

# Marxferatu: The Vampire Metaphor as a Tool for Teaching Marx's Critique of Capitalism

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**ABSTRACT** Although today's undergraduates may not have considered the implications of class struggle, they are generally well-versed in the intricacies of vampire lore. This article outlines how the vampire metaphor can serve as a valuable pedagogical tool for introducing students to fundamental concepts in Marxist thought. As opposed to the supernatural vampires featured in Stoker's *Dracula* or Meyer's *Twilight* saga, this approach treats capitalism as a form of economic vampirism—with the capitalist taking on the role of the vampire and the worker relegated to its prey. The article further extends the vampire metaphor and demonstrates how it can be used to teach the Marxist perspectives on class conflict, alienation, and false consciousness.

Our modern understanding of the vampire draws extensively on the work of Bram Stoker. Through Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula* we know the vampire's habits, the vampire's abilities, and the vampire's weaknesses. Stoker, however, was far from the first author to write about vampires.<sup>1</sup> In fact, if we look back a few decades prior to *Dracula*'s publication, we discover another author with an intense interest in vampires. This earlier author's work would go on to be translated into dozens of languages and shape the lives of well over a billion people worldwide. The author is, of course, Karl Marx.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the undeniable significance of Marxist thought across a wide range of academic disciplines—including political science, economics, film studies, geography, history, literary criticism, philosophy, sociology, and beyond—teaching Marx to an undergraduate audience poses certain pedagogical challenges. Obviously, students cannot fully appreciate the intricacies of “The Manifesto of the Communist Party” during a 15-minute skimming of the text prior to class. The language is dense, the arguments are sophisticated, and the early industrial era during which Marx and his collaborator Friedrich Engels wrote seems like ancient history to today's college students. Moreover, in an increasingly polarized American political climate, a growing number of students enter the classroom prepared to actively resist any attempts at “Marxist indoctrination” by their “agenda-pushing” professors. Therefore, the challenge is making Marx relevant, accessible, and applicable to twenty-first century undergraduates. In this capacity the vampire metaphor is particularly effective.

In this article, I demonstrate the utility of the vampire metaphor as a tool for teaching Marx in a manner that is both pertinent and readily comprehensible to today's undergraduate students. Whereas Stoker wrote about a supernatural vampire, this approach to teaching Marxism recasts capitalism as a form of *economic* vampirism. In this interpretation of Marxist theory, factory owners step into the role of the vampire, draining the surplus value of the worker's labor to further enrich themselves, in much the same way that Stoker's vampire sucks blood from victims to grow ever stronger. Seduced by the capitalist's spell—the comforting distractions of religion, politics, consumer culture—the worker suffers a “loss of self” and emerges as little more than a walking corpse.

Although the young women and men who step onto college campuses today may not have spent considerable time pondering the inherent contradictions of capitalism or the broader implications of class struggle, they are remarkably well-versed in vampire lore.<sup>3</sup> After all, the current generation of college students propelled Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* saga to sell more than 100 million copies worldwide and helped make television's *True Blood* the most-watched series on HBO since *The Sopranos*. In turn, the ubiquity of vampires in contemporary popular culture makes the vampire metaphor a particularly valuable pedagogical tool to introduce undergraduate students to key concepts in Marxist philosophy and political economy.

This article begins by exploring in greater detail the challenges faced in teaching Marx to an undergraduate audience, followed by a brief discussion of Marx's use of the vampire metaphor in his own work. Then the article extends the vampire metaphor to demonstrate its potential as a teaching tool to introduce three essential concepts in the Marxist critique of capitalism: class conflict, alienation, and false consciousness.

