



UNC
WORLD VIEW

NC SCHOLAR OF GLOBAL DISTINCTION 2024

Instructor: Matthew Humphries

Department: Arts & Sciences

Community College: Isothermal Community College

Course Description: Myth and Human Culture: Vampires (HUM 130)

The official course description reads: “This course provides an in-depth study of myths and legends. Topics include the varied sources of myths and their influence on the individual and society within diverse cultural contexts. Upon completion, students should be able to demonstrate a general familiarity with myths and a broad-based understanding of the influence of myths and legends on modern culture.”

My specific version of this course focuses on the role of monsters in mythology, as well as the unique definition problems created by both of those terms. Broadly, the course itself is centered on a simple argument: To understand a culture, you must understand its myths, and to understand those myths, you will often need to understand monsters. Students frequently come to the class with an understanding of how myth, much like folklore and fables, exist as cultural artifacts, so I spend some time both situating the importance of monsters to mythology and articulating why monsters are themselves cultural objects. The worries, fears, taboos, and typologies of cultures can often be found in their monsters.

Number of students enrolled in course: 25 (max)

Description of Module:

After looking at some of the ideas most important to this type of study, I break the course into a series of case studies. Following a section on the Medusa story, I devote a module to vampires. Many times, students will come to class with at least some understanding of Medusa: snakes for hair, eyes that turn you to stone, etc. However, because of the vampire’s ubiquitous place in pop culture, most students come to class with an abundance of knowledge of specific vampire stories, even if perhaps they do not



know much of the history of the monster. They know movies, television shows, video games, and many other types of pop culture that involve vampires. Because of this, I devote time to providing some context for the history of the vampire. Using an argument put forth by Nick Groome in *Vampires: A New History*, I separate vampires from earlier shapeshifting and/or blood drinking monsters and argue that the vampire begins in eastern Europe in the 18th century.

To help make that argument, I have created a series of videos on the history of the vampire. I also incorporate a few videos from our library on the history of the vampire, as well as some academic essays and chapters. In addition, I have created a video on the role of blood in vampire folklore. With this last video, I hope to draw out two threads that will become important to the work students do in this section:

1. When vampires made the move from the “real” world to the world of literature, they became an ideal metaphor for nearly any social belief. For example, Marx accuses the wealthy of feeding on the poor like vampires, writing in *Capital, Vol. 1*, “Capital is dead labour, which, vampire like, lives only by sucking living labours, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.”¹ Predictably, other writers at around the same time position the poor as drinking the blood of the workers to survive. Why, then, is the vampire so successful as a metaphor?
2. The vampire and the body. In this section, we discuss religious taboos concerning the body, as well as how medical knowledge lagged behind other scientific developments in the 17th and 18th century. How does this help shape some of the vampire history, and how do we see it influencing vampire myths today?

For this section, I do not want to run from the pop culture presentation of the vampire, as this reminds students that the vampire remains a figure in their own culture. In the Medusa section, we look at how many, including some early #MeToo activists, have recontextualized the Medusa story, making her not a monster or a victim, but a strong character actively fighting patriarchal control. With the vampire section, I want to consider how vampires begin their history in the specific cultural contexts of eastern Europe and then escape those boundaries to show up all over the world, particularly in pop culture. However, do we still see evidence of those early vampire legends and myths in the vampire stories of contemporary pop culture?

Student Global Learning Outcomes:

1. Develop an understanding of the role of the vampire as a cultural object in East Europe and Eurasia.

¹ Marx, Karl. “The Working Day.” *Capital, vol. 1*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch10.htm>. Marxists Internet Archive.



2. Learn about the rituals and customs of the Balkans as it relates to vampire mythology
3. Provide an analysis of a specific type of monster and its cultural context in East Europe and Eurasia.

Student Global Learning Activities:

Global Learning Activity 1: Short Essay on Vampires and the Balkans

In the past, I have had students write a short (1 pg.) etymology of “vampire.” The purpose of this assignment was two-fold: to look into the murky history of the term “vampire” itself, and to locate the history of the vampire in a particular place. Even though the history of the term is a little unclear, many of the theories are derived from Eastern European languages. For this redesign, I am going to rework this assignment to put more of an emphasis on place and less on the English term. To begin with, if I am going to make the claim that the vampire originates in the Balkans, it is important that students have some understanding of what is meant by that term. To that end, I will keep the length requirement for this assignment the same and give them two guiding questions:

1. What is meant by “the Balkans”?
2. What is the relationship between the Balkans and vampire history?

I evaluate students using the Global Education rubric I developed for courses in our Global Distinction program.

Global Learning Activity 2: Artistic Forum

For this forum, students provide an artistic representation of a vampire from eastern Europe.

- Provide a brief (1 paragraph) overview of a vampire myth an eastern European vampire. Students will identify one vampire myth from Romania, Serbia, etc., and provide some information about that legend. How old is it? What does this monster do? Does it align with or deviate from the standard understanding or behaviors of vampires?
- Provide us a picture of that vampire. This can be of a painting, a sculpture, a still from a film, or from any other type of visual medium. If students have any trouble finding visual representations, I am happy to help. I have a number of student-to-student forums in this class, so this forum will not require students respond to one another. Written feedback will focus on how thoroughly they explained their myth and what it reflects on their country of choice.

Global Learning Activity 3: Film Review

The film review will be the largest assignment for this section. Their essay should be 2-3 pages and go well beyond the questions of whether the film is good or bad. I will provide them with a list of films, most of which can be viewed for free or nearly so, as well as some guiding questions that will tie back to some of the themes and ideas discussed throughout the module and semester. For this assignment, it is



not necessary that the vampire in question echo all of the themes and traits common the early vampire iterations of Romania and neighboring countries. In fact, some of the films will be selected precisely for the ways they differ from some of those early incarnations. With this assignment, I want students to consider the vampire also as it exists in their own day and age. Does it share the same body, desires, and needs of the vampires of the 18th century? How has the vampire adapted as a metaphor? I use Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's "Monster Culture (Seven Thesis)" essay as a framework for the class, so I will also expect them to make some connections between the film they have chosen and one of Dr. Cohen's theses.

As this is the largest assignment in this section, I provide the most feedback here. For their reviews, I will make 3–5-minute feedback videos for each student. In the videos, I focus on their ability to situate each film in the larger questions of the module.

Resources and References Used in the Creation of the Module

To help with research, I have created a 'HUM 130: Vampires' guide on our library's Research Guides page. On this page, I provide tabs covering the learning objectives for the section, as well as tips for writing academic film reviews. They will also find a tab for resources. This page will be updated in summer 2024. These resources will include:

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. "Monster Culture (Seven Thesis)." *Monster Theory*, UP Minnesota, 1996, pp. 3–23.

Groom, Nick. *The Vampire: A New History*. Yale University Press, 2020.

Packer, Sharon, and Jody W. Pennington. *History of Evil in Popular Culture What Hannibal Lecter, Stephen King, and Vampires Reveal about America*. ABC-CLIO, 2014.

Schott, Gareth, and Kirstine Moffat, eds. *Fanpires: Audience Consumption of the Modern Vampire*. New Academia, 2011.