

## Additional Papers

Let There Be Darkness:  
The Vampire as Agent of Theological Dialogue

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**Abstract:** Despite the recent cultural shift of presenting vampires in a more secular light, the traditional vampire in popular culture has a long and rich history of serving as an overt theological figure in both literature and the cinema. Whether as a symbol of the seductiveness of sin as defined from an Augustinian perspective, or an apologetic for the technologies of religious salvation, or even serving as a portal of discussion of more contemporary religious and sociological interpretations such as liberationist theory, the vampire has served as a spiritual touchstone within popular culture, from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* to current entries such as the *True Blood* series and *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*.

**Keywords:** vampire, theodicy, mysterium, mythistory, liberation

In the film *Fright Night*, Charley Brewster, an archetypal teenage boy, discovers an ancient vampire has moved in next door to him. In desperation, Charley approaches Peter Vincent, an aged host of a late night cable access horror show, for assistance in dispatching the fiend. Vincent, misunderstanding the intent of Charley and believing he desires an autograph, informs the boy that his show has just been cancelled. "Apparently your generation doesn't want to see vampire killers anymore, nor vampires either. All they want to see is killers running around in ski

masks, hacking up young virgins.”<sup>1</sup> This condemnation of the post-modern horror genre, particularly with regard to the neglect of the vampire sub-genre in the mid-eighties, has proven to be paradoxically prophetic and myopic. While the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* arguably primed contemporary culture in the late 1990s for a vampiric invasion, it was the advent of the twenty-first century where the mythistorical beast truly exploded in popularity, from the cultural phenomena of the *Twilight* young adult book and film series, to *True Blood* and *The Vampire Diaries* on television, to any number of video games, best selling novels, and innumerable websites devoted to the undead. Susannah Clements expands on this notion:

Vampires represent something to us as humans. They represent our fears and desires. The reason they have recurred in our stories over the last hundred years is that vampires are rich enough a metaphor to adapt to culture’s changing worldview and interests. We can make a vampire mean what we want it to mean. We can use it for any number of purposes...there is something about the figure of the vampire that attracts us in this metaphorical sense. As a metaphor it hits at the heart of what makes us human. A vampire is a monster that has a human shape, and so it becomes a picture through which we can explore the human condition.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed the vampire throughout history has represented everything from the homosexual community, to forbidden love, to seductive forces threatening the institution of marriage, to the invasive political “other” endangering the very fabric of civilized society, to the interpersonal dynamics of the family. Scott Poole writes of monsters as serving as “‘meaning machines’...excavating all manner of cultural

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<sup>1</sup> *Fright Night*. DVD. Directed by Tom Holland. 1985; Los Angeles, CA: Columbia Pictures, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Susannah Clements, *The Vampire Defanged: How the Embodiment of Evil Became a Romantic Hero* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011), 4

productions depending on their context and their historical moment.”<sup>3</sup> More than any metaphor the vampire has represented throughout the history of cinema and literature, however, it is foremost a theological expression of sin, temptation, Satan, and even God.

Unfortunately, while the vampire narrative has exploded in esteem within the cultural zeitgeist, the overt religious underpinnings that have made it such a fascinating theological figure have waned, with exceptions such as the film *Dracula 2000*, which painted the titular character as a vengeful Judas Iscariot, only proving the rule. The lament of Peter Vincent gives voice to this shift within the vampire narrative, which itself may be a post-modern testament to the diminishing influence of religion within contemporary culture overall. Clements writes, “As the vampire myth was first turned into fiction, the associations of the vampire with evil and temptation were established, characteristics that have been diminishing gradually since.”<sup>4</sup>

Modern cultural considerations aside, the vampire throughout history has stood as a potent theological totem, rife with symbolism, metaphorical power, and religious admonition of failing to abide by the precepts of God. Timothy Beal argues, “The politically and religiously conservative function of the monstrous is to encourage one to pull back from the edge. The monster is a warning or portent, *demonstrating* what to avoid, and *remonstrating* with anyone who would challenge

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<sup>3</sup> Scott Poole, *Monsters In America: Our Historical Obsessions With the Hideous and the Haunting* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011), xiv

<sup>4</sup> Clements, *Vampire Defanged*, 4

established social and symbolic boundaries. They literally scare the hell out of us.”<sup>5</sup> The vampire, however, serves as more than a fundamentalist boogeyman shambling through the conservative religious imagination of moral gatekeepers. It provides the unique opportunity to bestow flesh and vivacity to theological concepts hiding in the shadows and crevices of religious studies.

While some might bristle at the notion of a creature that rises from the grave in order to drink the blood of unsuspecting victims operating as a theological marker, it should be noted that monsters, the horrific, and religion are more enmeshed than some might suspect, or even be comfortable with. Whether it be the chaos beasts Leviathan and Behemoth in the Hebrew Bible, Satan and his army of fallen angels, or the dragon at the conclusion of the New Testament, religion knows and is familiar with the monstrous. Beal writes, “There are indeed monsters in the Bible, inspiring not a little horror. Indeed, one might say that the Bible is literally *riddled* with monsters...the relation between the biblical God and these monsters is particularly riddling and disturbing.”<sup>6</sup> It is the often troubling relationships between God and monsters, the sacred and the profane, that shelters questions as to the role of the Divine in the enmeshment of good and evil and the disquieting understanding that “the diabolic is firmly embedded in Christian scripture, mythistory, and worship.”<sup>7</sup> The vampire, then, rests among well-established religious company, emerging from the swirling darkness of creation not only to strike fear within the

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<sup>5</sup> Timothy K. Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 195

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 25

<sup>7</sup> Douglas E. Cowan. *Sacred Terror: Religion and Horror on the Silver Screen* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008), 176

heart of audiences, it exists, perhaps unknowingly, as a lens through which to view death, questions of evil and theodicy, the search for transcendent meaning, and even the purpose and meaning of religious technologies of salvation such as the crucifix, the Eucharist, holy water, and sacred space. Foremost among these avenues of inquiry, however, is the relationship between the mortal and the Divine, and how that transpires amongst a world of evil and monsters.

