



## **Anna Höglund, POLITICAL READINGS AND THE MONSTER IN FANTASY HORROR**

“All fantasy is political, even – perhaps especially – when it thinks it is not.”

Fantasy literature moves its readers to fantastic and alien worlds. Yet this does not prevent the genre from reflecting and engaging in dialogue with the reality in which it is created. On the contrary, fantasy has been defined by several researchers as a highly political genre.

In the study *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1981), Rosemary Jackson explains the political potential of the genre as follows:

It does not constitute an escape into a made-up realm different from taken-for-granted reality, but constructs fictional worlds that are “neither entirely ‘real’ [...] nor entirely ‘unreal’ [...] but [are] located somewhere indeterminate between the two”.

The position of the genre between the real and the unreal has an alienating effect that can make our political reality more visible to us.

There are researchers who say that fantasy literature often portrays “a resistance to the dominant social order”. In my previous lecture I noted that this is very common in fantasy works where a monster tells his own story. The monster often questions the dominant ideological structure in culture and gives a voice to marginalized groups in society.

This does not mean that all fantasy challenges the status quo. It is also common that fantasy expresses norms and values that can be read as a defence of “the preservation of the social order”. Fantasy literature usually contains both a questioning and a defence of the existing reality.

I have previously observed that the fantastic monster is a rewarding object of study if one wants to learn more about the society and the culture we live in. The monster is a political creature.

The culture critic Edward Ingebreetsen says in *At Stake: Monsters and the Rhetoric of Fear in Public Culture* (2001) that every monster “is, essentially, a political entity and that our production of monsters is always part of our broader political understanding of the world and of notions of good and evil”.

To illustrate how monsters can be said to represent political opinions, in this lecture I shall give a brief analysis of the class affiliation of vampires and werewolves as portrayed in a work in the genre of paranormal romance, specifically, the *Sookie Stackhouse Series* by C. Harris.

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He was big as a boulder, with biceps that I could do pull-ups on. He would have to shave a second time if he planned on going out in the evening. He would fit right in on a construction site or a wharf.

C. Harris, *Club Dead*, 2003

This is a quotation from Charlaine Harris’s *The Sookie Stackhouse Series*, the books on which the popular television series *True Blood* is based. Harris’s books describe a world that is like our own but with a palpable difference: it is inhabited not just by people but also by a multitude of monstrous creatures such as vampires, werewolves and zombies.

In the quotation above, the main character in the series, the telepathic waitress Sookie Stackhouse, describes Alcide the werewolf.

For Sookie, Alcide is the perfect man. He dresses right, he eats real food and he drives a four-door Ram Crew Cab where he keeps everything a man needs at work and in leisure time, including duct tape, for “real men always have duct tape in their trucks”.

According to Sookie, Alcide is “a proper man”.

In the description of Alcide we see an ideal of masculinity in the working class that derives from a mythical idea that the masculinity scholar Mikael Kimmel calls *The Heroic Artisan*.

It is common that werewolves like Alcide are described as the working class and/or underdogs of the monster world. Well-known examples are the Native American boy Jacob in the novel *Twilight*, and the “lycans” in the film series *Underworld*.

In *Underworld* we find a typical representative of what can be called a *reluctant working class*, the werewolf Lucian. He is a true class struggler who revolts in order to free the werewolves from the role of servants that has been assigned to them. Like many other heroes he ends up sacrificing his life for the cause.

If you study Harris's werewolf Alcide you see that he is rather a representative of a more *willing working class*. Alcide has nothing against working for others and he is proud of his occupational skills. Alcide is not interested in the struggle for money and power. His priority is instead spending time with family and friends.

Alcide is not the only werewolf in Harris's books. In Harris's world most werewolves live together with each other, in a flock. There is a power struggle within the flock, but like Alcide the individual werewolves make no claim to power in the world outside the flock. They prefer to live their lives in peace and quiet outside society.

The werewolves' wild lifestyle and their appetite for drugs nevertheless forces several of them to do the dirty jobs for other groups in society, especially the vampires (to whom I'll come back soon).

The werewolves are the true underdogs of the monster world, and they are shaped by the prejudices against the people who go under the umbrella term *white trash* in the USA. White trash is a highly pejorative designation for white Americans with little education and low social status.

