



Romanticizing the Confederacy: Modern Vampire Media as a Conduit for Misinformation

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ABSTRACT

Vampires in television and film provide audiences with a unique link between past and present through their immortality. This becomes problematic when three popular vampire franchises – *True Blood*, *Twilight*, and *The Vampire Diaries* – all showcase important characters who were Confederate soldiers in their human lives. In a modern America that still sees the Confederate flag used as a popular symbol of racism, this misleading portrayal of the American Civil War allows people to form a connection to the average Confederate soldier through their favourite vampire. This paper argues that writing sympathetic fictional characters into historical events misrepresents those events and is a form of misinformation for individuals who lack the information literacy skills to separate the truth from fiction.

Keywords: Misinformation; Disinformation; Media; History

Introduction

The contemporary settings of the most popular vampire television and movies are often punctuated by flashbacks to a fictionalized past. Vampire characters find their human origins in notable moments in history, ranging from the 1860s Virginia depicted via the Salvatore brothers in *The Vampire Diaries* to the Viking roots of Eric Northman in *True Blood*. The unique storytelling capability of vampires lies in the potential narrative scope they provide (Jowett, 2017). Although flashbacks are a common tool of other genres of media, the immortality of vampires allows their stories and thus their flashbacks to extend beyond the realm of a human lifetime. Viewers can be

transported to a version of history alongside a character who exists equally in past and present. More so than any other genre, vampire media is able to bring its audience to any moment in history with a familiar modern character as their tour guide, so that the distance between the audience and the past feels liminal. In the space of these flashbacks, the line between historical fact and vampire fiction is blurry.

This becomes problematic when the stereotypical good vampire hails from a contentious period of human history. For the purposes of this paper, the good vampire should be defined as any vampire who could be considered a close ally of the typically human protagonist. The good vampire is a character who the audience is encouraged at the very least to trust; however, that trust may be undeserved due to the racism of the characters' human pasts. Three of the foremost vampire media franchises – *True Blood*, *The Vampire Diaries*, and *Twilight* – all feature prominent good vampire characters who were Confederate soldiers in the American Civil War during their human lives. After these vampires earned the trust of the human protagonists and claimed their place as good vampires in their modern-day fantasy worlds, the audience is then told that these men once fought alongside the Confederacy in favour of continuing slavery. When fact and fiction is blurred, this can lead audiences to subconsciously associate their favourite characters with the real Confederacy. The nameless, faceless men on the historical battlefield are supplanted by images of romantic, well-intentioned vampires. This melding of history and fantasy risks spreading misinformation.

This paper will argue that attaching sympathetic or favoured characters to controversial moments in history is a form of falsely representing historical events, and that this causes the

spread of misinformation about history. Vampire media is uniquely capable of transmitting historical misinformation due to the frequency of its flashback scenes that connect the characters directly to distant moments in a fictionalized past. This paper will first establish the popularity of the three vampire franchises – *True Blood*, *The Vampire Diaries*, and *Twilight* – in order to determine how the misinformation could spread and to whom. The paper will then discuss how the Confederacy is represented through each of these franchises to prove that this racist past is treated positively or as being equivalent to any other slight character flaw. These ideas will then be used to argue that vampire media is inadvertently re-writing history by confusing fantasy with reality.

The Modern Vampire Fascination

The power of vampire media comes from its widespread popularity. Vampires have been a cultural staple since the 19th century, but the idea of a modern vampire as a romantic leading man reached its height around 2010. This is reflected in the popularity of the vampire media of the time, as proven by their box office earnings, television ratings, and other indicators of success. Vampire media was able to disseminate through the cultural zeitgeist and reach an unprecedented audience that still continues to tune in today.