And while discussions of theology are often only reserved for church or other religious settings, and inquiries of a philosophical nature are generally relegated to the realm of academia, the vampire succeeds at intersecting these disciplines within contemporary culture in an accessible and relevant manner. As Hallab writes, “[T]he vampire leads us to a larger consideration of the nature of the individual and his search for significance in a vast and terrifying universe...[and] to provide a symbolic and metaphorical means to apprehend, contemplate, and deal with death within the larger context of life.”<sup>8</sup>

At the climax of the novel *Salem’s Lot* by Stephen King, Ben Mears, the author turned reluctant vampire killer who, along with young Mark Petrie, has tracked the vampire Barlow to his hiding place in the basement of a boarding house, has come face-to-face with the undead Master. As the sun sets and the showdown commences, Barlow psychically and violently invades the mind of Mears, declaring:

Look and see me, puny man. Look upon Barlow, who has passed the centuries as you have passed hours before a fireplace with a book. Look and see the great creature of the night whom you would slay

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<sup>8</sup> Mary Y. Hallab, *Vampire God: The Allure of the Undead in Western Culture* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2009), 1 & 7

with your miserable little stick. Look upon me, scribbler. I have written in human lives, and blood has been my ink. Look upon me and despair!<sup>9</sup>

Faced with the overwhelming power of his otherworldly adversary, Mears is sapped of his strength, suddenly all too aware of his own finite mortality. This devastating response to the presence of the vampire illustrates what the theologian Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) described as the *mysterium tremendum*, “that is, a radically other mystery that brings on a stupefying combination of fascination and terror, wonder and dread,”<sup>10</sup> traits, Otto argued, of religious experience present in the sublime as well as the horrific. The feeling of *mysterium tremendum* occurs in response to the *numinous*, another term coined by Otto that describes encounters with the Divine, as well as a “feeling which remains where the concept fails.”<sup>11</sup> The stock and trade of the vampire narrative (as well as the horror genre overall) relies on the awe and mystification brought on by the dread of the *mysterium tremendum* experienced in the wake of the supremacy of the numinous figure. Whether in the guise of Ben Mears, Jonathan Harker from Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, or Charley Brewster in *Fright Night*, any of the heroes who have seen fit to directly challenge the supernatural force of the vampire, not to mention its numerous victims, have been brought emotionally and spiritually low by the numinous presence of the undead, achieving a distinct and horrible awareness of their utter lack of ability to effectively act against the monster.

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<sup>9</sup> Stephen King, *Salem’s Lot* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 388

<sup>10</sup> Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 7

<sup>11</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry Into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), vii

Interestingly, the concept of the *mysterium tremendum* put forth by Otto was meant to convey the effects of a distinctly religious encounter, a brush with the Divine. Poole writes, “[R]eligious experience [is] a kind of horror movie, embodiments of the Divine that evoke feelings of terror. The monsters of the Bible are symbols of that horror.”<sup>12</sup> Such a view of the vampire through the lens of the *mysterium tremendum* raises a very important question: If the vampire displays traits of the numinous, must we consider it a symbol of the Divine? H.P. Lovecraft believed that the contemporary horror genre has emerged in its present form as a bifurcated doppelganger to modern religion, a malevolent compartment that the devout keep at arms length, while using it to compile their unspoken and unrealized fears about the shadow side of the Divine. Lovecraft himself wrote in his novel *The Call of Cthulhu*:

The most merciful thing in the world...is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.<sup>13</sup>

The unspeakable reality of the Divine that takes amorphous shape in the Lovecraftian mythos modeled in *The Call of Cthulhu* may in some ways reflect the

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<sup>12</sup> Poole, *Monsters In America*, 6

<sup>13</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, *The Call of Cthulhu* (Adelaide: The University of Adelaide Library, 2009), 76

equally indescribable horrific elements of God that have been obfuscated and shifted to the outright (and therefore easily dismissed) genre of the monstrous.

The pages of both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament are rife with the horrific, including cosmogonic chaos (chaogony), mass murder (including the divinely ordained murder of children), worldwide disaster, demons, war, witchcraft, cannibalism, and the divinely promoted exploits of Satan. This diabolic aspect of scripture, however, has either had its fangs dulled through the need for palatable and civilized religious services, or altogether ignored entirely by contemporary faith communities. Through the horror genre, however, particularly the traditional vampire narrative found in literature and cinema, the monstrous has found an avenue to convey the power of its own religious experience, the horrific divine found in the *mysterium tremendum*.

