

Self-Control, Suppression, Abstinence: Vampirism as Metaphor in *The Vampire Diaries*

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The Vampire Diaries is a massively popular teen television drama that aired new episodes from 2009-2017. Over the course of eight seasons, various supernatural creatures and events challenge the characters' resilience and imagination while they simultaneously navigate contemporary adolescent sexuality and social relations. A recurring theme for the vampires in the series is how and in which cases they suppress either their vampirism or their humanity and the impact that this suppression can have on their family, friends, and romantic and sexual interests. *The Vampire Diaries* uses vampirism as a metaphor for adolescent sexuality and social tensions around coming of age, argues against the use of self-suppression to cope with the challenges of adolescence, and further sexualizes vampires in popular culture.

The Vampire Diaries ("TVD"), a cable drama on The CW television network that aired new episodes from 2009-2017, is one of the most popular 21st-century teen vampire narratives. At the center of the show is Elena Gilbert, a high school student in a small Virginia town who falls into a love triangle with vampire brothers Stefan and Damon Salvatore. Over the course of eight seasons, various supernatural creatures and events challenge the characters' resilience and imagination while they simultaneously navigate contemporary adolescent sexuality and social relations. Viewers of the show are captivated by the dramatics of an imagined supernatural world where being different and unique is powerful rather than isolating and where the sacrifices the characters make for each other are fueled by unconditional, dramatic love.

The serial format of *TVD* contributed to my research interest and to its cultural significance. The writers of the show were able to make changes to characters and add plot points based on viewer feedback and cable ratings from season to season, changing the narrative as needed to better connect with the show's adolescent audience. The show lasted nine years and inspired two spin-off series, *The Originals* and *Legacies*, the latter of which concluded in 2022.

The universe of *TVD* affected an entire generation of TV watchers, mostly adolescent women. A recurring theme for the vampires in the series is how and in which cases they suppress either their vampirism or their humanity and the impact that this suppression can have on their family, friends, and romantic and sexual interests. This article addresses how *TVD* uses vampirism as a metaphor for adolescent sexuality and social tensions around coming of age, argues against the use of self-suppression to cope with the challenges of

adolescence, and further sexualizes vampires in popular culture.

Vampirism in Literature

The vampire was made famous by Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), but that novel was not the first documented instance of the vampire genre. Goethe's *Die Braut von Korinth* (1797) and Polidori's *The Vampyre, A Tale* (1819) are generally considered to be the origins of vampire literature, inspired by centuries-old folklore (Carlson 26). Over time, writers and artists of all sorts have been fascinated with and have continued to create narratives about vampires. Since the emergence of the first vampire works in the nineteenth century, there has been a "sexual element in the relationship between the literary vampire and his victim" (Carlson 30). This element has evolved over time from a damsel-in-distress trope of an innocent young woman bitten by a much older, stronger vampire to a variety of sexually charged circumstances (Carlson 30). In *TVD* and other contemporary vampire media like *Twilight* (2008 film) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), vampire sexuality is a more explicit and important part of the narrative.

Purity Culture

Stefan and Damon Salvatore, the two vampire brothers at the center of *TVD*, have different approaches to sustaining themselves with blood. Stefan drinks only animal blood when he can help it because he considers himself a "ripper" – a vampire with an innate predisposition to draining victims of their blood the second he tastes them, as opposed to most vampires' ability to restrain themselves after just a few sips. In the series, Stefan goes through patterns of abstaining

from drinking blood for years, then going on monstrous “ripper” binges in which he kills hundreds of people in days. Damon, on the other hand, takes an approach of moderation – the “snatch, eat, erase” method, where he drinks a bit of blood from a human and erases their memory using the vampire power of compulsion, so they have no knowledge of the incident. This allows him to satisfy his blood cravings without killing people. These two approaches metaphorize sexuality in that Stefan immerses himself in a kind of toxic purity mindset, one that is impossible to maintain over a long period of time. In season one, episode nineteen, when Stefan is on a “binge,” Damon observes that “normal to a vampire is drinking human blood, but he spent all this time fighting it when he should have been learning to control it. Now, it’s controlling him instead” (s1e19). Purity culture, a term generally referring to a strongly held belief that young people, especially young women, should abstain from having sex until they are married in an effort to remain “pure” for their future spouse, often does more harm than good to the young people that adopt the belief. Stefan, wanting to remain “pure,” sees his human blood cravings (a normal part of being a vampire) as an addiction that he needs to control. Caroline says, “[Stefan’s] a bit of a problem drinker” (s2e6). He is consumed with shame over a completely natural part of himself (hunger), which represents shamefulness around sexual desire, which is also natural. Stefan’s contemplation over whether to drink blood because of its moral ambiguity mimics a teenager’s decision whether to have sex amidst conflicting societal messages about its morality outside of marriage or a committed relationship. To make the metaphor clearer, the contrast between Stefan and Damon’s behavior extends to their romantic and sexual pursuits. Damon flirts with and engages in sexual relations with women of varying ages (Kelly Donovan, Isobel Flemming, Carol Lockwood, and a handful of nameless “Tri-Delts” in the first season alone), while Stefan is monogamous and committed to a loving relationship with one woman at a time (Elena and later Caroline). Human blood is necessary to nourish a vampire; without it, they become weaker and weaker, eventually “desiccating” and dying. Stefan’s refusal to eat – something that is necessary for him to survive and thrive – thus becomes a form of self-harm. “I don’t want to survive,” he tells Elena after he relapses and attacks a human girl. “After what I’ve done, it has to end. I just want it over” (s1e20). Cultural scholar Rebecca Williams characterizes Stefan as “guilt-ridden” and resentful of his vampire existence and contrasts this to Damon, who is “appealing to many fans because [he] represent[s] moral ambiguity” (Williams). By resisting the urge to drink blood, Stefan is resisting vampirism. He grapples with whether his existence as a vampire is