When *The Vampire Diaries* made its television premiere in the fall of 2009, The CW network reported that it had set the record as their most viewed series premiere episode ever (The CW Press, 2009). This momentum carried through the first season into 2010, when *The Vampire Diaries* continued to make ratings history as the top show among female teens on Thursday nights, winning against networks like ABC and NBC (The CW Press, 2010). Additionally,

Twilight became so associated with teenage girls that it sparked a frenzy of movie adaptations for young adult novels. Prior to the release of the final *Twilight* film, *Breaking Dawn Part 2*, it was reported that the first four installments had earned approximately \$2.5 billion at the box office globally. Although *True Blood* targeted a more mature audience than its vampire contemporaries, it still gained popularity quickly. At its peak in its third season, *True Blood* averaged at 13 million viewers per episode (Garofalo, 2014). At their best, *The Vampire Diaries*, *Twilight*, and *True Blood* defined the movement of vampire media.

These television shows and movies are seeing a resurgence in popularity today, over a decade after they first premiered. Forbes reported that as of July 2021, the *Twilight* franchise was dominating the top movies on Netflix in the United States. For a brief while, nearly ten years after the final *Twilight* film was released, Netflix's top 5 most-watched movies list was entirely *Twilight* (Mendelson, 2020). *The Vampire Diaries* experienced a similar phenomenon due to 2020 quarantine binge watching. The Nielson Streaming Unwrapped 2020 review revealed that audiences streamed over 14 billion minutes of *The Vampire Diaries* across various streaming services during the year. *True Blood* is seeing a literal resurgence in the form of a reboot announced in 2020 and still in its early stages of development (Ausiello, 2020). Despite being out of their prime, these franchises generate enough nostalgia to maintain their relevance and even gain new fans as younger generations discover them for the first time. Much like vampires, these are pieces of media that demonstrate a form of immortality.

This immortality is achieved through targeting an audience of women, especially young women and teenage girls. In these fictional worlds, the (typically) human, female protagonist

finds herself surrounded by conventionally attractive men with supernatural powers and a literally undying love for her. It is unsurprising then that these television shows and movies would appeal to masses of young women who desire their own fantastical romance. As Jowett (2017) states, “vampire men are fantasy men” (p. 12). The appeal of vampires for young women stems not from an interest in horror, but from a yearning for the kind of epic love story and adventure that can only be found when an ordinary human girl meets an immortal monster with a heart. This romanticization of vampire men combined with the cultural event that was romantic vampire media has culminated in the perfect setting for problematic misinformation to propagate through masses of young women.

The Confederacy through Bill Compton, Damon Salvatore, and Jasper Hale

True Blood

Bill Compton is the first vampire encountered by the human protagonist, Sookie Stackhouse, when he enters the bar where Sookie works in the pilot episode of *True Blood*. His romance with Sookie quickly develops over the course of the first season. Although their characters are not romantically involved for most of the series, Bill is an obvious good vampire. This is true even when he strays from his good path in the fifth and sixth seasons, as this plot relies on the audience’s expectation of Bill to do the right thing in protecting Sookie. Although discrimination against vampires is a key theme of *True Blood*, Bill remains generally well-liked and trusted by a community that often fears other vampires. He is perceived as good both by the audience and by the characters.

The vampire culture in *True Blood* differs from that of *The Vampire Diaries* or *Twilight* because the existence of vampires is common knowledge to humans in the *True Blood* universe. The entire fictional town of Bon Temps, Louisiana is aware of Bill's Confederate past, allowing them the unique opportunity for further engagement with this history outside of the core group of characters. *True Blood* does little with this opportunity. Instead, *True Blood* depicts a predominantly white Southern town that celebrates Bill's past. In the fifth episode of the first season, Bill wins the favour of the town by speaking in detail about his experiences in the Civil War at a public forum (Ball & Minahan, 2008). The only character who questions Bill on the morality of these experiences is Sookie's best friend Tara, who is one of few Black women in the series. In this exchange, which occurs in the second episode of the series, Bill confirms that his father owned slaves (Ball & Winant, 2008). This is never mentioned directly again and does not deter Sookie's romantic interest in him. When these characters react positively or even forgive a character like Bill for his role in a real historical event, this communicates to the audience that it is okay for them to forgive this as well.

This Civil War narrative was reinforced with promotional material from outside of the episodes. In 2010, HBO released a poster to promote *True Blood's* third season which featured Bill Compton's face edited into a Civil War-era photograph with the tagline "Life Goes On". The photo is a convincing artifact, with "sepia tones, slightly bleached out faces and the recognizable poses of early photography" (Jowett, 2017, p. 7). Simply removing the logo and tagline from the bottom of the image would be enough to convince some people that Bill Compton's presence in this Civil War photo is truthful. This promotional material creates a channel for the false history

to seep out of its fictional confines and to further blur the lines between historical truth and imagination.