Illustrative of the *mysterium tremendum*, the angel appears to be an immensely appropriate lens through which to examine the function and consequence of the undead. While the appearance of the vampire is, in fact, a human shell disguising a supernatural being, angelic appearances in the Bible served a similar role. Often in scripture, the visage of the angel is that of a normal human, and initially shows no traits of the numinous, as in Genesis 18 when three angelic guests appeared to Abraham, soon followed by two angels visiting Sodom in apparently nothing more than human guises, typical everyday men in the eyes of the mortals who greeted them. In the traditional vampire narrative, the vampire often appears to be as human as members of the general community until, when the time proves appropriate, the visage changes into a horrific perversion of creation. The typical



response of the mortal to the *mysterium tremendum* of the vampire is indistinguishable from the typical response of the mortal to angels in scripture: fear, awe, horror, and trepidation. In addition, the reaction of the disciples to an apparently undead Jesus in the upper room could easily model the reaction of contemporary characters in the vampire narrative: “While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’ *They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost*” (Luke 24:36-37 NRSV, italics added).<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps the greatest example within scripture of the sway of *mysterium tremendum* would be the narrative of Job. The horror to be found at the heart of the story of Job is the shocking ambivalence of the Divine, the promotion of violence, disease, and death by God, working with and through Satan, against a man favored by the Creator. In a theological world where pain was an indicator of a life out of sync with the precepts of God, the story of Job would have created confusion and fear in the reader. The life of Job is torn apart in every conceivable manner, only to be rewarded throughout his terror and pain with the silence of God.

Job, however, does not accept his suffering in silence. His cry of “Face me and be devastated” (Job 21:5 NRSV) is very similar to that of Barlow in *Salem’s Lot* when he commands Ben Mears to “Look upon me and despair!” Both perhaps are aware of the theological terror they are playing a key role in, serving dualistically as a result

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<sup>14</sup> All scripture passages take from: Bernhard W. Anderson, Bruce Manning Metzger, and Roland E. Murphy, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

and an example of the power of the *mysterium tremendum* at play within their existence.

The nightmarish odyssey of Job is an imaginative starting point for the emergence of the vampire, a motif embodied presciently in the film *Bram Stoker's Dracula* directed by Francis Ford Coppola. At the start of the film, a Romanian Christian knight, Draculea, leaves his bride Elisabeta in order to lead his army into battle against the invading Muslim Turks. Draculea emerges victorious, kissing a crucifix and declaring, "God be praised! I am victorious!"<sup>15</sup> However, through a nefarious trick by the Turks, Elisabeta believes her husband to have died in battle and commits suicide by flinging herself into a river. Draculea arrives home to find her dead body surrounded by a cadre of priests in a chapel.

BISHOP: She has taken her own life. Her soul cannot be saved. She is damned. It is God's Law.

DRACULEA: Nooo! Is this my reward for defending God's church?

BISHOP: Sacrilege!

DRACULEA: I renounce God! I shall rise from my own death to avenge hers with all the powers of darkness!<sup>16</sup>

Enraged, Draculea brandishes his sword and violently impales a large stone crucifix atop the chapel altar. Blood gushes forth from the cross and Draculea snatches a chalice with which he fills with the blood and drinks from it. "The blood is the life," he says. "And it shall be mine."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. DVD. Directed by Francis Ford Coppola. 1992; Los Angeles, CA: Sony Pictures, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*

Not only does Dracula invoke a chaos of sorts, aligning himself with darkness in a rant reminiscent of Job (“Let there be darkness”), he also partakes of an inverted and perverted communion at the altar of Christ. This inversion of communion in theological horror, the horror of the vampire, challenges the sacred order, seeking the solace of chaos as modeled by Job versus the face and order of the Divine. Dracula, and hence the vampire, introduces a new communion, one directly opposed to the communion modeled by Christ, introducing chaos into the sacred order. Cowan states, “The advent of one unseen order heralds – or at least threatens – the disappearance of another.”<sup>18</sup> In the case of Dracula, not only does the vampire emerge directly out of the *mysterium tremendum*, he is ultimately an agent of it.

If the vampire is indeed a figure of the numinous, displaying traits of the Divine or at least serving as an agent of the Divine while exhibiting the influence of *mysterium tremendum*, as well as the authority over life and death, what are the ramifications for God and the role God plays in the structure and existence of evil, a question that finds its roots in the story of Job and is carried into contemporary life through the avenue of the vampire narrative? Perhaps most explicit in an analysis of what the vampire represents or symbolizes in literature and cinema is that of incarnate sin or evil. And thus, as so often ensues in a discussion of evil, the vampire is exposed as a catalyst for queries of theodicy. Cowan writes, “Why do we fear the chaotic invasion/inversion of our world, and the apparent powerlessness (or capriciousness) of God in the face of it? In this sense, it is possible that cinema horror is one cultural means by which we confront the classic theological problem

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<sup>18</sup> Cowan, *Sacred Terror*, 67

of evil.”<sup>19</sup> The vampire, as a courier of the horrific, brings to the fore in a dialogue of theodicy and sin a vital analysis of theological perspectives addressing the often-perceived ambivalence of the Divine in the face of evil.

