

Transatlantic Differences and the Struggle for Identity in the 21st Century Monster

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fig.1 The Cast of the BBC Series *Being Human* Source: BBC

Monsters are everywhere. Lately, in popular culture, there has been a glut of TV shows, films and books all dedicated to the darker side of entertainment. Monsters are a part of our cultural heritage; they've been enshrined in religious texts and are a prominent feature of myth and legend. But recently, the prominence of these figures has been inescapable. Whilst we can look back and see monster films and books permeating the past century, the way they are being utilised now is completely different to their traditional uses. The monstrous identity was traditionally something *other* than human, something in opposition to all elements of 'us', including aspects of faith and identity. Monsters were the minions of the devil - an oft-cited example of monstrosity being *Frankenstein*¹. Here is the ultimate monster: a monster composed of human parts, created by a human, but demonic. He rejects God and sympathises with the Devil. Other monsters such as *Dracula*² terrified women and fully-grown men alike. What was scary about *Dracula* was the fact he could live amongst humans³ and was nothing short of the anti-Christ.

Fast-forward to this century, and the monsters we see are not being used to shock, nor are they the typical metaphor for evil. They are like *us*, even more so than before. Particularly

in shows where these monsters deny their 'natural' urges. One of these shows is *Being Human*.⁴ (fig.1)

The UK series runs on the BBC and began in 2009. The central premise is this: a ghost, a vampire, and a werewolf live in a house together, trying to be something like 'normal'. And what they call 'normal' is 'human'. Each character struggles with demons from their past. The best illustration of this struggle is the vampire character, Mitchell. His life is dominated by the split between the identity of vampire and the desired identity of human. This is compounded by the presence of the group of vampires that he rejected in order to live as a human, who are desperate to have him back in the fold. It is a choice between the traditional structures of the vampire lifestyle, or the struggle of rejecting his natural impulses. He shows how monsters now aspire to be like us, rejecting the cult-like confines of monstrous groups.

It was not long until the US decided they wanted to remake the series – American remakes of vampiric shows and films are not uncommon – a well known example being the Swedish film, *Let Me In*⁵, remade a mere two years after its original release for US audiences. The US series premiered in 2010, and the premise was much the same: a vampire, a

1. Shelley, Mary, *Frankenstein*, 1818

2. Stoker, Bram, *Dracula*, 1897

3. To an extent, albeit as an 'enigmatic outsider', the template on which many a vampire is based.

4. BBC, 2009-Present, aired on BBC3 (UK) and Muse, 2011-Present, aired on SyFy (US)

5. Matt Reeves, *Let Me In*, 2010

ghost and a werewolf.⁶ The differences at first were subtle, but as the series went on, it became clear that the structure of the *Being Human* world, particularly the vampiric one, was very different. Whilst the US version is based on Toby Whithouse's original conception, the way it departs from the story lines in the UK version is too radical to call it a remake. The same struggles were still in play- the vampire, who in this series is named Aidan, is still tortured by his bloodlust; the difference, however, was the way the central vampire group was portrayed, and how the concept of vampirism on the whole was shown. Both vampire protagonists, Mitchell and Aidan, reject their 'makers' (those who turned them into a vampire) and the group they once belonged to. Both strive to create a human identity and both fail at times to control their monstrous behaviour. The identity associated with the relative groups of human and vampire and how they are compared can be illuminated with the use of Social Identity theory, which will be discussed in more detail later. What should be made clear is the connotations of the monstrous (in this case, vampiric) identity and how they differ between the US and the UK. The overall thesis of this article is that the monstrous identity in the US series is infused with religion in comparison to the UK, which shows these identity differences as political, and the reason that this occurs is down to the effect of 9/11 on religious attitudes in the US.