The Vampire Diaries

Damon Salvatore's role as a good vampire is contentious. Damon is introduced in the pilot episode of *The Vampire Diaries* as the evil older brother of the initial vampire love interest, Stefan, and continues to be the main villain through the first season. However, by the end of the first season, his romantic intentions toward the human protagonist, Elena, are made clear. By the fourth season, Damon is the main romantic lead, and he continues in this role until the series finale at the end of the eighth season. Damon does wrong often throughout the series, but his loyalty and allyship to Elena is obvious. Rather than a villain, Damon is an archetypal bad boy with a heart of gold, at least in matters concerning the protagonist. The audience is intended to trust and like him. For this reason, Damon is a good vampire.

Damon's Civil War backstory is introduced to viewers in the first of *The Vampire Diaries'* eight seasons through flashbacks to the fictional town of Mystic Falls, Virginia in 1864. In the sixth episode of the season, Damon is seen wearing a Confederate uniform while on leave from the war (Plec et al., 2009). Rather than questioning his involvement in the Confederacy, this scene is played as a moment of brotherly bonding and of potential romance with his then love interest, Katherine. Immediately, the significance of the Confederacy is brushed aside in favour of furthering the plot around this romantic storyline. Damon is intended to be likeable in the scene, not questioned about his actions or beliefs. This sets a precedent for the portrayal of the Civil War through the rest of *The Vampire Diaries*.

These flashbacks to the Civil War continue throughout the series as more of Damon's past is revealed, culminating in the season seven episode "Hell Is Other People". In this episode, the modern Damon is trapped in a time loop in which he is forced to relive what he feels is the worst day in his Confederate past (Plec et al., 2016). On this day in the past, Damon made a deal to find and arrest deserters and Union sympathizers in exchange for being allowed to leave the army. This deal was made in response to a letter he received from his brother. While Damon is often referenced in the series as having left the Confederacy, this episode proves that his decision was at his brother's request and unrelated to any personal moral qualms. Furthermore, as the day repeats and Damon accidentally kills the deserters over and over, it becomes clear that his unpleasant memories of this day are not due to the Confederacy itself. Even in an episode themed around his Civil War past, Damon never grapples with the reality of what he was fighting for.

This fictional history is intertwined with the modern-day plot, as Damon forms a close friendship with the only Black character in the main cast, Bonnie Bennett. As Damon and Bonnie grow closer, the audience is never called upon to question Damon's past because Bonnie never questions it. To a predominantly white audience, Damon's role in the Confederacy is legitimized by Bonnie's apparent indifference toward it. This is all furthered via the setting of fictional Mystic Falls, which celebrates its antebellum past. The series returns several times to the annual events of the fictional holiday Founders' Day, in which characters come together with the entire town to celebrate the historical founding families of Mystic Falls. The audience knows through flashbacks that these families were wealthy white landowners, and presumable slaveowners, but the disconnect between the 1860s flashbacks and the Founders' Day events almost asks the audience

to not connect those dots in a meaningful way (Lush, 2017, p. 300). *The Vampire Diaries* provides their audience and their characters with the tools to question their narrative about the Civil War while simultaneously giving them permission to accept their version of the story as close enough to the truth.

Twilight

Jasper Hale is a member of the Cullen vampire clan and the adoptive brother of romantic leading man, Edward Cullen. When *Twilight* film audiences are introduced to Jasper in the first movie, he is characterized primarily as being the husband or boyfriend of Alice Cullen. Notably, the vampire Alice is an important ally to the human protagonist, Bella, throughout the movies. This tells the audience that they are meant to implicitly trust Jasper by his association to Edward and Alice. Despite his struggle to control his bloodlust around humans, Jasper also prioritizes maintaining the Cullen's "vegetarian vampire" diet of drinking only animal blood. In this way, Jasper is presented as a quintessential good vampire.