The disruption of the ordained order is at the core of the mythos of the vampire and of the concept of monsters across the spectrum. As will be illustrated, the vampire has often been portrayed, theologically, as a creature without reason or explanation, and serves as a prevailing agent of enticement too potent to oppose or, perhaps even worse, for God to prohibit. If, as Beal alleges, the vampire “is a chaos monster who invades the Divinely ordained order of the cosmos,”<sup>20</sup> then the vampire narrative presents an inimitable opportunity to discuss theories of sin, temptation, and even religious ethics that attempt to look beyond traditional and often distorted Christian definitions of good and evil. As Jack Crow, vampire hunter and protagonist in the novel *Vampire\$* by Jonathan Steakley, bemoans, “I know fucking well there’s a God because I kill vampires for a living. Are you listening? I kill vampires for money...so don’t tell me there ain’t no God. I know fucking well there’s a God. I just don’t understand him.”<sup>21</sup> This type of apologetic based on the relation between God and evil is echoed by Seth Gecko in the film *From Dusk Till Dawn* when he declares, “I’ve always said that God can kiss my ass, but I just changed my lifetime tune about 10 minutes ago. Because I know that whatever is out there trying to get

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 58

<sup>20</sup> Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 134

<sup>21</sup> John Steakley, *Vampires* (New York: Roc Book, 1990), 67

in is pure evil straight from hell. And if there is a hell and those sons of bitches are from it, then there has got to be a heaven...there's gotta be.”<sup>22</sup>

The vampire, by its very presence, is in some manner representing the existence of God, whether that attendance of the Divine is felt or not amidst the evil. Unfortunately, the monstrous and the holy often become hopelessly enmeshed, the awe-full and the horrific becoming indistinguishable from one another. Beal writes, “By playing God, does one inadvertently end up playing monster? More radically, does *being* God end up being monstrous? Who is more monstrous, the creature who must live through this vale of tears, or the creator who put them there?”<sup>23</sup> Within scripture, one is often confronted with an ambivalent brew of violence, abhorrent sexual ethics, and misogyny that is not only endorsed by God, they are indistinguishable from the nature and agency of God.

Crow and Gecko, then, are in some manner sharing in the philosophical and theological dilemma of theodicy, a difficult mixture of the sacred and the profane. While it might be innate to ask the question, “Where is God in evil?” it is considered more perilous, perhaps sacrilegious, to ask, “Is God the cause of evil?” As John Sanford argues, “The specific failure of Christianity is its failure to include the evil side of God in its understanding of the Divine nature.”<sup>24</sup> In the Hebrew Bible, Yahweh encompasses both good and evil, serving as the face of both the sublime and the terrible. In the New Testament, however, particularly in the Book of Revelation,

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<sup>22</sup> *From Dusk Till Dawn*. DVD. Directed by Robert Rodriguez. 1996; Los Angeles, CA: Dimension Films, 2000.

<sup>23</sup> Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 5

<sup>24</sup> John A. Sanford, *The Strange Trial of Mr. Hyde: A New Look at the Nature of Human Evil* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 101

evil is removed from the countenance of the Divine and attributed to Satan, the anti-Christ. If vampires were to exist in the created order as more than a theological metaphor, what role would God play in generating, permitting, and, perhaps, promoting this cycle of temptation and iniquity? Would vampires operate as a natural or a moral evil? Or both? And does God support them or oppose them? Or perhaps the truth would exist somehow as a combination of the two? Rather than, as the psalmist writes, “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” (Psalm 19:1-2 NRSV), for Crow and Gecko it is the survival of evil itself in the form of monsters that proclaims the existence of a Divine presence. As the villain Darkness in the film *Legend* asks, “What good is light without darkness?”<sup>25</sup> In other words, if evil thrives, surely the counterweight of good must also be at work in the philosophical and theological machinations of the universe. As Cowan writes, “[I]n the unseen order, it is the very shadows themselves that give the pattern depth and texture – that give it ‘reality.’ The angelic means little without the demonic, and vice versa.”<sup>26</sup>

The existence of monsters as apologetic for the Divine is perpetuated even further by Stephen Asma when he writes, “The medievals embarked on a rich speculative tradition that tried to articulate what God *wanted* when he made monsters...[Monsters] exist in order to fall...the point of being a giant, then, is to overreach and fail, and in that failure highlight their corruption to others, as a

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<sup>25</sup> *Legend*. DVD. Directed by Ridley Scott. 1985; Los Angeles, CA: Universal Studios, 2008.

<sup>26</sup> Cowan, *Sacred Terror*, 91

cautionary tale and consolation.”<sup>27</sup> To this end, a normative dynamic of the vampire narrative is the Vampire Hunter, the hero or heroes who confront the malevolent supernatural invasion in defense of society, the world, and God. In the traditional vampire account, the Vampire Hunter can often serve as the *de facto* apologist for the existence of the Divine as, through the technologies of salvation at their disposal, the monster falls, proving that righteousness, as opposed to evil, is the accepted order of creation. As Hallab summarizes, “Through Satan or his agents, now reduced in stature and dignity, we become aware of the wonder and majesty of God. The wicked vampire becomes the proof of and unwitting proselytizer for the Christian God.”<sup>28</sup>

This viewpoint fails to address, however, that despite evil allegedly falling short in its bid to molest the created order of God, it still appears to be an integral, even divinely promoted, piece of that order. Behemoth and Leviathan, two monsters described in the Hebrew Bible, seem to have an ambivalent relationship with Yahweh, one that does not necessarily require their destruction. According to Asma:

In some places, such as Psalm 74 and Job 3, Leviathan is described as a frightening monster that threatens order and stability, a giant sea monster that rises from the depths to cause mayhem but who is easily checked by the power and righteousness of Yahweh. In some cases, God is described as smashing Leviathan’s head, but in other places, such as Psalm 104 and Job 40, Leviathan is identified as a part of God’s wonderful creation, a sublime force that reflects God’s overwhelming aspect. In these passages, the giant sea monster is an ally and even a manifestation of God.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Stephen T. Asma, *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 76

<sup>28</sup> Hallab, *Vampire God*, 96

<sup>29</sup> Asma, *On Monsters*, 65-66

Why is God portrayed in scripture as actually reveling in the existence of monsters? And if God can easily dispatch monsters when they do get out of control, are the evil and metaphorical monsters in contemporary society “identified as a part of God’s wonderful creation?” Is evil simply a manifestation of God? Should we not, in some way, be disturbed by the relationship between God and the monsters at play in the Hebrew Bible? Joshi asserts that monsters, vampires in particular, “may serve not only as an avatar of the Christian devil but as an avatar of divinity in general. The very nature of the vampire may cause it to stand as a theophany, a manifestation of the Divine.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, the vampire may serve as a window into the nature of God with regard to the relationship God maintains with evil. The mortal, when faced with evil, demands to know where God is amidst that evil, however, the answer might be as simple as God being represented in and by the evil, in much the same way that the monsters of the Hebrew Bible represented, in some respects, the nature of Yahweh.

