

Recycling Vampires

In the ongoing battle for network recognition, a new breed of queer programming has surfaced in HBO's *True Blood*, however, this breed touts fangs and sleeps in coffins. The parallel between the fictitious vampire culture on the show and queer culture in reality strikes a poignant note teetering between revolutionizing and revolting. Is Alan Ball, the show's creator—famous for *Six Feet Under*, reclaiming the notion of classical Hollywood queer deviant characters, much like lesbian vampires or effeminate gay fiends, thereby recycling negative anachronisms into positive accoutrements, as Alexander Doty reclaimed queer in his famous article, *There's Something Queer Here*; or has HBO taken a substantial leap backwards in the wake of competitor Showtime's *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word*?

While the thick metaphors may sometimes seem subtle to heterosexual audiences, queer audiences who have spent years reading against the grain should find them oddly blatant. Mr. Ball explained the parallels between gay and vampire worlds as obvious in an interview with *The New York Times* simply stating, "it's a very fluid metaphor" (Rhodes). The show carefully mixes issues of race, religion, sexuality, and gender through the guise of a well crafted culture of exclusionism. Author, Charlene Harris, who wrote *The Sookie Stackhouse Stories* for which the series is based, explained in the same *New York Times* interview mentioned above, "My original conception was about exclusionism and how we're often most afraid of the things that make us look at ourselves too closely." Sharing this sentiment, Mr. Ball commented

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similarly when he pitched the show to HBO saying the show is about, “what it really means to be disenfranchised, to be feared, to be misunderstood. It’s a metaphor for the terrors of intimacy.”

In “To Love is to Bury,” Ball’s love of layering becomes apparent as the audience is introduced to the newest vampire on the block, Jessica Hamby (Deborah Ann Woll). Her newfound vampirism can be likened to that of a teenager finally getting out of the house and tasting independence for the first time. Jessica is excited about the power and uniqueness usually accompanied with becoming a vampire, but for queer audiences the scene strikes at the heart of one of the major dilemmas of sexual politics. Hegemonic television audiences are seemingly enculturated from birth to follow the morality of family and community. Yet, sometimes people choose to leave that behind adopting new identities based on rules and mores of other cultures, but for LGBT people the choice is thrust upon them, just as being a vampire was thrust on both Bill Compton (Stephen Moyer) and Jessica Hamby; their disparate reactions to this exemplify a divide in queer culture. For queer people who choose to come out, it is often (though less so as time goes on) a break from their previous lives.

Bill: You have been made vampire....You cannot go

home. That part of your life is over.

Jessica: No more mommy and daddy? No more little

sister?

Bill: I’m sorry. No.

For Bill, being made vampire was a traumatic experience, one he continues to reject. In its second season, *True Blood* is just beginning to explore Bill’s descent into

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vampirism (“Shake and Fingerpop”), but for now his attitude is shown in stark contrast to Jessica’s. She continues:

No more bells. No more clarinets! No
more homeschool. No more rules! {Scream
and dance} I’m a vampire! Wow.

A surprised Bill tries to rein her in, telling her that there are rules. While he tries to straddle the line between human and vampire, her idea of being a vampire is very different:

Bill: If you calm down I will teach you what
being a vampire means.

Jessica: I’m not stupid. I can read. I know
what it means.

Bill: Very well. Then why don’t you tell me?

Jessica: It means that I don’t have to sit
like a lady and I can kill anybody
I want. And there’s an awful lot of
people I’d like to kill.

Replacing the word kill with fuck makes the metaphor clearer. Jessica is saying she no longer has to follow gender norms and can freely explore her sexuality as Bill tries to pull her back, suggesting that she attempt a subtler approach which the show refers to as, “mainstreaming.”

Bill: You are gonna mainstream like I did. You are gonna live almost
exactly the same life as you did before except you’ll be

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awake at night.

The tension between “mainstreamed” LGBT people and those who reject the ideas of sexual norms is one that has been brought forward by the debates over gay marriage, adoption and other legal rights.

In the finale episode of the first season, “You’ll be the Death of Me,” the audience meets a representative of the Fellowship of the Sun, an anti-vampire religious institution bearing a striking resemblance to the Religious Right’s stance on homosexuality. Jason Stackhouse (Ryan Kwanten) is visited by a member of the Fellowship of the Sun after he confesses to killing a string of known “fang bangers,” women who sleep with vampires.

Churchman: You know, last year there were
over 800 reported vampire
related attacks in Louisiana
alone and the law won’t do
nothing about it. We are too
busy respecting those fiends and
their civil rights. Well, what
about our rights? Our rights to
be safe in our own
neighborhoods, our rights to our
own blood.

Jason: Now I don’t know nothing about
that.

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Churchman: Look, uh, officially, the church can't condone what you did. You took the lives of four women, women who had tainted themselves and their race, but still human women. Here... We want you to recognize that even though your methods may have been flawed, your intentions are pure.

The episode ends with a news report stating the legalization of Vampire marriage in Vermont followed by the leader of the Fellowship of the Sun, Steve Newlin (Michael McMillian).

Steve: And God said let there be light and there was light. And even though we stand in darkness today, we shall not fear. For God has given us the ultimate weapon, the ultimate salvation, the Sun! And he has placed in front of us, a daunting but righteous task. We will not falter. We will not rest until we have brought Gods light down upon each and every blood sucking abomination.

The attention garnered from LGBT audiences cannot be solely credited to the coattails of *Six Feet Under*, although I'm sure many Ball fans tune in for that purpose.

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The overtly poor acting, only outdone by bad wardrobe choices and abysmal southern accents, make *True Blood's* popularity an intriguing mystery. The ostensible parallel between Vampire civil rights and LGBT rights echo in every poorly pronounced ya'll, but Ball's intention behind this parallel remains as mysterious as the show's stronghold with LGBT audiences. Perhaps *True Blood* is queer culture's laugh of the medusa, perhaps it's just a poorly disguised attempt to further exploit exclusionism, and perhaps it's up to each viewer to decide. For me, I couldn't stomach *True Blood* if I didn't believe the former.

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