Not until a single brief scene in the third movie, *Eclipse*, are fans told about Jasper's backstory as a major in the Confederate Army (Slade, 2010). Specifically, Jasper was the youngest major in the Texas cavalry, which he appears to consider an accomplishment. In this scene, Jasper proudly shows off the battle scars from his human life to Bella and references using his Confederate Army training to help the vampires in their coming fight. His recounting of this story is spliced with footage from a fictional vampire war in the American South occurring simultaneously with the American Civil War. This fictional war rewrites history to make space for

vampires. By writing these two conflicts as contemporaneous, *Twilight* trivializes the Civil War by giving it a fantasy equivalent.

Jasper's character differs from Bill or Damon in that he is not a love interest to Bella; however, in some ways, this makes *Twilight's* portrayal of the Civil War all the more egregious. Jasper's distance from Bella means that the protagonist is never asked to contend with Jasper's past in any meaningful way. Bella remains silent for much of the scene and Jasper's leadership role in the Confederate Army is not mentioned beyond this moment. Additionally, Jasper and Alice's relationship is almost more romantic than Bella and Edward's because their stability is aspirational both to Bella as she navigates her relationship problems and to the young female audience. The scene finishes with Jasper explaining his meeting Alice and how she saved him not from the Confederacy, but from the fictional vampire army he joined after his human death. Jasper and Alice's story implies that bad men can be rescued from their own evil and transformed into perfect romantic partners.

Giving Fangs to Human Evil

The depictions of Confederate vampires in *True Blood*, *The Vampire Diaries*, and *Twilight* share some commonalities. These are vampire men deemed worthy of forgiveness, trust, or celebration. They are beloved by their human – or mostly human, in the case of Sookie Stackhouse – female protagonists. Additionally, there are few, if any, Black characters included in these narratives. Those Black characters who are present are not given ample opportunity to respond to the historical reality of the Civil War with the same care and urgency given to the

supernatural problems of the main plot. This creates the perfect environment for reinforcing historical misinformation.

Canet (2019) introduces the concept of the sympathetic vampire. Vampires as a concept are morally ambiguous due to their reliance on human blood for survival, but sympathetic or good vampires become progressively personified through narrative (p. 118). This idea can be used to describe Bill Compton, Damon Salvatore, and Jasper Hale to varying degrees. In sympathetic vampire narratives, the responsibility for this push toward humanity is given to the female protagonist. In *True Blood* and *The Vampire Diaries*, this is done through romantic relationships, while *Twilight* accomplishes the same through friendship. The female protagonist “enables the vampire to be more human” by positively reacting to moral choices and disapproving of his evil actions (Canet, 2019, p. 126). This becomes problematic when the human protagonist does not react negatively to the vampire’s Confederate past. When this happens, an obvious evil is ignored in favour of reproaching the plot-relevant supernatural mistakes of the modern vampire.

In this way, vampire media depicts the Confederacy as something that was not necessarily bad. Instead, their participation in the Confederacy is one of many minor character flaws for the human protagonist to work through as the good vampire approaches his humanity. This flaw is so minor that the human protagonist ignores it altogether. However, unlike the other wrongdoings of vampires, participating in the Confederate Army is an inherently human act because it is human history. To forgive this historical event as a step toward humanity is a contradiction because this part of the characters’ pasts is the most human thing about them. Instead of acknowledging the separation between their human past and their vampire sins, this creates a parallel between a

deeply human event and a fantasy narrative. This relegates the Confederacy and a history of racism to the same realm as vampire crimes, like drinking blood, that are not intended to be taken seriously by the audience.

By giving fangs to a Confederate soldier and allowing him to find love or friendship in the modern human protagonist, vampire media is communicating to its audience that racism, slavery, and the Confederacy are pieces of history that can or should be forgiven. The common use of the Confederate flag today shows that many people are already willing to forgive this past, and these stories tell a false history that gives them permission to do so. Through their narratives, these television shows and movies are able to equate a historical movement in favour of slavery with the imaginary and often romanticised sins of the average vampire. If the affection of the protagonist is enough to absolve the romantic vampire of guilt without requiring that he engage with his past himself, then the same can be said for the humans of the Confederacy.