Despite this ambivalence as to the presence of God amidst the proliferation of evil in the natural order, in many respects the spiritual metaphor of the vampire succeeds at cutting to the essence of a common theological view of what it means to deal with sin in the lives of the religious and non-religious alike. As Clements writes, “The vampire represented temptation into sin or the forbidden, temptation that attracts us but leads to destruction.”<sup>31</sup> Throughout her book *The Vampire Defanged:*

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<sup>30</sup> S.T. Joshi, “Religion and Vampires,” in *Encyclopedia of the Vampire: The Living Dead in Myth, Legend, and Popular Culture*, ed. S.T. Joshi (Westport: Greenwood, 2011), 249

<sup>31</sup> Clements, *Vampire Defanged*, 6



*How the Embodiment of Evil Became a Romantic Hero*, Clements subscribes to an ethics based model of sin, one that turns the issue into a personal choice, spiritualizing and privatizing it, transforming the power of sin into a list of unhealthy exploits.

Similarly, in the novel *Midnight Mass* written by F. Paul Wilson, this view of sin as an ethical choice (epitomized in the visage of the vampire) is reflected in a discussion between Father Joe, a Catholic priest, and Rabbi Zev, two survivors of a vampire outbreak rapidly spreading around the world. Joe, struggling with his apparent impotence as Christ's representative on Earth in the face of a wave of vampiric conversions and its effect on the people he once knew and served, lashes out in righteous indignation:

“But Zev, we know there's some of the old personality left. I mean, they stay in their hometowns, usually in the basement of their old houses. They go after people they knew when they were alive. They're not just dumb predators, Zev. They've got the old consciousness they had when they were alive. Why can't they rise above it? Why can't they...resist?”

“Maybe the urge to feed is too strong to overcome?”

“Maybe. And maybe they just don't try hard enough.”

“This is a hard line you're taking, my friend.”<sup>32</sup>

While this is a common approach to the metaphor of the vampire as sin, or at least as the embodiment of temptation to act sinfully, it can often be a flawed one. What Father Joe is referencing, knowingly or not, is a commonly held Augustinian model of sin as a willing transgression of the accepted order, sin modeled as an ethical choice. In *Midnight Mass* and other vampire narratives, while the vampire may

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<sup>32</sup> F. Paul Wilson, *Midnight Mass* (New York: Tor Books, 2004), 81-82

indeed serve as a temptation, being a vampire, or allowing oneself to become a vampire, is a sinful act, one that should be resisted, ideally and most effectively through the various technologies of Christian salvation. As the novel progresses, Father Joe is, in fact, ultimately turned into a vampire and successfully withstands the urge to give into the “evil” nature of it, while still bound by the rules of the vampiric condition (i.e. needing blood to survive).

Clements argues consistently for the literary character of Dracula serving as a direct metaphor for sin, particularly sin as a knowing disobedience of the law, and there is indeed ample evidence for her stance. Throughout the novel, the vampire often proves impossibly seductive to a number of characters, particularly Jonathan Harker who comes face-to-face with the overwhelming mysterium tremendum of the vampire. Clements writes, “Harker is tantalized by the allure of sin, hypnotized into failing to fight against it, victimized and imprisoned by it, and finally threatened to death by it.”<sup>33</sup>

This view of temptation and sin as a kind of spiritual fly-paper, luring complicit victims into a deadly trap with promises of forbidden pleasure and earthly satisfaction, showcases the power of sin and the seemingly willing powerlessness of the individual, perhaps even God, to thwart it. This motif is reflected time and again in vampire narratives apart from *Dracula*. Illustrative of this is the film *Fright Night* in which a seductive vampire, Jerry Dandrige, moves into a quiet suburban neighborhood only to be discovered by his teenage neighbor, Charley Brewster. In one pertinent scene, Dandrige corners Edward, a friend and schoolmate of Charley,

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<sup>33</sup> Clements, *Vampire Defanged*, 21

in an alleyway. As Edward (unsympathetically referred to by other students as Evil Ed due to his love of horror films) cowers in fear, Jerry empathetically looks to him. "You don't have to be afraid of me," he says. "I know what it's like being different. Only they won't pick on you anymore... or beat you up. I'll see to that. All you have to do is take my hand,"<sup>34</sup> at which point Jerry reaches out, revealing elongated fingers and sharp nails. Edward, obviously aware of the mortal danger he is in, willingly accepts the hand of Dandrige and is enveloped in the embrace of the vampire. This keen acquiescence to temptation is again illustrated in *Fright Night* when Amy, the girlfriend of Charley, is seduced by Dandrige and eagerly removes her dress so that he might sink his teeth into her neck.