With its portrayal of the werewolves as white trash, *True Blood* is alarmingly reminiscent of the way the working class is presented in Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* from 1897. *Dracula* shows the working class as constantly swearing, drug-abusing savages with no moral qualms whatever, prepared to perform all manner of shady deeds in return for money or free alcohol.

If you study the portrayal of werewolves in Harris's books, then, you can find evidence that ideological notions from the nineteenth century have persisted into the twenty-first century.

In Harris's books the werewolves represent the underdogs of society. Who then represents the upper class? I would claim without hesitation that it is the vampire.

Ever since the publication of John Polidori's *The Vampyre* in 1819, the vampire has been portrayed as an aristocratic lady-killer. When Bram Stoker's *Dracula* was published in 1897, the upper-class status of the vampire was consolidated.

Today there are many fiction writers who play with the class status of the vampire. In *The Sookie Stackhouse Series* we find vampires in several different classes in society.

Despite that, it is clear that vampires are an elite in the social hierarchy. If the heroine Sookie and most of her friends represent a low-paid American working class, the vampires in the books stand for the opposite.

These are blood-suckers who live a life of luxury and surround themselves with status symbols such as country estates, private planes, exclusive cars, designer clothes and various other expensive commodities. Moreover, even the most unpretentious vampire appears to have a staff of personal servants to satisfy the master's multifaceted needs (such as cleaning up after the latest blood-orgy or offering refreshment from their own aorta).

Vampires are often depicted as a disciplined class, or at least this is the role they play in public. Like the nobility of bygone days, that have been brought up in highly traditional settings, often of a military character. They have been taught to maintain an upright bearing, never to show their feelings on the surface, always to be impeccably dressed, and to follow the family's many rules of etiquette.

Underneath the impeccable surface, however, the vampiric upper class conceals a quite different side, their hedonism. When no one is looking, they indulge in the good things of life, such as exclusive delicacies, drugs and sex. The upper class is corrupt. They make their own laws and are prepared to murder and bribe anyone to maintain their position in society. Being upper-class means not being subject to anyone.

In Harris's world the vampires wield power. Even so, they crave more power, over humans and monsters alike. The upper class is simply insatiable; they can never get enough but always demand more.

Like the portrayal of the working class, the picture of the upper class in *The Sookie Stackhouse Series* is similar to what we see in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. In Stoker's novel the nobility is depicted as a decadent and degenerate class. Under the tidy, disciplined surface they conceal their true nature as hedonistic and corrupt vampires. The hunger of the aristocratic vampire Dracula can never be satisfied. He is constantly in search of new hunting grounds and new victims on whose blood he can gorge.

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In this lecture I began by claiming that studies of monsters in Fantasy Horror can give us a broader political understanding of the society we live in. I then illustrated my claim with a simple study of the class affiliation of vampires and werewolves in C. Harris's *The Sookie Stackhouse Series*.

From this analysis I want to draw a number of conclusions. Harris portrays a society where there are strong ideological notions about the concept and the phenomenon of class. I would claim that these notions show close resemblances to those which emerge from an analysis of class in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* from 1897.

In twenty-first-century society most of us reject the nineteenth century's pseudo-scientific and, in my opinion, reprehensible theories of the supposed characteristics of individuals from different classes of society. Despite that, an analysis of the monster's class status in Harris's books shows that similar ideas still exist and still have a strong influence on our view of class.

I began by observing that fantasy literature often simultaneously questions and defends the dominant ideological notions in society. Harris's books, and above all the film version by HBO, *True Blood*, are an illustrative example of this. While the class society is presented in a conservative way, we also hear the voices of marginalized groups in society questioning the status quo. In this simple study of Harris's books, however, I

have chosen to highlight a number of conservative tendencies in the portrayal of monsters.

It is now time to round off my last lecture on the “Horror and Fantasy” course.

My intention is that these lectures, together with the knowledge presented in the mandatory and suggested reading in this module, will make you more aware of the political potential of fantasy literature. I also hope that the lectures have aroused your interest in Fantasy Horror in general and the genre’s monsters in particular. My greatest wish, however, is that the knowledge you have gained on this course will inspire you in such a way that you now feel the urge to explore for yourselves the fantastic world of monsters in order to learn more about human beings and the society we live in.