

Constructing Ideology in Twenty-First-Century Supernatural Romance.
The Salvatore Brothers in *The Vampire Diaries*

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The Vampire Diaries is a television series based on J. L. Smith's novels that follows the emergence of young adult vampire fiction in the first decade of the twenty-first century. This article explores how the show presents vampires in a reflection of changes in society and contributes to debates about marketability and ideology and the influence television has on its audience.

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Vampires have always been fascinating creatures that have captured the imagination of their audience. From the original folklore traditions and legends, they were transformed into a recurrent topic of the literature of the nineteenth century. But it is during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, thanks to the cinema and television, that they have enjoyed more popularity and success than ever before, and this is partly due to their ability to transform and adapt to different periods. As Nina Auerbach (1995) explains, there is a vampire for every generation and it is precisely this “constant state of disintegration and renewal” (Abbot 2007, 5) that intrinsically links them to the contemporary world.

However, vampires in the twenty-first century have become a product that has gone beyond the literary or cinematographic domain. Mass consumer culture is present in most Western societies and, as a consequence of “the increasing commercialisation of culture and leisure” (Strinati 1996, 2), the vampire has been transformed into yet another product to be marketed and sold worldwide. As Valerie Wee explains, the “unprecedented degree of intersection across multiple forms of media and distribution outlets” (2004, 89) that started in the 1990s should be understood as a crucial factor when analysing how these days products are created not for a particular sector but for multiple ones. Media corporations have “expanded their holdings and interests across film, television, music, publishing, retail and the Internet” (2004, 89) and, as a product, the vampire has been sold and circulated in different media, including

“soundtracks, music videos, trailers, fashion, magazine features and television appearances” (2004, 91). The obvious consequence of this model of development is that popular culture has completely changed and now, as many might argue, “criteria of profitability and marketability take precedence over quality, artistry, integrity and intellectual challenge” (Strinati 1996, 3). This profit-driven nature of the culture industries means that media corporations are constantly looking for new products to sell, and vampires have proven financially successful on many occasions. From film series such as the *Blade* trilogy (1998-2004) to *Underworld* (2003-2012) or the TV series *True Blood* (2008-2014), their appeal to audiences is undeniable. But it is the instant success of Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* Saga that has helped increase the audience interest in what has been called the *supernatural romance*, creating legions of fans, first following the novels, later the films as well as spawning thousands of internet sites and generating a profitable merchandise market. The success of any product quickly generates copies and the American TV network CW created *The Vampire Diaries* in an attempt to profit from the popularity of Meyer’s story. L. J. Smith had written a series of novels for a commission from Alloy Entertainment in the early 1990s and these were used as the basis for this new TV series. In the case of *The Vampire Diaries*, the timing of its release seems obvious. Following the *Twilight* success in December 2008, CW began working on the project and the series premiered on air on September 10, 2009, not even a year after the huge success of the first *Twilight* film and a month before the second, *New Moon*, appeared on cinemas. As expected, it was CW’s biggest series premier with more than 4.9 million viewers and its success has continued ever since, with more than 2.5 million viewers on its first five seasons on the US alone and currently running its sixth season.

Media organisations do not only reflect however the “demands of profitability” (Strinati 1996, 251) that are at work in the American capitalist society, but they also become “channels for a dominant ideology” (1996, 251). In this sense, vampires become a reflection of the capitalist society, where profitability becomes a key element, but also, as part of the contemporary popular and mass-produced culture, they become a discourse for transmitting specific ideologies, values and behaviours. Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson explain that we should pay attention not only to the way capitalism has embedded itself within the teen lifestyle but also analyse the “moral and ethical ramifications” (2004, 9). Media organisations are managed by an elite that provides “filters and frames through which many people view the world” and, therefore, control “what will be seen or how reality will be perceived” (2010, 42). They encourage certain attitudes and censure others, constructing a particular reality for their consumers, but it must be remembered that “that picture of reality is usually inaccurate” (2010, 42). Contemporary representations of vampires mirror not only the changes that have taken place in our society in the last decades but they also carry particular ideological constructions that should not be overlooked. One of the first aspects we should focus on is the fact that Mystic Falls, the place where