Aidan and Mitchell represent an antithesis to the other vampires within the show, yet they are sought after by their kind. Both characters are indebted to their maker, Mitchell to Herrick and Aidan to Bishop. Their maker simultaneously plays the role of father and friend, teaching them everything they need to know about vampirism and being a partner in crime for their murderous acts. Both characters have rejected the lifestyle they were previously following, choosing humanity instead. In rejecting the lifestyle, this becomes a rejection of their maker, primarily the father figure, and the identity associated with the group 'vampire'. The makers respond in the expected paternalistic way, by cautioning their young protégés for the heretical behaviour they display and attempting to control the aspects of identity by forcing a categorization, that is, asking the protagonists to choose between 'us' and 'them'. Mitchell, when asked to choose by Herrick, simply states, "I choose them"⁷ whereas Aidan appears to make a temporary choice, stating that "I may be sentenced to a life in hell with you, but here and now I choose them."⁸ This temporary choice implies the damned existence of the vampire among other things, positioning humanity as a form of temporary absolution. Aidan's temporary commitment to humanity suggests three things. Firstly, that he views the human identity as currently desirable. Secondly, it positions the monstrous identity, and monstrous behaviour as undesirable. And thirdly, that both identities are mutually exclusive, which is important considering our tendency as a society to characterise evil as 'monstrous'. Here, the more literal sense of the word highlights the division between human and monsters and our belief that an individual can only be one or the other. In particular, it is the behaviours of the vampires that these protagonists find so objectionable. Their disregard for humanity and natural tendency to treat them like prey puts them in firm opposition to the category of 'human'. Aidan and Mitchell change their behaviour in order

to assimilate with the human identity.

Here is where social identity theory becomes pertinent. Social identity is a person's knowledge that "he or she belongs to a social category or group"⁹. The cognitive and behavioural assimilation with the group enforces an identity. According to Stets and Burke, "having a particular social identity means being at one with a certain group, and seeing things from the group's perspective".¹⁰ Which clearly Aidan and Mitchell do not: they reject the behaviours of the group, and are cognitively detached from its mind-set. For example, in both series, our protagonists return briefly to the group, trying in some way to reconcile their physical identity (that of vampire) with their social identity. The reconciliation fails after the protagonists discover the group imprisoning humans in a dungeon to feed on. They cannot change their beliefs and values and see humanity as prey, as the other vampires do, and thus, cannot assimilate themselves within the vampire group. But the rejection goes deeper than just the brutal treatment of humanity, and this is where the differences between the UK and the US series become apparent.

The vampire group that Aidan and Mitchell reject is highly structured, and relies on authoritarian measures to keep the behaviour consistent with the group identity. The group itself is described in religious terms - markedly so in the US version. However, there are brief religious references in the UK version, such as Herrick, who masquerades as a different kind of institutional authority, a police detective, and uses religious allusion to justify his plans to 'takeover' humanity. He says: "They had their chance...we left them to tend this paradise, this Eden, and look what they did..."¹¹ The implication is that both vampires and humans were created by God, but humans were the ones to take control, and in the view of the vampires, cause destruction. Herrick remarks on this when confronting Mitchell's choice to 'be human': "In fact, the only part of humanity they successfully adopt is their ability to deceive and destroy."¹² Despite the fact that the very nature of the vampire means it creates a cycle of destruction and infection (that will only end once there is no humanity), Herrick focuses the viewer's attention to the age-old problems of our existence - our tendency to be self-destructive. For the vampires in *Being Human*, death is the beginning, and the severance from a human life is liberating. No wonder then that Herrick describes it as the following: "Our very existence is a union of life and death...funeral parlours, cemeteries, hospitals...These are our churches."¹³ Yet, even though this language is religious, the overriding theme for the UK version seems to be the problems of authority, which dominates in a cult-like way. The dogmatism of this authority is problematic for some, and this emerges in the dialogue between Mitchell and Herrick.

