Interview With a Vampire Expert

University Relations - Communications
October 2015

For centuries, we've loved to fear them — the bloodthirsty, night-walking undead. A unique mix of terrifying and alluring, the vampire is a mainstay in literature and film. However, the immortal figure has evolved significantly over time.

Once strictly sinister, the vampire is now presented in some fiction as an ally for humankind. Jerrold Hogle, University Distinguished Professor of English and an expert on Gothic fiction, will discuss this shift and what it says about our modern social and cultural values during a lecture tonight at the Fox Tucson Theatre, 17 W. Congress St.

His talk, "The Dark Immortality of the Vampire," begins at 6:30 p.m. and is part of the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences [1]' Immortality Downtown Lecture Series [2].

Tickets to the event are free and can be picked up at the venue starting at 4 p.m. today. Seating is available on a first-come, first-served basis, and those who can't attend in person can watch a live stream on the Arizona Public Media [3] website.

Lo Que Pasa talked with Hogle about what makes vampires so popular and which vampire movies we should watch this Halloween.

When did the vampire first show up in literature?

There is no one "first text," because there have been oral legends for centuries in many countries about corpses coming back to life and sucking the blood — or the life — out of the living, though not always for the same reasons and in the same ways.

The word "vampire" is first recorded in the 1670s as a West European reference to an East European and Slavic figure of folklore associated most with legends in the area that is now Romania, which includes Transylvania and Wallachia, where Bram Stoker's "Dracula" comes from in his 1897 novel.

Two texts, however, seem to be major influences on English fictions about vampires because they coalesce images and definitions of them that others later used by the mid-1700s. These are a French treatise on "apparitions" by the Catholic Bishop Augustin Calmet, translated into English as "The Phantom World" in 1749, and a German poem titled "Der Vampir," first published in 1748 by Heinrich Ossenfelder.

Why has the vampire remained such a popular character?

The vampire is a character of wildly incompatible elements forced together. He or she is dead and alive, supernatural and physical, attractive and threatening, asexual and sexual, et cetera. Beyond being a kind of anti-Christ — taking the blood of earthlings and leaving them sinful
rather than taking upon himself the sins of the world and letting those he forgives drink his blood? she or he can symbolize in disguise many different quandaries in Western culture and thinking, areas of subliminal concern and fear in which we feel contradictory things and cannot resolve them. These include:

- conflicted attitudes toward sexuality? it's really good and really bad
- conflicted attitudes toward race? we're all human, yet maybe some of us look human but are not properly so
- conflicted attitudes toward evolution? we have evolved beyond animal impulses and yet we have not
- conflicted attitudes toward the power and agency of women, who can become excessively strong viragos if bitten by vampires
- conflicted attitudes toward immortality itself? we want it, and yet we want to stay as we are on Earth if we get it, and we feel guilty for wanting that
- conflicted attitudes toward the unconscious, which the vampire suggests by enacting very primal impulses of hunger and desire

Vampires have therefore evolved as symbols as our most conflicted beliefs have evolved.

At the same time, at a simpler level, vampires are very attractive figures to fantasize being, since they are immortal, have superhuman powers and are overwhelmingly sexy without really trying. Yet we also condemn them for their? which are really our? destructive and antisocial impulses. Since they are fictional myths, we can thus be safe in wanting what they have and yet publicly condemning what they represent at the same time. Why not keep going back to such a construction, since it is an imaginary version of "having our cake and eating it, too?"

How is today's vampire different from vampires past?

Especially since Anne Rice's "Interview With the Vampire," published in 1976, there have been many more good and sympathetic vampires than there used to be in the past when the figure, as in Stoker's "Dracula," was more mad, bad and dangerous to know.

We now have many fictions? novels, films, plays, video games, et cetera? in which good vampires try to help the human race. They avoid drinking human blood, settling for substitutes, usually, and may ally themselves with people or even other creatures? werewolves, say? to fight against bad vampires who retain all the evils of a Dracula or a similar bloodsucker.

It is hard to specify a clear dividing line between the good and bad vampires sometimes, but authors and filmmakers keep trying to do exactly that. Two very successful recent examples are the "Twilight" series of novels and films that stem from books by Stephanie Meyer, the first of which appeared in 2005, and the HBO "True Blood" TV series, from 2008-2014, based on the Southern Vampire Novels series by Charlaine Harris, which began with "Dead Until Dark" in 2001.

In the spirit of Halloween, which vampire film or book do you most recommend?
There are many, many books and films of real value in which vampires are the focus. For a book about the vampire as a myth and symbol, I recommend "Stage Blood" by Roxana Stuart.

For vampire fiction, I urge reading Stoker's original "Dracula" and Rice's original "Interview With the Vampire."

For a touching recent film, I recommend the original 2008 Swedish film version of "Let the Right One In," which is better in its emotional power, though not radically better, than its 2010 American remake, "Let Me In."

*In the clip below, Hogle talks about the evolution of the vampire and why vampires may be especially appealing to teenagers.*

Source URL: https://uaatwork.arizona.edu/lqp/interview-vampire-expert

Links
[3] https://www.azpm.org/