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Humanities and Theology

Vampires in the Classroom

An Analysis of Charlaine Harris'
Dead Until Dark

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Introduction

I knew immediately what he was. It amazed me when no one else turned round to stare. They couldn't tell! But to me, his skin had a little glow, and I just knew (*Dead Until Dark* 2).

In Charlaine Harris' *Dead until Dark* (2001) vampires have "come out of the coffin" (1) and live together side by side with humans. In this novel vampires are portrayed as beings who have always been part of earthly life but it is not until the discovery of synthetic blood, so called "Tru[sic] Blood", that they have been able to share the world with humans without using them as a source for food. As a new group of society vampires encounter many problems such as the right to legally marry, to work, or even to hire workmen to get some repairs done to their house during the light of the day. Vampires are also hunted by so called "drainers", humans who want to drain the vampires of their blood since this is paradoxically a very addictive drug for humans. There are two groups of vampires; the ones who want to live side by side with humans in peace (so called mainstreamers) and the ones who regret that vampires were exposed to human society. The latter group would still like vampires to mysteriously roam the earth after dark, feeding on humans.

The *Curriculum for the upper secondary school* states as a fundamental value that:

[t]he school should promote understanding of other people and the ability to empathise. No one in school should be subjected to discrimination on the grounds of gender, ethnic affiliation, religion or other belief system, transgender identity or its expression, sexual orientation, age or functional impairment, or to other forms of degrading treatment. All tendencies to discrimination or degrading treatment should be actively combated. Xenophobia and intolerance must be confronted with knowledge, open discussion and active measures (Skolverket 4).

As an English teacher I would like to attain this by analysing four different themes in the novel and to assess their suitability for classroom use in upper secondary school.

To assess the novel's suitability for teaching I will analyse the themes of gender, sexuality, race and how diets and eating are connected with identity, and connect the analysis to the course content of English 5 in the upper secondary school. In the curriculum for the subject of English it is stated that teaching should aim at giving students the opportunity to develop "[u]nderstanding of spoken and written English, and also the ability to interpret content" (Skolverket 2). It also says that teaching should cover "[t]hemes, ideas, form and content in film and literature; authors and literary periods" (Skolverket 7).

I will begin the essay by looking at the novel from a gender perspective. The main character and narrator in the novel is Sookie Stackhouse, a young waitress who encounters and solves mysteries. How is she portrayed and how are other women in the story described? What stereotypes of gender are there? Then follows a chapter discussing sexuality in the narrative and why vampires are so strongly associated with sex. What resemblances are there between homosexuals in our society and the vampires of the novel when it comes to legal rights for example? Furthermore the theme of vampires being a new race or minority of the society in the novel and how that can be compared and contrasted to other races or minorities in our society of today will be reviewed. What similarities between fictional vampires and for instance African-Americans are possible to find? Finally the theme of diets and identity will be analysed. Identity forming is an on-going process for the students in the upper secondary school and hence a current and relevant topic. The vampires of the story can choose either to "mainstream" and drink synthetic blood or live the conservative way of feeding on humans. How can this be applied to our eating habits of today? What choices can we make when it comes to our diet and how does that shape who we are and how other people consider us?

Gender

'You may not think my job amounts to much, but it's one I'm good at, and I like it. I am as worthy of respect as your sister, the lawyer, Andy Bellefleur, and don't you forget it. I am not stupid, and I am not a slut' (99).

The words above are said by Sookie Stackhouse when she is confronted by the police officer Andy Bellefleur who disrespects her work at the bar. This points to one of the interesting themes of the novel, namely the issue of gender. This theme is important in the classroom teaching since it raises awareness about inequalities, prejudices and misconceptions between men and women and how to change or prevent these reoccurring societal patterns. It is even stated in the *Curriculum for the upper secondary school* that teaching should use a gender perspective (Skolverket 4-9).

In order to analyse this novel from a gender perspective using feminist theory one has to first determine the term of feminism. According to Steven Lynn (221) there are, or have been, three different waves of feminism through history. The first wave fought for legal equality between men and women, such as women's right to vote, study at university and to pursue any career of their choice. The second wave focused on the needs for women, meaning that equality between men and women is only met in theory since the ones responsible for taking care of the children and doing the housekeeping still are women and thus the demands for equality are not met in practice. The emphasis during the second wave of feminism was to reverse the established patriarchy in order to create real equality. If a man and a woman of the same family with children are to pursue careers and it is the woman's responsibility to take care of the children she has not the same possibilities to make a career as the man, hence he is favoured by structural cultural conditions. The third wave, also known as postfeminism, wants to deconstruct the whole idea of gender and sexuality. Lynn argues that these waves fit the classical structure of deconstruction: first, notice the binary relationship (men and women) and which element is favoured, second, expose the vagueness of this favouring by reversing it and finally deconstruct the binary relationship that makes oppression and prejudice possible (222).

