

I'm so old, I remember when vampires were scary. I would never have predicted they would quit their lugubrious fortresses in Transylvania to become the cynosure of teenage girls' romantic yearnings in upscale American suburbs. Yet Stephanie Myers' Twilight series has enjoyed sales of 116 million globally.

For the last 40 years, since Anne Rice's 1976 *Interview with the Vampire* emerged as a bestseller, the vampire industry has taken wing in books, TV series, video games and films. Soulful and tender like Robert Pattinson in Twilight's movie versions, or comically inept like Johnny Depp's latest vampire incarnation in the film *Dark Shadows*, the modern vampire is a far cry from the gloomy supernaturalism of his medieval origins, or even from Dracula's "homme fatale" fictional pre-modern descendants, such as Emily Bronte's Heathcliff. (In less ethereal modern mode than Twilight, we have Canada's 1989-96 TV series, *Forever Knight*, about an 800-year-old vampire in the guise of a Toronto homicide detective.)

Cultural attention must be paid. And is being paid. A slew of serious commentary on this compelling creature of "unquenched, unquenchable" thirst (Byron) is rolling off the presses.

Illumination on the history and diversity of vampires emanates from the 2011 book, *Blood Will Tell: Vampires as political metaphors before World War I*. In its preface, Canadian author Sara Libby Robinson explains that the popularity of the TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* inspired her to reread Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. This time a formerly overlooked image caught her attention. When Dracula is finally cornered, one of the heroes rips the vampire's coat with a knife, and money pours out of the lining. Yet even though five armed men are trying to kill him, Dracula frantically lunges for the money before making his escape. Robinson immediately recognized the detail as an anti-Semitic trope, and conceived the PhD thesis that became this book.

From an interpretive perspective, it is instructive that, according to lore, vampires must first be invited into the premises they subsequently ravage. So in unsettled times, an indictment of cultural depletion can be easily linked to non-indigenous people or ideas. Vampires possess great flexibility for political imaging. Although vampires are most powerfully and consequentially projected as avatars for Jews, anti-Semitism is but one expression of loathing-for-the-other that vampires represent.

For example, capitalism (often itself linked to Jews) and vampires share a long twinship. Indeed, I was sparked to columnize on the topic today by an ad created for Obama's re-election campaign that has a former employee of a company allegedly pushed to bankruptcy in the 1990s by Mitt Romney's Bain Capital, saying, "[Bain] was like a vampire. They came in and sucked the life out of us." During the 2008 recession, *Rolling Stone* magazine described Goldman Sachs as a "giant vampire squid wrapped around the face of humanity."

But vampires have also been linked to other groups, like anarchists, diverse immigrants and women seeking political and cultural emancipation, all well chronicled in Robinson's book.

In one compelling chapter, Robinson explores Europe's enduring psychological obsession with blood and its role as a locus for all inherited traits, both physical and moral. Robinson traces the logical route in public discourse from the assumption that there is no escape from one's blood-borne destiny to popular assent for extermination of "degenerate" races on hygienic grounds.

History and science combined to foreclose on such iniquitous rot in the West. The Holocaust forbade further blood libeling of Jews amongst all civilized people. Later the discovery of DNA put a stake through the fictional heart of racism-tainted vampires. Thus was the way paved for American vampires' present semi-socialization, as in Charlaine Harris' *True Blood* vampire mysteries, and even spiritual elevation, as in *Twilight*.

In other words, American vampires are now politically correct. Except when it comes to capitalists. As noted, they are

still fair game for the blood libel here, just as virulent Jew-haters abroad find vampire imagery too efficacious in promoting anti-Semitism to credulous masses to abandon. (In Arab countries, Israelis are continually, shamelessly portrayed as vampires: Ariel Sharon is sometimes called “Sharoncula.”)

Although *Blood Will Tell* deals mainly with premodern history, Robinson’s concluding chapter brings us up to date. Vampires still represent social fears, but today the subtexts are drug addiction and delinquent youth. Don’t look for cloaks and thick Romanian accents to announce the vampiric presence. Extreme pallor, fangs and life-sapping cultural infiltration have become internalized social problems. As novelist Joseph Conrad rightly put it, “Fashions in monsters do change.”

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