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### THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING ABOUT MARXISM

In most academic disciplines, introducing undergraduate students to Marxism consists of more than simply describing Karl Marx as a historical figure and briefly summarizing his work. Isser (1981) explains the task at hand as follows:

The students need to develop intellectual insights into complex economic and social conflicts as well as a rigorous analysis of political theory. They must perceive the philosophical and ethical dimensions of these societies, such as the dilemma of liberty versus equality, or the disparity and difficulty of maintaining individuality in a collective society. (61)

This task is further complicated by the fact that many undergraduate students, at least in the United States, enter college with relatively little knowledge about Marxism. For instance, a study of first-semester freshmen conducted by Manton and English (2000) indicates that only 37.2% of respondents could correctly identify Karl Marx as the “father” of communism on a multiple-choice questionnaire.<sup>4</sup> Clarke and Mearman (2003) also note that students “will invariably have a whole host of preconditioned ideas, including perceptions of ‘communist’ or ‘socialist’ regimes,” all of which make teaching about Marxism “harder, although not impossible” (74).

Ollman (1978) argues that the absence of a vital socialist movement in the United States “makes most students approach Marxism too much in the spirit of another academic exercise, just as it confirms them in the belief—before study begins—that Marx’s analysis cannot be correct” (15). He suggests that “how one approaches and organizes the subject matter, where one begins and con-

cludes, the kind of examples used, and especially what one emphasizes have considerable influence on the degree of success” (16) in teaching students about Marxism. In turn, the vampire metaphor is an accessible approach that works around students’ lack of knowledge on Marxism by capitalizing on their familiarity with the vampire mythos. Furthermore, this metaphor has the advantage of divorcing Marxist thought from an immediately “political” context, helping to assuage any preconceived notions or biases that students may bring to the classroom.

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### MARX’S USE OF THE VAMPIRE METAPHOR

Although the characterization of communism as a “specter” haunting Europe is arguably the most prominent example of supernatural imagery in the Marxist canon, Neocleous (2003) argues that “the vampire metaphor plays a significant role in Marx’s work, a role perhaps even more significant than the ghostly or spectral” (669). In *Das Kapital*, for instance, Marx (1867/2008) describes capital as “dead labor, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks” (149). He also suggests that the elongation of the working day “quenches only in a slight degree the vampire thirst for the living blood of labor” (159) and warns that the vampire “will not lose its hold . . . ‘so long

as there is a muscle, nerve, a drop of blood to be exploited” (181). Similar blood-sucking imagery also appears in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (1852), the *Grundrisse* (1858), the Inaugural Address to the International Working Men’s Association (1864), and elsewhere in Marx’s work (Neocleous 2003).

Why does Marx revisit the vampire metaphor and use blood-related imagery so often in his work? Perhaps Marx’s references to vampirism merely serve as a literary device to enliven his prose. Alternatively, we could also situate it against the broader backdrop of nineteenth-century Europe’s fascination with vampire fiction. However, Neocleous (2003) argues that the vampire metaphor is more than a simple rhetorical device or a reflection of popular literary trends; rather, it is central to Marx’s understanding of capitalism:

Marx uses it to illustrate one of the central dynamics of capitalist production—the distinction between living and dead labor, a distinction that picks up on a more general theme in his work: the desire to create a society founded on the *living* of full and creative lives rather than one founded on the *rule of the dead*. . . . The vampire as monster both *demonstrates* the capabilities of capital and acts as a *warning* about it. (684)

Just as vampirism was a potent metaphor in illustrating the relationship between bourgeoisie and proletariat in Marx’s time, it remains effective for teaching the basic principles of Marxist thought today—perhaps to an even greater degree considering the resurgent “vampire craze” in contemporary popular culture.<sup>5</sup> The following section expands on the vampire metaphor and illustrates its value as a pedagogical tool.

### EXTENDING AND APPLYING THE VAMPIRE METAPHOR IN THE CLASSROOM

As Barrows (2006) observes, “Count Dracula has proven the most persistently adaptable and resilient of popular icons, retaining his power to intrigue and frighten audiences across generational and cultural divides” (69). Moreover, Newitz (2006) characterizes monster stories, including tales of the undead, as “one of the dominant allegorical narratives used to explore economic life in the United States” (5). With that in mind, how can we extend Count Dracula—and the vampire metaphor as a whole—to introduce undergraduates to Marx’s critique of capitalism? In this section, I explore three central concepts in Marxist thought: class conflict, alienation, and false consciousness. In each case, I first introduce the traditional Marxist understanding of the concept and then draw parallels with works of vampire literature, film, and television to demonstrate the value of the vampire metaphor as an instructional approach.