The authority of the vampires in the UK version seems to tiptoe between the lines of religion and politics, which is not surprising, considering they are two key proponents of institutional control. When one of Mitchell's friends learns about Herrick's plan, she exclaims, "The vampires are mobilizing. Oh, they're making it sound all New Labour, but

6. *Being Human*, Muse, 2011, aired on SyFy

7. *Being Human*, BBC, 2009, Episode 1

8. *Being Human*, Muse, 2011, Episode 2

9. Stets and Burke, "Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory," in *Social Psychology Quarterly*, (Vol. 63: No 3, 2000), 224-237, 225

10. Stets and Burke, 225

11. *Being Human*, BBC, Episode 1, aired 2009

12. *Being Human*, BBC, Episode 6, aired 2009

13. *Being Human*, BBC, Episode 1, aired 2009

this is an invasion! It's a coup!"¹⁴ The balance of power rests between the borders of life and death. For the US version, the authority seems far more overtly religious, and encompasses many versions of belief, apt for a nation that sees religion as a free market. One is the idea of the over-zealous religious advocate. This is acted out by the Priest figure who appears in Episode Five. Instead of administering last rites in hospitals, he 'converts' patients into vampires. He justifies it by his belief that he is "still saving souls...but in a different way."¹⁵ This is the only time in the series that the idea of having a soul is mentioned. "God saved me", he says. It is not particularly difficult to make a link between this attitude and that of 'militant' Christians. The role of the Priest is further complicated when it emerges that Bishop only turned him into a vampire in order to help with his plan of converting others. Here, Bishop confirms all our worst fears: religion is a tool used to gain power. "Nobody sells eternal life like a Priest," he says, before justifying it with the line: "Holy men are always by the side of important men." Aidan confronts the Priest, questioning his belief in God, and the reasons for his actions. He responds: "If God made everything...then he made vampires too." This is something apparent in Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* but is used here not to question God, as Rice does, but to question the assertions authority figures make to justify their actions. Aidan's response is simple: "I get it, you're completely unhinged." This is not a denouncement of religion, but religious authority – the group identity hinges on the religious aspects of vampirism.

In vampire fiction, religion has usually figured with vampires in opposition to God. Here, the very essence of vampirism is religious: they congregate in buildings they describe as 'churches', can offer an afterlife, and adhere to strict traditions, denouncing anyone who strays from the expected group behaviours as a 'heretic'. The traditional aspect of the group is very important, and illuminates the close bond between vampirism and religion. For religion as an identity marker is seen as very important and successful because religious traditions and institutions "resist constant change in the negotiation of social meaning, thus affording individuals and groups more secure anchors for self-reference."¹⁶ The "preservation of old content"¹⁷ in religion enables the individual to form a stable identity. This preservation is something the US series enacts through the structure of the head vampires, known as 'the Dutch'. They are described as 'orthodox' and are shown to live like Amish peoples. They denounce Aidan as 'heretical' for mixing with both werewolves and humans. The authoritarian attempts at controlling action and interaction appear to be ridiculous. The series itself appears to encourage diversity, particularly through the view that it is the actions and behaviours that define an identity, and nothing else. Aidan, in trying to be human, is presented as a human figure in his own right, rejecting the confines of the vampiric lifestyle and denying his violent impulses. To strive to be *good* does not appear to be something that could be deemed heretical, and so the assertions of the Dutch are seen as dogmatic and out-dated. By contrast, there is an absence of these religious structures and references in the UK series. Religion as an identity marker in the US is much

14. *Being Human*, BBC, Episode 5, aired 2009

15. *Being Human*, Muse, Episode 5, aired 2011

16. Seul, JR, "Ours is the Way of God," in *Journal of Peace Research*, (Vol 36: no 5, 1999) 553-569, 558

17. Seul, JR, "Ours is the Way of God," 558

more prominent, and this, arguably, is because of the impact of 9/11.