How is oppression and prejudice created in the first place and in what way is it displayed through literature? Kelley Griffith mentions Rubin's distinction from 1984 concerning "sex", the biological difference, and "gender", the cultural difference, between men and women. It is the culture that determines the traits and behaviour that set masculinity apart from femininity. In other words, the traits we regard as typically masculine or feminine are something constructed by our culture that, unlike biology, can be changed (142). Griffith claims that Western culture has: "seen women as passive rather than active, irrational rather than rational, subjective rather than objective, at home rather than at 'work', spiritual rather than material, impractical

rather than practical”(142). Jacqueline Bach, Jessica Broussard and Melanie K. Hundley add that: “[w]hen gender is seen as binary, places too become gendered: masculine being outside, public, and work; feminine being private, inside, and home” (192). Such gender distinctions almost always give women less power, status and respect than men.

There are typical masculine and feminine traits, behaviour and places in the novel, to use the terms already mentioned above. One example of a character with typical female traits is the protagonist of the story. She is a twenty-five year old woman working as a waitress at the local bar of her home town Bon Temps in Louisiana. She describes herself as pretty. She is blond, blue-eyed, has strong legs, a “waspy waistline” and her bosom is “substantial” (1). This makes her fairly attractive, popular with the men and generally liked in her community. This description fits the picture for how a typical young female should be. But Sookie has a “disability” as she puts it (2). She is telepathic, meaning that she can read other people’s minds. This is a huge problem for her. She rarely goes on dates and she has never had a boyfriend. She wishes that she was “normal” and that she could live a normal life with friends, parties and all other elements that make life adventurous and exciting. She sees herself as a social outcast that people make fun of. The people of Bon Temps do not know about her telepathic skills but only see her as crazy. At the beginning Sookie lives together with her grandmother and a cat in a big house but later on in the story she lives in the house by herself. She also has a promiscuous brother, Jason, who lives not far from her and is very protective of her. Their parents died in a car accident several years ago and therefore Sookie and Jason have been brought up by their grandmother. Sookie has been living a quite safe and protected life until the day when Bill the vampire enters the bar where Sookie works and her entire life is turned upside down.

To analyse the narrative from a gender perspective, it is not until Sookie meets the man, Bill the vampire, that she starts to evolve as a human being and getting active rather than passive. Ananya Mukherjea calls this phenomena “the Byronic hero and the heroine’s journey” meaning that the dangerous lover (a blood-sucking and exceptionally strong vampire) is a perfect mate for the innocent and inexperienced but adventure seeking heroine (115). Mukherjea suggests that the dominant lover and his attraction for her shows the heroine that she is precious and more interesting than what her lack of social standing may first imply and that it contributes to the self-

making and identity forming of the heroine (116). The dominant male may serve to highlight the importance of the heroine through his interest in her. However, the main story is Sookie's and she is the focal point of the narrative. In the very first scene they meet she ends up in a blood-spattered fight with two people who want to drain Bill of his blood. She rescues him, which makes her an active, practical and rational woman. In this scene she is the subject, the rescuer, and he is the object, the victim. The author's intention of playing with traditional gender roles by reversing them is clearly noticeable in this passage right after Sookie rescues Bill: "'Thank you,' he said stiffly. So he wasn't thrilled about being rescued by a woman. Typical guy" (12).

Furthermore, feminism is also about reaching equality (power, status and respect) between men and women. Sookie can be said to have this since she works full time as a waitress, she is independent, she can fight for herself both verbally and physically, she is adventurous, she rejects the idea of "weak" or "bad" girls/women and she does not want people to help her out when times are rough. Nevertheless, she is not interested in pursuing a career. She is satisfied with her waitress job although she thinks it is not a well-respected one. On the other hand, Bill claims that Sookie belongs to him (meaning no other vampire can feed on her), he treats her like his puppet (feeding her, bathing her, combing her hair) and whenever danger is near Sookie counts and hopes for Bill to defend her.

Other women in the narrative are mostly described as low class citizens except for two women, one a lawyer (who is unhappy because she has no husband) and the other one a police officer. All the waitresses in the bar where Sookie works are female, whereas the chefs and her boss are male. The "fang-bangers" (humans who want vampires to feed on, have sex with and exploit) are either women or homosexual men. The people getting killed are physically attractive low class females working in bars or gas stations who are single but with active sexual lives. All vampires in the novel are men except for two women. The first one is described as pretty and that "her round face and sweet features would have done credit to a milkmaid" (120). The other one is depicted as "cheap as hell and most likely absolutely mouthwatering from a male point of view" (72). This adds to the structure of the binary system between men and women and the one who is favoured since the male characters are in power. To conclude, although Sookie as a character is said to have in some way reached equality from a gender perspective, the ones who lack power, status and respect in the narrative are women.