This view of sin as the preference of an individual to turn his or her countenance from the precepts of God is often reflected, surprisingly enough, in the plethora of Dracula-themed films produced by the British film corporation Hammer in the 1950s through to the 1970s. These films, mostly directed by Terence Fisher, a professed Christian, and starring Christopher Lee as the titular vampire, present an overt "Christian worldview in which evil is subtle, beautiful and deadly. Evil is real and it is ultimately supernatural. It can only finally be defeated by the cross of Jesus Christ."<sup>35</sup>

This view of Christian theology espoused by Fisher, easily traced, however, to Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, is a distinctly Augustinian perspective, emphasizing the allure and power of the vampire within the narrative. However, by presenting the

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<sup>34</sup> Holland, *Fright Night*.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Leggett, *Terence Fisher: Horror, Myth and Religion* (North Carolina: Mcfarland, 2002), 1-2

vampire as an independent evil, one separate of the regulations of a God-ordered cosmos, Fisher seems to leave open the opportunity for evil to ultimately win. Margaret L. Carter writes, "If the vampire can damn even souls of otherwise innocent victims, he must be operating independent of Divine permission...[Vampires depict] a Manichean world where Evil seems to be as self-existent as Good."<sup>36</sup> Indeed, in the Hammer films, while Dracula suffers a form of defeat at the end of each movie, he inevitably returns at the commencement of each successive film, just as sinister and wicked as before.

While Fisher may present an overly dualistic and rather Manichean view of Christian theology where evil is represented by Dracula and righteousness is epitomized in Van Helsing, a continuing component of all the Hammer *Dracula* films are ultimately the allure of vampiric temptation and the negative effects yielding to sin have on the human condition. It is important to illustrate the willingness and complicity that victims share when it comes to the invasiveness of vampiric temptation from the Augustinian perspective of sin as an individualized choice. In addition, in traditional and popular undead lore, a personage must actually invite a vampire into their house, negating the safe and sacred space that a home traditionally represented. Therefore, in Fisher's world, while an individual may appear to be a passive agent, she (rarely he) is simply facing the results of the influence of sin that has secured a foothold in her life.

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<sup>36</sup> Margaret L. Carter, *Spectre or Delusion?: The Supernatural in Gothic Fiction* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987), 102 & 116

In the film *The Brides of Dracula*, Fisher delves deeper into the effects of the power of sin. Helen, a proper and rather prudish woman, is seduced by Dracula, ultimately transforming into a powerful and sexually unconcealed vampire.

Whatever lustful origin may have existed in Helen's repressed nature has by now been totally dominated by Dracula's demonic influence. The writhing, screeching figure at the end bears no resemblance to the original Helen. In theological terms, sin has totally defaced Helen's humanity so that she has now become more a beast than a person like the Gerasene Demoniac in the Bible.<sup>37</sup>

Echoes of this transformation can be found in the film *Fright Night* as both Evil Ed and Amy experience not only an outward physical change toward the monstrous, they also experience a liberation of sorts. Shy, timid Edward is now powerful and beastly (as represented in his transformation into a wolf), and Amy evolves into a lustful, hyper-sexual woman, perhaps reflecting a theme early within the film of the apprehension Amy experienced as she struggled with potentially losing her virginity.

There is, however, some sense of irony in framing the vampire as a catalyst for societal change for many reasons, some obvious, others not quite so. Most noticeably, Dracula is unabashedly a sinister character, admittedly devoid of love and seeking only self-gratification, mirrored in any number of literary and cinematic creations from Count Orlock in the silent film *Nosferatu*, Barlow in *Salem's Lot*, to Satanico Pandemonium in the movie *From Dusk Till Dawn*. Most vampires in traditional narratives follow suit, with occasional sympathetic, yet fleeting, glimpses into their plight. For example, the vampire Jerry Dandrige in *Fright Night* attacks

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<sup>37</sup> Leggett, *Terence Fisher*, 74

the protagonist Charley Brewster, telling him, “You deserve to die, boy. Of course... I can give you something I don't have. A choice. Forget about me, Charley. Forget about me, and I'll forget about you.”<sup>38</sup> While hearing that Dandridge was turned against his will might give one pause, it doesn't change the fact that he is fully embracing his current role as an active agent of oppression, versus the response of a post-human Father Joe in *Midnight Mass* who, rather than perpetuate or take part in the system of vampiric oppression, resists the urge to kill, using his “privilege” as a member of the dominant vampire class to affect change, ultimately destroying the oppressive vampiric power structure.

The vampires in *Salem's Lot* in many ways display the magnetism of temptation that Dracula embodies, however they also serve as a potential lens through which to view a more corporate view of sin and liberation. In the following passage from *Salem's Lot*, Danny Glick, a recent vampire convert, visits young Mark Petrie, a schoolmate, in the middle of the night. Danny floats ominously outside of the window of the bedroom, patiently scratching at the glass until Mark wakes up and sees him:

He got out of bed and almost fell down. It was only then that he realized fright was too mild a word for this. Even terror did not express what he felt. The pallid face outside the window tried to smile, but it had lain in darkness too long to remember precisely how. What Mark saw was a twitching grimace – a bloody mask of tragedy.

Yet if you looked in the eyes, it wasn't so bad. If you looked in the eyes you weren't so afraid anymore and you saw that all you had to do was open the window and say, “C'mon in, Danny,” and then you wouldn't be afraid at all because you'd be at one with Danny and all of them and on one with *him*.

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<sup>38</sup> Holland, *Fright Night*.

He dragged his eyes away, and it took all of his will power to do it.

“Mark, let me in! I command it! *He* commands it!”