#### Class Conflict: The Living and the Undead

As Marx and Engels write in “The Manifesto of the Communist Party” (1848), “The history of hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebian,

lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman” (473–74). Certainly, the bifurcation of society into oppressor and oppressed is a hallmark of Marxist thought. Marx (1844/1978) argued that “the whole of society must fall apart into the two classes—the property-owners and the propertyless workers” (70), locked into an exploitative relationship that inevitably breeds conflict.

To illustrate this fundamental division of society into bourgeoisie and proletariat in the classroom, I compare the distinction between vampire and human that defines so much of the vampire canon. “In the figure of Count Dracula,” Hatlen (1988) argues, “Stoker created an image of ‘otherness’” (129)—not just physically, but also culturally and socially. Vampire fiction typically draws a clear line of separation between the living and the undead, creating a social demarcation between vampire and victim. Bill Compton, the vampire lead in HBO’s *True Blood* series, gives voice to this division when he matter-of-factly declares to his human paramour, “I am not human, Sookie. I am vampire” (“Burning House of Love,” 1.7). Moreover, as Bill explains to Sookie in an earlier episode, “We don’t have human values like you” (“Strange Love,” 1.1). In fact, *True Blood*, the *Twilight* series, and other contemporary works of vampire fiction increasingly depict entire clan-

As Count Dracula states in the 2004 film *Van Helsing*, “I’m at war with the world and every living soul in it!” In a similar vein, Marx (1847a/1978) defines the stakes in the conflict between the bourgeoisie and proletariat as “combat or death: bloody struggle or extinction” (219). The vampire metaphor, in turn, has the potential to drive home the primacy of class conflict to students encountering Marxist thought for the first time.

### **Alienation: The Exsanguination of the Working Class**

Questions about what it means to be human are central in vampire fiction, dating back to Stoker’s *Dracula* and running through the present in works like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Twilight*. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this is also an important concern in Marx’s work. As a staunch materialist, he centers his theory of human nature on the individual’s labor and productive activity. For instance, Marx argues in “Wage Labour and Capital” (1847) that labor “is the worker’s own life-activity, the manifestation of his own life” (204). Singer (2000) elaborates that “labor in the sense of free productive activity is the essence of human life. Whatever is produced in this way—a statue, a house, or a piece of cloth—is therefore the essence of human life made into a physical object”

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based vampire societies with their own laws and social norms that exist outside mainstream human society.

As discussed earlier, patterns of exploitation and inevitable conflict define the relationship between Marx’s “dead labor” (capital) and “living labor” (the working class). Motivated solely by profit, factory owners emerge as a form of *economic* vampires, improving their bottom line through longer hours, lower wages, and poorer working conditions. Capitalists are, in effect, draining away the value of their workers’ labor to enrich themselves—just as supernatural vampires drains their victims’ life force to grow stronger.

The parallels with vampire fiction are evident. As Shaviro (2002) notes, “The vampire grows, not through any productive activity of its own, but by expropriating a surplus generated by the living” (282). Sims (2010) concurs: “For vampires, the cost of staying alive, or at least staying not quite dead, is the price of lives other than their own—as if, when they have exhausted their own allotted wealth, they can steal someone else’s to keep the creditor at bay” (6). According to Forry (2006), “Vampires are the ultimate affirmation of individualism, escaping from human moral obligation, caring only for themselves, and free from regret or remorse for their actions” (237). Finally, Moretti (1999) draws the following comparison between the vampire and the capitalist:

His curse compels him to make ever more victims, just as the capitalist is compelled to accumulate. His nature forces him to struggle to be unlimited, to subjugate *the whole of society*. For this reason, one cannot ‘coexist’ with the vampire. One must either succumb to him or kill him. (46)

(35–36). According to Marx, our ability to create freely and enjoy the products of that labor defines us as human beings and gives meaning to our lives.