evil, and whether he can ever exist as a “good” vampire. This internal struggle to define one’s place in the world coincides with the struggle that adolescents face in emerging from childhood and adopting a new identity as an adult. Teenagers on the brink of adulthood are forced to ask themselves questions like what career to pursue and what kind of a relationship they are going to have with their parents and family. As Stefan struggles with his “addiction” to human blood and goes on several binges over the course of the eight seasons, leaving a trail of bodies as he goes, the show conveys the message that suppression and abstinence is not the answer to coping with animalistic desires – whether that’s human sexual desire or vampire blood thirst.

The Humanity Switch

When not feeding, vampires are indistinguishable from other humans. Damon once says to Stefan while consoling him after a blood binge, “I know what it’s like. That Jekyll and Hyde feeling, that switch, sometimes it goes off and you snap” (s1e19). A vampire’s bloodsucking “hidden side” creates a Jekyll & Hyde complex, in which they have two separate personalities – a human-like personality that loves and protects, and a monstrous personality that will do anything to drink blood. Stefan says that as a vampire, “It’s difficult to separate your feelings: love, lust, anger, desire. It can all blur into one urge: hunger” (s1e1). Vampires in the series are also able to “switch their humanity” on and off like a light, which is said to be an adaptation of sorts that allows them to prey on humans to survive. When a vampire’s humanity is “off,” they do not experience emotion, love, or remorse. This allows them to brutally kill humans – even their own loved ones – with no hesitation. Vampires can also flip their switch to numb emotional pain after a traumatic experience. Vampires are generally not held accountable by their peers, both human and vampire, for things they do when their humanity is off, indicating that the show’s characters see their loved ones as having a completely different identity when their “switch” is “off.” Stefan, who is forced to flip his switch by a mind-controlling siren in season eight, rips out the heart of his close friend, Enzo, right in front of his girlfriend. Once Stefan turns his humanity back on, his friends and family forgive him immediately and do not fault him for what he did. This inhuman, hidden side of a vampire resembles Freud’s “id” in that it urges them to indulge in their most basic, animalistic impulses. English-language scholar Malin Lidström Brock writes that when a vampire flips their switch, “instinct kicks in and the desire for blood and death inevitably takes over, suggesting that the sympathetic vampire’s basic ‘nature’ is still to kill” (Brock).

When a vampire's humanity is off, they also often engage in sexually promiscuous acts. In season six, vampire Caroline flips her humanity switch after her mother dies from cancer and shortly after makes her way to a bar, where she gleefully tells a handsome stranger that "nothing matters, not a thing," before kissing and eventually feeding from him (s6e16). Before Caroline flipped her switch, she was practicing self-control with her sexuality, only ever having passionate intercourse with Tyler, who she was in a monogamous romantic relationship with. Even after she turns her humanity back on and deals with the social fallout, she is freer with her sexuality, spontaneously having intercourse with Klaus, the original vampire who tried to kill her best friend Elena in season four. Caroline was permanently changed by the time she spent with her "humanity off" and learned about the benefits and freedom that come with refusing to suppress your desires and identity.