He was weakening. That whispering voice was seeing through his barricade, and the command was imperative. Mark’s eyes fell on his desk, littered with his model monsters, now so bland and foolish –

His eyes fixed abruptly on part of the display, and widened slightly.

The plastic ghoul was walking through a plastic graveyard and one of the monuments was in the shape of a cross.

With no pause for thought or consideration (both would have come to an adult – his father for instance – and both would have undone him), Mark swept up the cross, curled it into a tight fist, and said loudly: “come on in, then.”

The face became suffused with an expression of vulpine triumph. The window slid up and Danny stepped in and took two paces forward. The exhalation from that opening mouth was fetid, beyond description: a smell of charnel pits. Cold, fish-white hands descended on Mark’s shoulders. The head cocked, doglike, the upper lip curled away from those shining canines.

Mark brought the plastic cross around in a vicious swipe and laid it against Danny Glick’s cheek.

His scream was horrible, unearthly...and silent. It echoed only in the corridors of his brain and the chambers of his soul. The smile of triumph on the Glick-thing’s mouth became a yawning grimace of agony. Smoke spurted from the pallid flesh, and for just a moment, before the creature twisted away and half dived, half fell out the window, Mark felt the flesh yield like smoke.

And then it was over, as if it had never happened.<sup>39</sup>

On the surface, this passage seems to bolster the idea that vampires represent an outward one-to-one metaphor of internal temptation and sin, with the only solution lying in the power of the cross of Christ. However, what had Mark done through his own agency to place himself in such dire straits? If, for whatever reason, he were

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<sup>39</sup> King, *Salem’s Lot*, 231-232

unable to snatch the plastic cross from his model at the last moment, would he have been doomed to roam the streets as a member of the undead, scratching on windows of unsuspecting victims? King, in talking about his fascination with Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, asks a similar question:

The Count's evil seems totally predestinate; the fact that he comes to London with its "teeming millions" does not proceed from any mortal being's evil act. Harker's ordeal at Castle Dracula is not the result of an inner sin or weakness; he winds up on the Count's doorstep because his boss asked him to go. Similarly, the death of Lucy Westenra is not a deserved death. Her encounter with Dracula in the Whitby churchyard is the moral equivalent of being struck by lightning while playing golf. There is nothing in her life to justify the end she comes to at the hands of Van Helsing and her fiancé, Arthur Holmwood – her heart burst apart by a stake, her head chopped off, her mouth stuffed with garlic.<sup>40</sup>

King expresses a major problem with using the vampire narrative as a *direct* religious allegory for sin. While any serious conversation about vampires is undoubtedly a theological one, victims of the undead are often undeserving of their fate, ultimately enslaved by a power far greater and more oppressive than any individual can address. Therefore, the theological implications of the vampire narrative as it pertains to sin hinge less on an Augustinian model and more on a liberationist critique.

With regard to the traditional vampire narrative, oppression and freedom are a common meme, particularly with regard to the soul. However, physical oppression is a reality as well. Sean Eads suggests that in *Salem's Lot*, "Vampirism is

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<sup>40</sup> Stephen King, *Stephen King's Danse Macabre* (New York: Everest House, 1981), 64



clearly a metaphor for power and control,"<sup>41</sup> as the Master Vampire Barlow gradually, yet definitively, enslaves an entire town, while in *Midnight Mass*, the vampire strikes quickly and overtly in dominating most of civilized society. In the David Sosnowski penned *Vamped*, as well as the film *Daybreakers*, vampire domination and oppression is so complete that humanity has become nothing more than chattel, living in factories where they are regularly processed for blood supplies. In this sense, the vampire narrative could easily serve as a shockingly apt metaphor for Latin American, Black, Womanist, Feminist, or even Queer Liberation Theologies, any movement that develops as a response to the subjugation (physical, spiritual, or emotional) of an entire group of people, up to and including the recent Occupy Wall Street movement. Indeed, the metaphor of vampire as corporate oppressor is so culturally apt that a popular piece of artwork that went viral on the Internet during the George W. Bush administration depicted the former President as a vampire sinking his fangs into the Statue of Liberty, an answer to the pro-corporate policies of said administration.

The all-encompassing and powerful invasion of the vampire moves beyond privatized sin into a corporate, shared spiritual oppression with immediate, practical, and long lasting consequences. Liberation Theology, as an answer to vampiric oppression, has both feet planted in the present, with an eschatological perspective that seeks to transform the very structure of society and reversing the oppressive invasion of whatever dominant hierarchy exists. Gustavo Gutierrez

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<sup>41</sup> Sean Eads, "The Vampire George Middler: Selling the Monstrous in 'Salem's Lot," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 43 (2010):1, 83

explains that “the present in the praxis of liberation, in its deepest dimension, is pregnant with the future” and that “it means sinking roots where the pulse of history is beating at this moment.”<sup>42</sup> Whether serving to free Mina Harker in *Dracula*, Amy in *Fright Night*, the town of Salem’s Lot, or the entire human race in *Midnight Mass*, the activists serving as the catalyst for freedom, the Vampire Hunters, embody the praxis of liberation, serving deeply and fully in the present with a confidence of a transformative future.