the action is set and that is supposed to represent the typical southern American town, does not offer any ethnic, racial or cultural variety. While other TV series, such as *True Blood*, portray a far more heterogeneous society, almost all the vampires appearing in *The Vampire Diaries* are white, middle-class. Although in the original novels the Salvatore brothers belonged to the Italian nobility, the TV series adapts to more recent representations of vampires. In the tradition of American narratives, status is not given through European titles of nobility, but in the TV series the main characters belong to the founding families of Mystic Falls. In this way, the tradition of the aristocrat vampire is updated and included within the heroic history of the creation of the United States, with frequent references to the Civil War and the romantic idea of the good old South as well as many flashbacks to the beginning of the twentieth century where we see the brothers leaving for Europe to bravely fight in the Second World War together with other young Americans, thus reinforcing their status as heroes. This element of heroism is confronted with the presentation of other vampires, such as Katherine Piers or Klaus Mikaelson, that are clearly linked to negative characteristics. They are presented as monsters, as the dangerous Other, and stand for reprehensible behaviour. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has explained that “the monster polices the borders of the possible” (1996, 2) and is used as a warning against the exploration of the different. The subversive potential of the monster that is apparent in other types of narratives disappears in *The Vampire Diaries*. Instead, vampires are used to present behaviours charged with moral values. As happened with earlier representations of these supernatural creatures, the TV series uses these villains to reinforce “the formally dichotomized structures of belief” (Punter and Byron [2004] 2007, 270) and a dominant worldview. The vampire is, then, appropriated in the service of “a more conservative moral agenda that aims to reinforce threatened moral values” ([2004] 2007, 271) but also economic factors of profitability in the mass-market entertainment industries.

The main focus of this study is not analysing the vampire as a monster but as a romantic hero, and, as Susannah Clements points out, in order to transform them from the enemy to the sympathetic hero, they must be first “sanitised” and “domesticated” (2010, 149), a process that is present in the portrayal of the Salvatore brothers. Stefan is presented as a mysterious teenager arriving at Mystic Falls looking for the reincarnation of his long lost love, Elena Gilbert. But an element of danger is added; he is a vampire and his thirst, his desire, is dangerous. Like some previous vampires, including Edward Cullen in *The Twilight Saga* or Angel in *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, Stefan is afraid of losing control. He is portrayed as a repentant sinner, always fighting against his true nature as a vampire, against his thirst, which is presented as an addiction. From a series of flashbacks, the audience witness how, soon after his transformation, there is a period when Stefan loses control, becoming a ruthless killer known as “the Ripper.” In a clear copy of the traditional formula, Stefan’s character is presented as a romantic hero who falls in love with a girl, but also as a repentant vampire

who willingly refuses to take human blood and seeks to “actively help other people” (Clemments 2011, 143) to compensate for all the deaths and pain he has caused. The other Salvatore brother, Damon, can also be compared to other traditional vampire heroes. Like Spike in *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* or Lestat in *The Vampire Chronicles*, Damon is a rebel who defies rules and does not care about authority. Although at the beginning of the TV series he is presented as a dangerous Other, as evil, the theme of redemption is present again. The audience will witness his transformation as the series develops and how his relation to Elena Gilbert, their friendship and the love he feels for her, changes him. Despite his sarcasm and apparent disdain for everybody’s welfare, Damon starts helping others and slowly becomes a member of Mystic Falls’ community, earning Elena’s forgiveness and love. This portrayal of the bad boy turned good because of love repeats a traditional formula of previous vampire narratives that has proven commercially successful, something that CW producers are well aware of and exploit in the TV series.

As in most supernatural romances, love is a central theme in the narrative but sex is also present in an attempt to bring vampires to the twenty-first century attitudes towards romantic relationships and sexuality. Although there are no explicit scenes, sex is part of the characters’ lives. However, it is neither presented as a taboo, as in *Twilight*, nor does it appear intrinsically linked to the fact of being a vampire, as happens in *True Blood*. Once again, it is worth noting that in all six seasons heterosexuality is presented as the norm and it is not discussed or questioned any further. This offers its viewers a biased perspective of reality that has ideological consequences, since it monitors and shapes what attitudes are acceptable and at the same time it silences alternative voices. As Lorna Jowett explains, the definition of self and normed is “constructed by dominant groups and work to exclude characteristics or identities that do not match those of the dominant group” (2005, 6). This tendency towards homogenization, which audiences perceive as real, though not at all accurate, is safer for the network and avoids any type of controversy, since it inscribes itself in the current mainstream ideology. Likewise, other aspects in the description of these supernatural creatures follow the same tendency. Vampires have always represented the human desire to overcome death. They reflect the human wish for eternal youth and beauty and human “anxieties about the aging process and the desire for immortality” (Abbott 2007, 134). In fact, most vampires have always been, if not beautiful, at least attractive figures with a great degree of appeal. However, it is only recently that their youth has been stressed so much. This should be understood not only as part of the young adult narratives that have become so successful in the last few years but also as a reflection of today’s society and its present obsession with these aspects. The twenty-first century vampire is no longer understood as the enemy but has become a role model. They have some desirable characteristics that are emphasised in our society. Plastic surgery has become a common practice not only amongst public figures such as models, actors or even politicians, but also amongst average people in an attempt

to achieve eternal youth and perfect physical features. Being a vampire would, then, mean having those characteristics eternally and, for this reason, the focus on these elements is highlighted more than ever before.