Marx argues, however, that the relationship between workers and the value of their labor fundamentally changes under capitalist modes of production. When a worker sells the surplus value of his labor to a factory owner in exchange for wages paid, Marx calls it “a sacrifice of his life” (1847b/1978, 204). This process alienates humans from their own nature, and it is the factory owner who ultimately accumulates profit from the worker’s labor. “Estranged from the material embodiment of their labor,” Latham (2002) observes, “workers find themselves integrated into the factory system as cogs in the productive apparatus their own energies have spawned” (3). The worker is reduced to little more than the next stop on the assembly line, a monotonous process that results in a “total loss of humanity” according to Marx (1844/1978, 64). “As a result, therefore,” Marx continues, “man . . . no longer feels himself to be freely active in any but his animal functions—eating, drinking, procreating . . . and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal” (74). In turn, alienation from the product of his labor “enforces on the laborer abstinence from all life’s enjoyments” (Marx 1867/2008, 333). Drained of his human spark, a worker’s life loses all meaning. At the risk of mixing monster movie metaphors, the “loss of self” (Marx 1844/1978, 74) that results from capitalist production transforms the worker into little more than a zombie—a slave to the capitalist.

Whereas Marx’s theory of alienation is a sophisticated argument, the vampire metaphor once again proves itself quite useful

as a way to make the concept accessible to an undergraduate audience. In this context, compare the Marxist concept of alienation with the loss of humanity suffered by victims of the vampire's bite. Look no further than Lucy Westenra, the first character to suffer the Count's fangs in Stoker's *Dracula*, to find the archetypal victim of the vampire. Visiting her at night, Count Dracula slowly drains Lucy's blood and leaves her anemic and bedridden. Once vivacious, Lucy becomes pale, listless, and visibly weakened. "She was hardly able to turn her head," the character of Dr. Seward writes in his journal, "and the little nourishment which she could take seemed to do her no good" (Stoker 1897/1973, 143). The same character later notes, "Presently she woke, and I gave her food, as Van Helsing has prescribed. She took but a little, and that languidly. There did not seem to be with her now the unconscious struggle for life and strength that had hitherto marked her illness" (Stoker 1897, 149). Just as Marx's view of alienation suggests that capitalism drains the worker of his humanity and separates him from all life's enjoyments, so too does the vampire's bite drain Lucy of her will to live and eventually transform her into the walking dead.<sup>6</sup>

### False Consciousness: Under the Vampire's Spell

When we discuss the Marxist perspective on the exploitation and alienation of the working class, students often pose a familiar question: why don't the workers just rise up? Following through with the vampire motif, we compare the failure of the working class to mobilize against the bourgeoisie with the victims who

superstructure create a false consciousness that distracts workers from the economic base and, ultimately, their own best interests. The social order produced by capitalism is designed to immobilize the worker long enough for the factory owner to effectively drain him dry.

Similarly, the title character in *Blade* (1998) describes the base and superstructure that define the film's setting when he declares, "You better wake up. The world you live in is just a sugar-coated topping. There is another world beneath it—the real world." Seduction is arguably the most potent talent in the vampire's repertoire, dating back at least as far as Count Dracula's "hypnotic" eyes and the "fascination" they evoke in Lucy. For instance, Hood (1988) refers to Dracula's powers of enticement, "in which he inflames the irrational desires of his world-be converts for those corrupt but intoxicating powers and pleasures to which he has access" (216). While *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* Spike dismisses Dracula's hypnotic powers as "nothing but showy Gypsy stuff," the Count nevertheless succeeds in placing the formidable Buffy under his thrall, however briefly ("Buffy vs. Dracula," 5.1). Meanwhile, in the *True Blood* universe, the vampiric ability to mesmerize and mentally control human beings is known as "glamouring." After all, as *True Blood's* Bill observes, "humans are shockingly susceptible to just about every form of thought manipulation" ("I Don't Wanna Know," 1.10).

Turning to the *Twilight* series, Edward Cullen does not rely on any supernatural vampiric powers to enthrall his prey. Rather, he does this through old-fashioned emotional and physical attrac-

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passively surrender to Dracula's attacks. The vampire has seduced his victims and placed them under his spell. In much the same way, Marx argues that capitalism casts its own spell over the working class.