In addition, the vampiric takeover of Salem’s Lot was only made possible by the utter lack of communal solidarity within the town *before* the arrival of Barlow. This is best illustrated by Parkins Gillespie, the town constable: “‘It ain’t alive,’ Parkins said, lighting his smoke with a wooden kitchen match. ‘That’s why he came here. It’s dead, like him. Has been for twenty years or more.’”<sup>43</sup> The town, fractured and paranoid, and perhaps still mourning their complicity in the legacy of Hubert Marsten, a dark and unabashedly evil figure in the history of the town, is filled with child abuse, spousal abuse, predatory financial schemes, alcoholism, and murder, all shielded from view by a protective film of emotional and spiritual malaise blanketing the inhabitants. King provides a lens into the often mundane and hidden horror of small town life, a credible palette from which the otherworldly terror of the vampire ultimately invades. With regard to *Salem’s Lot* and the liberation motif,

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<sup>42</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, “A Theology of Liberation,” in *Readings in Christian Ethics: A Historical Sourcebook*, ed. J. Philip Wogaman and Douglas M. Strong (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996), 343

<sup>43</sup> King, *Salem’s Lot*, 378

when Barlow finally arrives in town with the intent of enslaving its citizens, he must undoubtedly be pleased to find the hard work of oppression a *fait accompli*.

From this perspective, one could even view Barlow as an agent of liberation in *Salem's Lot*, an undead Moses delivering a welcome reprieve or salvation to a people who have long lived under an invisible (and perhaps self-inflicted) yoke of oppression. Judith Johnson writes:

When the vampire strikes, and begins to victimize the town, some of these natural predators become victims, thus receiving a kind of justice...[T]he born victims...now become vampires. They, too, find someone upon whom to prey. Sometimes, the prey they find is the person who victimized them when they were alive. Thus, the victims rise and turn upon those who abused them...By the end of the novel, the whole town has risen in a kind of parodic revolution and become a vampire town, a town of the revolting, in all sense of the word, a town that won't allow itself to be abused.<sup>44</sup>

This “revolt metaphor” in *Salem's Lot*, hearkening back to the Exodus narrative, finds camaraderie with many vampire mythologies both traditional and contemporary. In *Fright Night*, Jerry Dandrige offers Evil Ed freedom from his bullying, and the opportunity to no longer be victimized. In the HBO series *True Blood*, based on the Sookie Stackhouse novels by Charlaine Harris, the vampires can be seen to serve as a metaphor of the homosexual community refusing any longer to accept second-class citizenry from the dominant heterosexual culture. Even in the distinctly non-religious universe of the *Blade* film series, the vampire is presented as the next level of existence, free from the oppression that occurs from simply being human.

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<sup>44</sup> Judith Johnson, “Women and Vampires: Nightmare or Utopia?” *Kenyon Review* 15 (1993):1, 77

Of course, the theory of the vampire serving as an agent of liberation certainly has its share of flaws. In the case of *Salem's Lot* (as most other vampire narratives), once turned, a vampire must create more victims in order to sustain itself. As Johnson points out, previously living oppressors and victims alike are now predators in their new role as vampire. "In their turn, they act out their predatory nature, victimizing others as they used to do when they were alive. But these others, the born victims, victimized again by the predators, now become vampires. *They, too, find someone upon whom to prey*" (italics added).<sup>45</sup> A theology or ethic of liberation seeks a radical break from the status quo, versus propping up the prevailing cultural hegemony at work in society that makes, knowing or otherwise, conspirators of the oppressed with regard to maintaining the dominant power structure. Liberation is not about replacing one form of dominance for another, it seeks to erase the dynamic altogether. In most vampire narratives, living hierarchical structures are only exchanged for undead ones, whether it be the authority Dracula has over his brides and the nearby villagers, the undemocratic power structure of the vampire community in *True Blood* (Kings and Queens rule various territories), or references to Barlow as the Master in *Salem's Lot* (a power structure Stephen King fleshes out in *The Dark Tower: Wolves of the Calla* when Barlow is revealed to be a Type One vampire, most powerful and nearly immortal, with authority over Type Two and Type Three vampires).

While an attempt has been made here to expose, collect, and analyze the theological underpinnings of the traditional vampire narrative, it must be noted

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid

that, while some researchers such as Clements view the traditional narratives as direct allegories and lessons in Christian faith, it has been demonstrated that such a position is perilous at best. Forcing the vampire narrative into any type of systematic theology “is apt to have a haphazard and ambiguous relationship with any specific dogma.”<sup>46</sup> However, it can safely be argued that the traditional vampire narrative consistently draws on any number of familiar religious elements, motifs, and structures, making it a relevant and imaginative symbol through which to discuss pertinent theological topics such as the nature of the Divine, theodicy, the created order, and sin. Paul Tillich writes, “Religious symbols are distinguished from others by the fact that they are a representation of that which is unconditionally beyond the conceptual sphere; they point to the ultimate reality implied in the religious act, to what concerns us ultimately,”<sup>47</sup> a role the vampire undoubtedly fulfills as a form of cinematic and literary expression.

The vampire serves a valuable dual purpose, not only emerging from the swirling darkness of the human psyche in order to strike fear within the heart of eager audiences and providing the reassurance of the power of ultimate Good over absolute Evil (unless, of course, the vampire returns), it also exists as a lens through which to analyze ancient questions about death, the quandary of evil, the search for transcendent meaning, and where exactly God fits into it all. The figure of the vampire is able to traverse and interconnect theology and academia within the larger culture in an entertaining, engaging, and thought-provoking manner as a

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<sup>46</sup> Hallab, *Vampire God*, 86

<sup>47</sup> Paul Tillich, “The Religious Symbol,” in *Myth and Symbol*, ed. F.W. Dillistone (Essex: The Talbot Press, 1966), 17

result of its rich mythistory, cosmogonic (or chaogonic) implications, and its metaphorical potential to lead one into contemplating their role in the created order established in the context of religious tradition.

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