However, it is not only women's beauty but also men's bodies that are objectified in these recent incarnations of vampires, reflecting the changes that have taken place in the portrayal of masculinities in recent decades. In the 1980s a new style of action film portrayed men with extremely muscular bodies, an obsession with fitness and the cult of the body that has continued into the twenty-first century in what Chris Barker refers to as *ornamental culture*, the culture of "celebrity, image, entertainment and marketing, all underpinned by consumerism" (2012, 315). Masculinity and the representation of the masculine body are now sold in the same way as that of femininity and women's bodies. Both are objectified and their bodies, their beauty and perfection become another characteristic that will help sell the product, presenting an ideal to be obtained and desired by their audience. Beauty has become such an important feature that its lack is usually translated into something negative. When vampires in the TV series show their true vampire nature, when they crave blood or act violently, it is not only their fangs that appear but they also change physically—their faces have beast-like features and their eyes turn black. In this sense, vampires continue to be understood as monsters when they do not follow the rules, and their ugliness becomes apparent. However, vampires in this TV series are offered a choice: they can turn off their humanity and feel no pain or regret, becoming no more than a beast, or decide to live like humans, with all the suffering and remorse, but be saved. Physical appearance is, therefore, linked to moral aspects. When vampires become monsters on the inside they also become monsters on the outside. Acceptable behaviours are rewarded but the audience can also witness the terrible consequences of unacceptable attitudes, which do not only lead to death or violence but also to physical ugliness.

The idea of beauty is not only linked to perfect physical features but also to other aspects. Money is a fundamental element that determines one's position in society. One is classified depending on what you own, and, therefore, material possessions are a symbol of status, something which typically appears in most TV series. As Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson explain, it is a mechanism that ensures that teenagers engage "in the 'right' types of consumer culture" (2004, 9). Technology, the use of computers, smart phones and the latest state-of-the-art devices frequently appear in the series, reflecting new ways of communicating and socializing. Most of the characters, for example, constantly send text messages, search for information on brand new computers or use the most recent applications for their phones and tablets. But, as has been explained, this is not only a way of taking vampires into the twenty-first century but rather a reflection of a materialist modern society where success is measured by the amount of things you can buy. And the same happens with other luxury objects such as expensive cars and motorbikes—Damon, for example, drives a Chevrolet Camaro SS Convertible and Stefan has a T-100 Triumph motorbike and

a red 1963 Porsche 356B Karmann Coupe—contribute to inculcate “a worrying identification with commodities in young viewers” (2004, 9). It is also worth noting the importance of clothes in the series. All the characters, both human and vampire, frequently change their outfit, their hairstyle and their jewellery. Fashion is no longer restricted only to women and we frequently see Stefan and Damon wearing the latest trend in clothes and changing their outfit several times in each episode. Then, the very same clothes they use for the series appear in the cover of various fashion magazines. Vampires are no longer fearful creatures living in the dark, as we saw in many twentieth-century representations on screen, but they are turned into new fashion icons and teenagers following the TV series will become potential buyers of all the products appearing on screen.

With an audience of over 2.5 million viewers for its last season, *The Vampire Diaries* presents not only American but also worldwide audiences with particular values. They reinforce “ideological constructions such as the value of romantic love, the norm of heterosexuality, nationalism, or traditional concepts of good and evil” (Sturken and Cartwright [2001] 2003, 21) and, thus, modulate the way reality is perceived. Vampires have now become the heroes in the story and are presented as the ideal any teenager should aspire to become, but, most importantly, this ideological construction appears “to be natural or given, rather than part of a system of belief that a culture produces in order to function in a particular way” (Sturken and Cartwright [2001] 2003, 21-22). Therefore, *The Vampire Diaries* contributes to the continuing of the profit-driven industries within which this TV series was created and mirrors a tendency in many teen-oriented shows in these first two decades of the twenty-first century. It is a perfect example of how copying a successful formula becomes a highly profitable business and reflects a trend present in a great number of productions that no longer attempt to present their viewers with more complex plots or characters. Networks and media corporations aim at continuing the society of consumerism. They not only present vampires as fearful beings, following traditional trends, but a new concept of vampires also arises in a reflection of what teenagers should desire, what they should aspire to become. Television is a powerful tool for spreading ideology and vampires are the perfect product to sell to those eager teenagers looking for love, sex, beauty, money and success. These supernatural creatures do not only reflect the changes that have taken place in American society and how commercialisation and globalisation have affected popular culture but they are also a reflection of our own time and how the discourse of the vampire has become yet another instrument of the dominant socio-cultural order.

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