Vampirism as Puberty

While the characters in *TVD* discover their own relationship with sexuality, they also engage in the social and familial challenges associated with adolescence and grapple internally with the extent to which they should suppress or hide their true identities, as either vampires or as sexually active adults. The "transition" from human to vampire mirrors the process of puberty. There are several steps in becoming a vampire: a human must consume vampire blood, then die, then wake up and drink human blood. Elena "transitions" and becomes a vampire in an episode appropriately titled "Growing Pains." While transitioning, one's senses and emotions become stronger and more volatile, much like a human teenager's emotions become more volatile due to high hormone levels during puberty. In the real world, teenagers "experience wider and quicker mood swings" than adults (Larson), and these mood swings are dramatized by vampires losing control of their desire for blood. "My emotions are all over the place... everything's heightened," Elena explains (s4e2). She explains how she "can't stop feeling this grief" (s4e2) and has intercourse with Stefan in the woods (s4e2). When a vampire's hunger becomes more intense, they experience more mood swings. "You seem sad," a stranger says to Stefan while he is trying to refrain from drinking her blood. Stefan angrily responds, "I'm not sad. I'm freaking hungry" (s1e19). The conflation of physical discomfort with emotional volatility is reminiscent of pre-menstrual syndrome, especially considering the motif of blood involved. *TVD* was made for and most popular with female teens, based on cable ratings during its original airing ("The Vampire Diaries Up 100%"). This would make the challenges

of menstruation fairly new and top-of-mind for them. Hunger pains prompt a vampire body to drink blood the same way menstrual pains prompt a female body to get pregnant. This similarity leads to a connection between vampirism and womanhood.

Vampirism and Gender

Female self-control is more prevalent in *TVD* than male self-control, and male indulgence is more prevalent than female indulgence. When Caroline is unwillingly turned into a vampire by one of the villains in the show, Stefan and Damon fear how she is going to cope because of her teenage dramatics and insecurities. "Caroline, of all people, will not make it as a vampire," Damon explains to Elena (s2e2). However, as the series progresses, Caroline becomes one of the most well-adjusted vampires of all. Stefan describes her in season six as "neat, organized Caroline, staying within lines, good at control" (s6e17). She exclusively drinks hospital blood bags and kills only a few people by mistake, compared to the hundreds killed by Stefan and Damon, the ultra-masculine vampires in the show. When Stefan and Damon expected Caroline to struggle with her newfound vampirism because of the self-control it would require of her, they mirror male concern over female promiscuity. Although men, on average, have more sexual partners throughout their lifetime than women (Rogowska), women are often criticized and generalized by society as being more promiscuous. Caroline needed to mature and gain control of her impulses so as not to hurt those around her. As she was learning how to deal with her vampiric traits, Caroline matured emotionally and grew into her adult human traits. "You prefer who you are now to the girl you once were," the vampire and villain Klaus notices about Caroline. "You like being strong, ageless, fearless" (s4e14). Caroline becomes more responsible and confident as a vampire just like how teenagers become generally more responsible and confident as they reach adulthood. She helps Stefan through his PTSD episodes after drowning in a safe (s5e9) and puts herself in danger to help her werewolf friend "turn" on the night of a full moon (s2e10). Gerhards likens the transition of a human to a vampire to that of a beauty makeover. She writes that the vampire self, "which was there all along, is understood to have been liberated" from the restraints of the human condition (Gerhards). This implies that a stronger, more intense version of our own personality is waiting inside us to be freed by vampirism.

The characters discover through their vampire transitions how adulthood emotions are more complex than childhood emotions, especially when sex is involved. Similarly, when Caroline loses her virginity

to Tyler, her boyfriend, she attempts to sneak out of the house in the morning. She is caught red-handed by his mother, who asks, “Leaving so soon?” before incapacitating Caroline with a bullet from a paralytic dart gun (s3e1). Tyler’s mother did this literally because she discovered Caroline was a vampire and figuratively because Caroline slept with her son. This demonstrates the danger that someone puts themselves in if they choose *not* to suppress their true identity in a hostile world -- to vampires and to sexually active adolescents. Research has shown that those who suppress their sexuality or sexual desires out of religious-based or queer-based shame often experience a “rebound effect,” where their sexually charged thoughts increase rather than decrease (Efrati). Furthermore, sexual suppression is linked with a higher prevalence of “compulsive sexual behaviors,” an obsession with sex to the point of “impaired social and occupational functioning” (Efrati). *TVD*’s plotlines around self-suppression and its inevitable failure are guided by this psychological phenomenon.

“Othering” of Vampires

Vampires in the series are often “othered” and alienated by their human peers’ divergent understanding of them and by the limitations of vampire powers. This mirrors the adolescent challenge of feeling neither like a child nor an adult. For instance, Elena and Caroline, both vampires, try to go to an “adult” party for the first time during their first week at college. However, they experience harsh rejection when they are unable to walk into the house because the magic in the show – in line with traditional vampire lore – stipulates that vampires must be invited into a human’s home to enter. “Someone must own this place,” Elena says to Caroline in a panic when they are stopped by a magical force at the front door. “We have to be invited in” (s5e1). They make up a lie to tell their friends and leave. Although the show’s teenage viewers would not necessarily relate to having difficulties with magic powers, they are likely to have experienced social rejection at one point or another, making the show’s conflicts feel relevant to them. Furthermore, Bridgeman writes that “through Elena and Stefan’s narration and the motif of diary writing, the theme of the troubled or alienated self is introduced” (Bridgeman). The pilot episode begins with a voiceover from Stefan reading his diary aloud. “For over a century,” he says, “I have lived in secret: hiding in the shadows, alone in the world. Until now” (s1e1). Stefan goes on to explain that he has come out of hiding and cast off the shame associated with his vampirism because he wants to get to know Elena, the human girl who looks exactly like his ex-girlfriend Katherine from the 1800s.

