

Factual Origins of Myths

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ABSTRACT: Many cultures have developed myths and legends rooted in the ideas of vampirism, lycanthropy, and witchcraft. According to anthropological currents, these stories don't come up from nothing, but follow a process of transformation of elements drawn from real experiences eventually transformed into fictional stories depending on the message they are meant to spread. Every legend has an origin in history, an event with no plausible explanation at the time due to lack of scientific technology and resources. Although, reality can be described in scientific terms. These possible facts connected to mythology do not entirely explain the success of myth in folklore, but only some more or less impressive aspects following these legends. These facts when turned and twisted by imagination and superstitious thinking create these inexplicable enthralling stories which undoubtedly would be passed down to generations as souvenirs of history, culture, and civilization.

KEYWORDS: Vampirism, mythology, folklore, lycanthropy, witchcraft, anthropology

The unknown is frightening and when fear surrounds imaginary or real phenomena with no apparent explanations, irrationality prevails over rationality, facts turn into myths. Myths are stories, sayings or legends leading to irrational fear and paranoia. Myths change depending on the period and culture of reference, but they always symbolise a diabolical and wicked aura, one of fascination and charisma. Many cultures have developed myths and legends rooted in the ideas of vampirism, lycanthropy, and witchcraft. According to anthropological currents, these stories don't come up from nothing, but follow a process of transformation of elements drawn from real experiences eventually transformed into fictional stories depending on the message they are meant to spread. Every legend has an origin in history, an event with no plausible explanation at the time due to lack of scientific technology and resources. These stories are passed down to generations and are still believed to be true in parts of the world because of impervious and imbecile stereotype thinking. The lack of knowledge about transmission of illness, political ethics, cultural roots, decay of corpses and criminal thinking have given way to the proliferation of myths and have bred collective hysteria throughout history.

Vampires dwell in the idea of dualism between life and death, romanticized in literature, described as vial and vicious creatures in folklore, they still to this day remain the most fascinating and feared creatures in history. Immortality, blood being the core of their existence and the sun being their enemy have earned them a predilection towards authors and anthropologists. Generally, a vampire is an undead creature who comes back from its grave, and who lead a dissolute life, even violent, who committed suicide or was buried with no religious rite. Even though a short story by the name of "The Vampyre" was published in 1819 by John William Polidori, the event that popularised the idea of vampirism was the 1897 novel, *Dracula* by Bram Stoker. His character Count Dracula was inspired by the former Voivode of Wallachia, Vlad III, famously known as Vlad the Impaler or Vlad Dracula. Born in Transylvania, he was a brutal and sadistic leader responsible for the deaths of more than eighty thousand people in his lifetime and was known for torturing his foes. *Dracula* meaning the devil in Wallachia language caught the eye of the famous author and became the name of the literary masterpiece, *Dracula*.

Illnesses and diseases that have marked human history lay the basis of the idea of vampirism. Plague, rabies (hydrophobia), pellagra, catalepsy, anaemia, tuberculosis, porphyria, and schizophrenic syndrome are some rational explanations to understand such widespread folk phenomenon. Before diseases were widely understood, people came up with supernatural explanations for their biological symptoms. Humans usually get rabies from wild animals; one would expect rabies to be associated with werewolves rather than vampires. However, a 1998 paper in *Neurology* by Juan Gomez-Alonso put forth a convincing series of arguments that put the symptoms of rabies front and centre in many vampire tales. In "A Natural History of Vampires," Eric Michael Johnson provides a well revised summary of Gomez-Alonso's points. Gomez-Alonso draws a transparent parallel between the "depiction of the vampire as a savage beast" and therefore the erratic and violent behaviour of rabies-infected humans. Also, both rabies and vampirism are transmitted via bites or blood-to-blood contact. Humans die from rabies as a result of suffocation or cardiorespiratory arrest. The bodies of people who have died in these ways exhibit signs of vampirism—haemorrhage (giving the impression that the person had been drinking blood) and slower decomposition (making it look like the person was not truly dead). The period between

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1721-1728, when dramatic tales of vampires were first emerging from Eastern Europe was a result of a major epidemic of rabies in dogs, wolves, and other wild animals recorded in the same region.