Misinformation and Truth in Fictionalizations of History

This rationalization of the Confederacy through vampires is potentially harmful, as demonstrated by Scott Metzger's research on the effects of fictionalized histories when viewed by young audiences. Metzger found that when students were shown historical feature films with little or no foundation of historical understanding to place the media into its appropriate context, students would perceive the film "as a kind of literal truth" (2007, p. 68). This research reveals how easy it is for audiences to be impacted by historical misinformation. Young and impressionable audiences are unlikely to question the "emotionally powerful, memorable, and

persuasive” narratives of historical films because they lack the tools that allow for successful media and information literacy (Metzger, 2007, p. 68).

Vampire media has a target audience of young women and teenage girls who align with the profile of the students in Metzger’s research. This audience is not equipped with the appropriate media literacy skills or the historical context that are required to adequately question these false historical narratives. Additionally, while Metzger’s research focused on full-length historical films, vampire media reveals its history through flashbacks. This makes vampire media more insidious for young audiences. By presenting its historical narratives in brief flashes, vampire media provides its audience with less opportunities to realize that they should doubt what they are seeing.

As false depictions of the Civil War become more common in media and disseminate through an audience of young viewers, the concept of historical truth becomes questionable. There is nobody alive today who can provide a first-hand account of the Civil War. All that is known about this period in history can be found within the remaining primary source documents. The separation between historical misinformation and historical truth is thus decided by historians, who act as a gateway to the truth by legitimizing some sources over others. Yet, in vampire media, there are characters who were alive to see history. Through their flashbacks, these vampires provide an eyewitness account to an otherwise inaccessible period in time. To young audiences, this is closer to historical truth than a document in an archive that has been vetted by historians. These narratives, although false, are accessible and tangible. This cultivates a sense of

genuineness that makes the vampiric version of the Civil War easy to believe and puts it in direct competition with the historical truth.

When two historical narratives compete against each other for validity, both of their truths come into question. Establishing historical truth is an impossible feat because there is no direct living source to confirm what information is true. The belief in a truth, no matter how rational, does not equate to true knowing. Historical truth is therefore chosen from the most widely accepted narrative. As previously established, *True Blood*, *The Vampire Diaries*, and *Twilight* have all reached large audiences. Their false narratives of the Civil War have been viewed more frequently by these young audiences than real primary source accounts of this history. In this way, vampire media is not only attempting to re-write history, but has the potential to be successful in this. The misinformation of historical fiction can supersede the accepted truth because that truth could be misinformation itself and because the young audiences of vampire media are not capable of the information literacy required to determine the difference.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the flashbacks in popular vampire media are a form of historical misinformation. *True Blood*, *The Vampire Diaries*, and *Twilight* all uniquely contribute to the spread of this misinformation through representations of good vampires with human pasts in the Confederate Army. These franchises all deem this past insignificant to the vampires' goodness by way of the indifference of the human protagonist and of the few Black characters. In allowing vampires to bridge the gap between historical fact and fiction, these franchises simultaneously trivialize the significance of the American Civil War and permit their audiences to

accept this narrative as an alternative historical truth. This message of misinformation is capable of spreading widely due to the popularity of these three vampire media franchises. This is particularly true with teenagers and young women who lack the information literacy skills necessary to recognize misinformation. The result of this is a potential shift in the concept of historical truth as a whole.

This is especially significant in the context of the cultural apathy towards the slaveholding past that was markedly prevalent as these franchises reached the height of their popularity in the early 2010s. As vampires on screen showed glimpses of their Confederate pasts, celebrities were holding lavish weddings on plantations that featured slave cabins on their list of attractions. One example of this is Ryan Reynolds and Blake Lively, who were married at South Carolina's Boone Plantation in 2012 (Hosken, 2020). Simultaneously, radio stations across North America were playing hits by a band named Lady Antebellum. The pre-Civil War American South was fashionable and nostalgic. As this trend dies and white Americans are asked to reckon with their celebration of a dark history, *True Blood*, *The Vampire Diaries*, and *Twilight* all maintain their popularity. The historical misinformation that they spread through massive young audiences remains.

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