Marx attributes the failure of the working class to rise up against its oppressors to a lack of class consciousness—that is, a collective unawareness concerning social and economic standing among the workers. In fact, engendering a stronger sense of class consciousness among European workers is the *raison d'être* behind Marx and Engel's "Manifesto of the Communist Party." However, the workers are distracted from the realities of economic exploitation (the "base" in Marxist terminology) by politics, ideology, culture, religion, and the commodities that capitalism produces (all parts of society's "superstructure"). For example, Marx's oft-quoted dictum that religion is "the opiate of the people" (1843, 54) alludes to vague promises of future rewards in the afterlife in exchange for enduring earthly hardships in the present. Similarly, Marx (1867/2008) argues that the social value ascribed to the wages paid and the goods produced under capitalism creates "commodity fetishism" that further diverts the worker's attention from the harsh realities of exploitation. Political ideologies are yet another distraction; as Marx and Engels (1846) note, "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas." These social, cultural, and political aspects of the bourgeoisie-dominated

tion. As Bella Swan, the target of Edward's affection, puts it, "I wasn't *interesting*. And he was. Interesting . . . and brilliant . . . and mysterious . . . and perfect . . . and beautiful . . . and possibly able to lift full-sized vans with one hand" (Meyer 2005, 79). Bella goes on to expound, "About three things I was absolutely positive. First, Edward was a vampire. Second, there was part of him—and I didn't know how potent that part might be—that thirsted for my blood. And third, I was unconditionally and irrevocably in love with him" (195). Meanwhile, Edward is clearly cognizant of his charm, declaring to Bella, "I'm the world's best predator, aren't I? Everything about me invites you in—my voice, my face, even my smell. As if I need any of that!" (79). In summary, the vampire—whether through psychic powers or sheer physical beauty—creates its own sense of false consciousness in humans to more easily feast on their blood. Once again, the parallels with Marx's critique of capitalism are evident.

As the father of communism, where does Karl Marx fit into the vampire narrative? We might equate Marx with Stoker's Professor Abraham Van Helsing—a savvy intellectual endeavoring to warn those around him that a vampire is on the loose. After all, as Van Helsing cautions in *Dracula* (1931), "The strength of the vampire is that people will not believe in him." When Marx and Engels urge workers of the world to unite in *The Communist Manifesto*, they are not simply urging the proletariat to join a labor

union. Instead, they are calling on the working class to stop acting like Lucy, the Count's passive victim in *Dracula*, and start acting like Buffy the Vampire Slayer. With their very humanity on the line, Marx and Engels urge workers to wake up from the vampire's spell and drive a stake through the heart of capitalism, laying it to rest once and for all.

## CONCLUSION

McLellan (1999) describes the history of interpreting Marx in Western societies as "a history of the attempts to come to terms with, and even incorporate, the successively dominant intellectual trends in these societies" (955). In turn, I argue that using the vampire metaphor to teach Marx is a constructive exercise in reconciling the Marxist critique of capitalism with dominant trends in contemporary popular culture. This analysis demonstrates that it is possible to draw meaningful parallels between Marx's work and familiar tropes in vampire fiction, illustrating key Marxist concepts without diluting their intellectual significance. Moreover, this approach to teaching Marxist thought offers several pedagogical advantages. First, and perhaps most importantly, the "barriers to entry" are low. Neither the instructor nor his or her students must know the intricacies of the entire vampire genre to benefit from the metaphor's application. Rather, a basic knowledge that vampires are supernatural creatures that somehow enthrall and suck the blood from their human victims—a threshold of understanding that many American students will have met and exceeded after their first few experiences trick-or-treating during childhood—is a sufficient starting point to draw the necessary parallels with Marxist concepts like class conflict, alienation, and false consciousness. A second advantage of the

to other key Marxist concepts, including historical materialism, Marx's theory of revolution, and the dictatorship of the proletariat. In other words, the vampire metaphor is not intended as a *substitute* for the in-depth scholarly study of the many facets of Marxist thought. It is merely an *entry point*—the beginning of an intellectual discussion intended to make the subject matter more immediately engaging to an undergraduate audience.