Between the late 1700s and the 1890s, vampire superstitions were prevalent in New England—and so was a disease people referred to as “consumption”, now known as tuberculosis (TB). In the 1800s, the idea that people who were dying of tuberculosis were having the life sucked out of them by a supernatural creature was widely popular. Villagers were convinced that those who perished from consumption preyed on their neighbours and living family members, thus being called vampires. This led to a series of disturbing incidents, of which the story of Mercy Brown in Exeter, Rhode Island, the Vampire Capital of America, is probably the most famous. Mercy Brown died of tuberculosis in 1892. Her death was followed by the death of her mother and her sister Mary Olive. Shortly after, her brother Edwin Brown suddenly became frail and sick. It was clear that consumption was taking the family, but country folk of Exeter believed that one of the deceased was leaving the grave at night to suck the life out of its relatives. Mercy Brown’s body was exhumed and was found to be oddly well preserved. To the less superstitious, there was perhaps nothing so unusual about the well-preserved condition of Mercy’s body as she had been in the ground during the two coldest months of the year. But that did not keep the villagers from deciding she was a vampire, they removed the heart, burned it, and fed the ashes to young Edwin, who not surprisingly died less than two months later. The Mercy Brown incident was the end of tuberculosis-associated vampire prevention rituals in New England.

Porphyria symptoms have four main connections with vampire folklore. The first is that vampires drink blood. Because porphyria can result in red or brown urine, this may have led to the belief that individuals who demonstrated this symptom had been drinking blood. The unfortunate sun sensitivity to porphyria patients was linked to vampire folklore due to vampires’ famed sun-aversion. Lastly, the ideas that vampires have fangs and hate garlic may also have their roots in the symptoms of porphyria. Frequent porphyria attacks result in facial disfigurement and cause the gums to recede, resulting in a “fanged” appearance. As for garlic, it has a high sulphur content, which makes it a potential attack trigger for people with acute forms of porphyria. Fortunately, scientific, and biological advancements have provided logical explanations, cures, and vaccines for these diseases, finally putting an end to these bestial and barbaric believes.

The gruesome story of the Carter brothers from the Crescent City (New Orleans) has also served as fuel to the burning stories of vampires. In the year 1932, John and Wayne Carter were tried as serial killers, convicted, and eventually executed. But still to this day they are referred to as the Vampire brothers of New Orleans. The brothers had five victims, half dead, tied to chairs in one of the rooms in their French Quarter residence. All victims had their wrists slit and two more bodies, wrapped in blankets were tucked away in another room. The unmistakable suffocating odour of death permeated their apartment. It seemed that the brothers would let the blood flow freely from the victims’ cuts. They caught the blood in cups from which they drank until their hunger was sated, but again any proof of vampirism was never found.

Another story begins in the earlier days of New Orleans when in 1728 a group of girls from France were sent as marriageable women to help increase the population of the fledgling colony of New Orleans. As they arrived in New Orleans, people were surprised at their pale, otherworldly complexions, most probably a consequence of being kept below decks out of the sun for the long voyage. Their name “*filles a la cassette*” was anglicized to the very petrifying name “Casket Girls”. The Casket Girls, who could not find husbands, eventually found themselves living in the Ursuline Convent on Chartres Street. They resided in the third-floor attic, their coffin-like wooden boxes stashed at the foot of their beds. As the neighbours fell ill, crops failed, cats and dogs lived together, whispers began that the vampire-pale Casket Girls had brought an evil with them. Eventually, the Ursuline nuns threw the Casket Girls out and closed up the third-floor attic. Legends arose that the Casket Girls had smuggled in vampires from Eastern Europe, who were now leaving blood-drained corpses all over New Orleans. 800 screws made of silver that had been blessed in Rome by the Pope himself were used to close the convent’s third floor forever. Even though the casket girls lived their whole lives as outcasts, in fear and paranoia, they are now celebrated to show honor to the women who were brave enough to fight against the oppression by selfish men.