If vampirism is a metaphor for young adulthood, the beginning of the series sees Stefan accepting and embracing the difficulties of young adulthood to pursue something he deeply cares about. The significance of diary writing as a plot device is that diaries serve as an added store of memory besides relying on the brain itself. Stefan says he keeps one because “if I don’t write it down, I forget it. Memories are too important” (s1e1). During puberty, the brain changes, matures and develops better decision-making skills. Expressive writing is a common tool used by psychotherapists to help adolescent clients fill in gaps in self-understanding and engage with their emotions on a deeper level (Garza). The diary can serve as a way to feel less alone: as a teenager writes letters to their future self for the purpose of storing memories, they can process and cope with the feeling of loneliness that adolescence can sometimes produce as their friends mature at different speeds and change in different ways.

Teen-Parent Relationships

Storylines in *TVD* also include conflicts between parents and children about magic and vampires. Vampirism is presented as something that parents just do not understand and something that their children are open to and may even know well. These conflicts can be understood as metaphorizing the challenges of watching one’s child go through puberty and become an adult themselves. Most parental figures in *TVD* are either absent or harmful. Bridgeman writes that the characters’ “fathers tend to be domineering and violent... [and] mothers tend to be absent, selfish or ineffective” (Bridgeman), resulting in many of the characters being underdeveloped emotionally or having unresolved trauma from their childhood. Elena, for example, is an orphan. Bridgeman writes that Elena’s story is “one of alienation in the wake of grief, well-trod thematic ground for Gothic and adolescent literature.” She further observes that Elena’s depression after the death of her parents isolates her from her former, happy self (Bridgeman). Elena tries to suppress her grief upon returning to school for her senior year of high school but finds it too difficult to manage. In the pilot episode, she narrates, “I thought I could smile, nod my way through it, pretend like it would all be okay... But it’s not that easy. The bad things stay with you” (s1e1). Moving forward, Elena resolves to accept her grief as something that will continue to impact her transition into adulthood and as a part of herself that she should not suppress.

Adults in the show do not recognize the supernatural in the same way that teenagers do, often being more skeptical of the truth or paranoid about the danger that vampires, werewolves, and witches present. When Caroline’s mother finds out that she is a vampire, she

asks Damon, “Can you keep Caroline far away from me please? I don’t want to see her... my daughter is gone” (s2e5). Damon replies, “You have no idea how wrong you are about that” (s2e5). Caroline’s mother’s negative reaction to her daughter’s vampirism can also be perceived as a negative reaction to Caroline’s sexuality. Teenagers in the real world could relate to this if they faced negativity from their parents after coming out to them as queer. Unsupportive parents of queer children may distance themselves from their child like Caroline’s mother does when she discovers that Caroline engages in taboo sexual behavior (drinking blood). However, over time, “through the experience of ‘otherness’ entering [her] own immediate family... [Caroline’s mother accepts] that [her] opinions on the inherent evil nature of vampires are dangerous simplifications” (Bridgeman). Watching Caroline’s mother gradually become accepting of vampires would be a solace to queer teenagers struggling with their own parents’ disapproval. Teenage viewers of *TVD* are indulged in their desire to understand something better than their parents do by watching Elena and Caroline be more open-minded and compassionate than their parents are about the supernatural. The show’s storyline discourages adolescent viewers from suppressing their true selves by offering hope that they will be accepted and loved for who they are, even if their parents do not understand it at first.

Conclusion

Vampirism in *TVD* serves as a metaphor for puberty, sexuality, and adolescence. The show depicts teenagers becoming vampires, which can be seen as mimicking sexual maturity or exploring one’s sexuality. Characters’ need to regulate their vampirism over time recalls the process of coping with sexual desire, discrimination/ostracization, or heightened emotions. The series shows vampires as more sympathetic than monstrous and offers many examples of vampires being good people as they minimize the harm that comes with their bloodlust and use their supernatural powers to protect their loved ones. By presenting vampirism as neither good nor bad and simply as a part of oneself that must be managed, much like any other personality trait, the series argues that suppression is not a healthy or reliable way to deal with the things that vampirism is allegorizing: sexuality and the challenges and changes of adolescence.

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