In conclusion, by taking something that is both very real and vitally important—the impact of economic forces on modern society—and recasting it in terms of fictional blood-sucking creatures, we arrive at a teaching practice that helps make Marx relevant to a generation of students well-versed in the finer points of vampirology. Furthermore, the vampire metaphor works across the wide range of disciplines in which Marx is studied, from political science to literary criticism. Therefore it is a valuable instructional approach that makes Marx accessible and comprehensible to twenty-first century students, so many of whom have grown up immersed in both classical and contemporary vampire fiction.

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## NOTES

1. Earlier prominent works of vampire fiction include Goethe's *The Bride of Corinth* (1797), Lord Byron's *The Giaour* (1813), John William Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819), James Malcom Rymer's *Varney the Vampire* (1847), and Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872).

2. "Marxferatu" is a portmanteau that blends Marx's surname with *Nosferatu*, a synonym for vampire most famously used as the title of director F. W. Murnau's unauthorized 1922 film adaptation of *Dracula*.

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vampire metaphor is its scalability. Depending on the particular course and the instructor's learning objectives, this approach to introducing Marxist thought could constitute a single lesson plan, or, if the instructor chooses to explore it in greater detail, span over the course of several class periods. Finally, as the preceding analysis suggests, the pedagogical approach lends itself readily to incorporating multimedia into the class with vampire-related film and television clips.

One must remain mindful of the fact that the vampire metaphor potentially risks reducing the complexities of Marxist thought to the oversimplified notion that capitalism "creates monsters who want to kill you" (Newitz 2006, 3). To that end, it is an equally valuable classroom exercise to examine the ways in which the vampire metaphor is an *imperfect* representation of Marx's ideas. The portrayal of the capitalist as a predator intent on draining away the life essence of the worker, for instance, fails to adequately capture Marx's structural understanding of class relations, replacing it with a decidedly individualistic depiction of exploitation.<sup>7</sup> In addition, while the vampire metaphor provides helpful insights into class conflict, alienation, and false consciousness, it is more difficult to find proximate thematic connections

3. Certainly, the "rules" and assumptions of vampire fiction vary considerably from one fictional work to the next. For instance, vampires who sparkle when exposed to sunlight, as depicted in the *Twilight* saga, are a significant departure from the vampire archetype popularized in Stoker's *Dracula*. For this article, however, I work from three defining traits—that is, characteristics that tend to appear consistently in nearly all fictional portrayals of vampires. First, vampires are distinct from, and prey on, humans. Second, vampires survive and draw strength by draining the life force, typically blood, from their human victims. Third, vampires possess the ability to enthrall their would-be victims, whether through supernatural means or sheer beauty and charisma. These core traits reappear consistently in historical and contemporary vampire fiction. Moreover, they create a starting point that is accessible to nearly any student or instructor acquainted with even the general concept of a vampire, whether or not they are aficionados of the genre.

4. The same study indicates that only 26.6% of freshmen respondents could correctly identify Adam Smith as the "father" of capitalism, suggesting more generalized deficiencies in teaching economic history in American high schools.

5. Notably, the vampire's cultural context has shifted somewhat since the era of Marx and Stoker. Whereas vampires were still a source of genuine fear for many eighteenth-century readers (and, therefore, a powerful allusion for Marx to draw on), contemporary depictions of vampires increasingly portray the vampire in a sympathetic light, the victim of his or her own curse—or even glamorize the bourgeois wealth and power of the vampire lifestyle.

6. Marx's theory of alienation further argues that workers are themselves reduced to a commodity as a result of capitalist modes of production. We might compare this with the depiction of vampires treating humans as private property in *True Blood*. Bill repeatedly refers to Sookie as his possession, other vampires

speak of keeping humans as pets, and vampire law explicitly forbids one vampire from feeding on another vampire's human.

7. Even in this instance, Marx's tendency to waver back and forth in his work between characterizations of the bourgeoisie as either willfully predatory or simply a product of larger structural forces arguably parallels depictions of vampires who enthusiastically embrace their malevolent instincts and other "noble" vampires who treat their condition as an inescapable curse. For example, *True Blood's* Bill Compton represents the latter archetype, whereas his frequent rival, Eric Northman, represents the former—at least during early seasons of the series.

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