The way 9/11 was dealt with was overwhelmingly religious. Bush, himself a devout Christian, infused his speeches about the event with religious language, frequently talking about 'good' and 'evil', and notably stated that "you're either with us or against us."¹⁸ This response in a time of crisis is perhaps down to the idea that:

religious norms and institutions may provide ready, alternative frameworks for governance, or, perhaps more commonly, support and justification for the non-clerical leaders and institutions which emerge to establish regimes in the service of a religious group's nationalistic aspirations.¹⁹

The structure of religion provided something to cling onto in a crisis that didn't make sense. Whilst Bush may have simplified the event by assigning it to the first strike in the war on terror, it raised, both through the event itself, and the response, questions about cultural identity and attitudes towards faith; the event itself was perpetrated by those acting under the guise of faith. Although Bush urged citizens to "avoid ethnic profiling", still things changed, based on perceptions of identity: five thousand Arab men who had recently moved to the US were interviewed by the FBI and student visas from countries associated with terrorism were much harder to obtain.²⁰ Questions about identity and faith were not debated openly in the political or public arena. Instead, it seemed, it was down to the fictional world to explore these issues through metaphor. The need to establish a human identity was perhaps down to the fact that, as Neal argues in his essay on national trauma, "collective social identities emerge most prominently from moments of catastrophe."²¹ The figure of the vampire provides an ideal way to explore these issues, for they are simultaneously 'us' and 'them'. They can masquerade as human because of their physical appearance much like terrorists can assimilate among us. Terrorists, according to Baudrillard, "used the banality of American everyday as cover and camouflage."²² He goes on to note that, "if *they* could pass unnoticed, then each of us is a criminal unnoticed..." This appears much like the vampires of *Being Human* who to the outside world, identify as human, passing unnoticed. But they, like the terrorists, who have turned "their own deaths into an absolute weapon",²³ render the division between life and death meaningless, and use their death to inflict destruction upon other humans.

Religion and division have arisen in monstrous fiction before, but the division between 'us' and 'them' has never featured as prominently until now. The concept of vampirism as religion enforces the point: the structures of faith are being scrutinized, and the use of religion both as a form of control and a weapon is being condemned. Aidan and Mitchell's rejection of religious authority makes clear that they do not identify with 'them', and that the traditions associated with

18. "You are either with us or against us," *CNN*, November 6, 2001, accessed February 27, 2012, <http://edition.cnn.com/2001/US/11/06/gen.attack.on.terror/>

19. Seul, JR, *Ours is the Way of God*, 562

20. Schildkraut, D, "The More Things Change," *Political Psychology*, (vol 23, No.3, 2002) 511-535

21. Neal, Arthur, *National Trauma and Collective Memory*, (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1998) 45

22. Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, (London: Verso, 2003) 17

23. Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, 17

religion are unworkable here: in a world where religion is used as a reason for destruction, it is clear that new approaches need to be considered in attitudes towards faith.

9/11 facilitated the questioning of what it means to be 'us', and how cultural identity can be defined. *Being Human* explores this issue by illustrating the divisions between identities that are based around religion. Whilst religion may be a strong identity marker, the structure and authority of it make it clear that faith is an entirely different thing. Faith is cognitive assimilation rather than behavioural assimilation. It is an alignment with an identity based on beliefs and values rather than the enforced structures that may come with religion, and in this case, the structures that are used to maintain a concept of identity that is controlled by a minor few.

Although we as a nation have been through terrorist attacks in the form of 7/7, the impact was not the same as it was across the Atlantic. The comparison between both series of

Being Human is perhaps one of the best ways of illuminating the differences in cultural concepts of identity. For the US, it is clear from the narrative steeped in references to religion and identity that religion that is the most pertinent identity marker, and it is likely that the interrogation of the divisions between 'us' and 'them' will continue until they can find a way to 'make sense' of the attacks, which according to Baudrillard, have "no interpretation".²⁴ The UK series was originally written as a comedy, and in this way, it allowed us to examine what it meant to be human in an easy manner. The monstrous identity was a sideline: an obvious metaphor for our darker struggles, played out in comic fashion. But the US version is lacking in humour: for them, the stakes are too high. The concept of the monster is something that continues to change as our attitudes towards identity changes. Now, the goalposts have shifted: in a world where anybody could be a 'monster', how do you define 'human'?

24. Baudrillard, 30

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