These stories have become synonymous with paranoia and injustice and continues to beguile the popular imagination. The word witchcraft traditionally means the use of magic, clairvoyance, or supernatural psychic powers to harm others. In medieval and early modern Europe, where the term originated, accused witches were usually women who were believed to have communed with the devil also known as Samael, Lucifer, or Satan according to different cultures, thus proving to be a gender biased atrocity. A "witchcraft craze" rippled through Europe from the 1300s to the 1600s. Tens of thousands of falsely accused witches—mostly women—were executed. The Salem witch trials befell in Massachusetts between February 1692 and May 1693. An astonishing 200 people were accused of practicing witchcraft—the Devil's magic—and 20 were executed. After the executions, many involved, like judge Samuel Sewall, publicly confessed guilt. In 1702, the trials were declared unlawful. However, it was not until 1957 that Massachusetts formally apologized for the witch hunt events of 1692.

The rich and proud Voodoo culture of New Orleans, Louisiana is another victim of mass hysteria. The sensational aspects of voodoo, such as belief in zombies and animal sacrifice, have provided content for countless television shows and movies in the form of voodoo. Zombies are an excellent example of how a religious element can be taken out of context and become a global phenomenon. Generally misunderstood, voodoo came to Louisiana with enslaved West Africans. Their religious rituals and practices were then

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merged with those of the local Catholic population. In the 1800s, Voodoo queens and kings were powerful spiritual and political figures of New Orleans. The core belief of Voodoo is that spirits interfere in daily lives, but Gods don't. Marie Laveau (1794-1881), the famous voodoo queen was a free woman of colour who fed the hungry, adopted children, and cared for the sick during the yellow fever epidemic. She was known to help slaves. It is known that politicians, lawyers, and businessmen consulted her before making any important financial or business-related decisions. Today, Voodoo remains to serve others and influence connections with ancestors and spirits.

Stories of shape-shifting men turning into beasts go back to antiquity. In ancient Greece, werewolf myths, presumably originating from prehistoric times, were linked with the Olympian religion. At a yearly gathering the priests were ordered by Lycaon, the son of Pelasgus, to prepare a sacrificial feast, that included meat mixed with human parts. According to the legend, Zeus was served the sacrificial meal which angered the god. The engraved god Zeus punished Lycaon by turning him and his sons into wolves. The werewolf myth also became acquitted with the local history of Arcadia, a part of Greece where Zeus was worshipped as Lyncean Zeus, commonly known as Wolf Zeus. The legend goes that any cult member who tasted human flesh, that was offered as a ritual sacrifice to Zeus, was turned into a werewolf forever. But the popularity of the phenomenon came from the stories of the Beast of Gevaudan. In the 1760s, nearly three hundred people were killed in the French city called the Gevaudan. The killer was thought to be an enormous animal, which came to be known simply as "the Beast". Not only was the Beast of Gevaudan said to prefer attacking women and children, according to first-hand accounts published within the press it often "removed the victim's head and drank all her blood", forsaking a pile of bones. Supported by the reports created at the time by witnesses or survivors, the Beast of Gevaudan was more or less described as a kind of wolf, but a singular one. The creature with reddish and evil eyes had red fur, a black stripe along its back, and a long tail. It could walk on its back legs like a human, which resulted in the resurrection of old beliefs among the population, such as tales of werewolves. Marie-Jeanne Vallet, a twenty-year-old woman, and her sister were attacked by the Beast of Gevaudan. Marie-Jeanne fought back by sticking a spear into the beast's chest. Still, the beast escaped again. Eventually, Jean Chastel became the hero who killed the famous Beast of Gevaudan. To this day there is no proof of the Beast being a werewolf or a shapeshifter, though it does make a scary bedtime story.

Werewolf superstitions resulted in numerous trials which led to a number of people being burned at the stake. Two conceptual thinking about werewolves still coexist: first, the religious approach of metamorphosis from man to wolf and the other a rational medical perspective. Finally, the medical model is excepted where lycanthropy is described as a clinical manifestation of a number of mental illnesses. Still to this day, clinical cases of lycanthropy continue to be published in the French as well as international literature.

Although, reality can be described in scientific terms. These possible facts connected to mythology do not entirely explain the success of myth in folklore, but only some more or less impressive aspects following these legends. These facts when turned and twisted by imagination and superstitious thinking, create these inexplicable enthralling stories which undoubtedly would be passed down to generations as souvenirs of history, culture, and civilization.

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