

Vampires among us: Tales of defeat and redemption

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [February 9, 2010](#) issue

Met any vampires lately? They are unavoidable in popular culture, from Stephanie Meyer's books *Twilight* and *New Moon* (both made into films) to television fare such as *True Blood* and *The Vampire Diaries*. And though *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* may have gone off the air years ago, she lives (and slays) on in DVDs and comic books.

Vampire and other monster stories have long held an appeal for adolescents, an appeal the *Twilight* Saga movies exploit with hot young stars. Adolescence is a period of strange, new, powerful feelings. As sexual maturation and awakening occurs, menstruation begins for girls. Boys, like werewolves, grow more hair and experience their own hormonal turbulence. Amid these disturbing changes, teens often feel alienated and freakish, alone in the world.

Monster stories allow them to approach their sense of monstrosity sidewise. In many tales the monsters are vanquished, suggesting that the disconcerting bodies and disturbing urges of adolescents can be mastered. In more recent narratives, the monsters are domesticated—a sign that the adolescent can mature and tame his or her sexuality. The vampires in *Twilight* and *True Blood* aren't all evil. Some have learned to subsist on animal or synthetic blood rather than human blood.

The vampire is an enduring figure in our culture because it plays into the myth of romantic love. This myth concentrates on the adventure of two lovers who must overcome obstacles to consummate their attraction. Romantic love is a love of being under the spell of love more than it is a real, enduring relationship. That's why classic fairy tales end at the point where the lovers come together.

For romantic love, then, a distant, apparently unobtainable, even dangerous lover is ideal. The vampire is the ultimate tall, dark stranger—seductive, impressively powerful, mysterious, if also threatening.

I suspect that beyond the drama of adolescence and the conventions of romantic love, there are reasons specific to our time that vampires are pervasive. The catastrophe of 9/11 shook some American certitudes. Before that day in 2001, we believed acts of serious terrorism, at least by foreign agents, happened only in other countries. Now we know they can happen here.

In a post-9/11 world, we are confronted with terrorists who seem to operate outside our understandings of good and evil. In the wake of our bafflement and fear, we can and sometimes do think of these terrorists as monsters, unnatural people, not really human.

The situation is even more insidious than that. Knowing that we are not invulnerable from horrendous attacks, we worry that terrorists may dwell and move among us, their monstrosity concealed under a veil of normality. We may sit at a bar or in a classroom, maybe even at worship, alongside strangers or acquaintances who are actually our sworn enemies, who despise our way of life and hate what we stand for.

Vampires perfectly reflect this state of affairs. Especially in post-9/11 fictions, vampires do not immediately look different from ordinary human beings. (In *Twilight* and *New Moon*, they can even dwell in the daylight.) They speak our language and outwardly conduct their lives like ordinary citizens. Yet, like Osama bin Laden, they want our blood.

So vampire tales speak not only to teenagers or readers of romance novels—they resonate with Americans of all ages. They reassure us that the monsters can be defeated with spectacular technology and extraordinary violence, as in the *Blade* and *Underworld* movies. Or, as in *Twilight* and *True Blood*, they suggest that vampires may not be irredeemably monstrous after all. Maybe they can be domesticated and taught to live peaceably with us.

In theological terms, today's vampire stories focus on a difficult but central tenet of Christian discipleship: the love of enemies. It is easy and often psychologically satisfying to demonize our enemies. But Christ's response to his enemies, as well as his counsel to his disciples, rules out that response. The profusion of vampire stories today gives Christians an opportunity to consider and debate how to love the enemy, even the enemy in the guise of a supposed or actual terrorist.

Loving enemies in real life, amid intense global and inter-religious conflicts, is not easy to imagine, let alone act out. Would that it were as simple as driving stakes

through the hearts of monsters or charming them to fall in love with us. It is not, of course. That is what gives teeth—or fangs—to the challenge of loving our enemies.