When working with this theme for educational purposes the students should first be given a lecture about gender and feminist theory; the determination of the term, the history and how to make a feminist reading of a text in order to have a base of knowledge to work from when making their own analysis. Students should then focus on the first chapter of the book since this is where Bill and Sookie meet for the first time. The first chapter also serves as a presentation of the protagonist and her surrounding world. While reading the chapter the students should analyse the text from these questions provided from Emily Dial-Driver (175) in order to prepare for an oral discussion in class about gender in the narrative:

- How does the first chapter of the novel illustrate or refute the feminist ideal?
- What are the stereotypes of masculinity and femininity revealed in the chapter?
- What are the contradictions that make the conclusion reached problematic?
- How has feminism changed?
- How has feminist rhetoric changed over the last decades, and how is that change revealed in the chapter?

After having the oral discussion in class the student will write an argumentative text in which they answer these questions once more, but now having the input from the oral discussion to use as well. This written text will then be the first part of a longer essay composed by the students. This essay will contain three different parts analysing not only gender but also sexuality and race connected to the narrative. These themes are important and necessary issues to bring into education since it is stated in the *Curriculum for the upper secondary school* that:

[t]he inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between women and men, and solidarity between people are the values that the education should represent and impart (Skolverket 4).

The *Curriculum for the upper secondary school* also states that “teaching should use a gender perspective and that equal values when it comes to sexuality and race also

should be embodied” (Skolverket 4-9). Robin Redmond Wright and Jennifer A. Sandlin claim that popular culture, such as popular fiction, can be used not only to reach and engage learners but also to do it in a relevant critical way. They believe that popular culture incorporates determining attitudes towards gender, sexuality and race that serve as a base for oppression. Furthermore they argue that by raising awareness concerning those determining attitudes of gender, sexuality and race is one way of creating change in the matter (125-6). To make the students read the novel, orally discuss what they read in class and then write an essay about it is a way of working with literature in line with the course content in English 5. It states that teaching should cover “[o]ral and written production and interaction of various kinds, also in more formal settings, where students instruct, narrate, summarise, explain, comment, assess, give reasons for their opinions, discuss and argue” (Skolverket 4).

Vampires and Sexuality

‘Listen, Sookie, I got to ask. Are vampires all everyone says they are, in the lover department?’ (168).

The question above is posed by one of Sookie’s colleagues and illustrates another theme in the book, specifically that of sexuality. Vampires are believed to be exciting love partners for humans. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock suggests that one reason for vampires being so persistent in literature and popular culture is because vampire writings are always about sex. Weinstock argues further that “vampires provide representations of tabooed sexuality to establish and reinforce proper sexual roles”(4). Vampires in literature are often not fixed in their sexuality but prefer both men and women which, according to Patrick R. Grzanka, “disturb[s] dominant rhetoric about sexual orientation based on concepts such as ‘natural,’ ‘essential,’ and ‘permanent,’”(192). Vampires are also polygamous and driven by a thirst of blood combined with sex. Thus vampires evoke a thrill of “forbidden sexuality” which make them “both dangerous and dangerously attractive” (Weinstock 4).

Both Weinstock (4) and Mikel J. Koven (70) claim that vampires manifest as a literary symbol for the Id, the storage for basic human instincts and drives. The concept of the Id comes from the theory of “the unconscious” by Freud, who claimed

that the human mind is psychologically structured in three elements; the pleasure-seeking Id, the moralising super-ego and the ego that directs between the opposite desires of the Id and the super-ego. Freud believed that sexual drives exist in the unconscious, that the conscious mind represses the sexual drives and that unconscious symbols therefore often represent repressed sexual energy (Griffith 139). Taking this into account, in literature such as vampire narratives the vampire could be seen as an unconscious symbol for sexual repressed energy both from the reader of the text, the author who has written the text and the characters within the narrative.

One of the typical traits of the Gothic Romance genre, which *Dead until Dark* is categorised as (Mukherjea 116), is that it “tells its story for a heterosexual, female reader who is invited to identify strongly with the heroine” (Mukherjea 116). This indicates that vampires as a sexual symbol are claimed for heterosexual women only. But historically, starting with Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* published in 1897, the vampire is seen more as a dangerous monster that needs to be killed rather than a sexual symbol. However, the vampire of the historical novel *Count Dracula* only bites women, preferably in their sleep when they are all alone. The notion of blood, both as bloodsucking between Count Dracula and his victims and blood transfusions between the humans in order to save each other are frequently occurring in the narrative. Count Dracula even forces his victims to suck his own blood:

With his left hand he held both Mrs Harker’s hands, keeping them away with her arms at full tension; his right hand gripped her by the back of her neck, forcing her face down on his bosom. Her white nightdress was smeared with blood, and a thin stream trickled down the man’s bare breast which was shown by his torn-open dress. The attitude of the two had a terrible resemblance to a child forcing a kitten’s nose into a saucer of milk to compel it to drink (Stoker 319).

The act of Count Dracula in this passage indicates that the vampire can be seen as a conscious or unconscious sexual symbol, not for women but for men. Since the novel is written by a man during the end of the nineteenth century, a time where not many women read books, the implied reader must be an educated man. Vampire narratives were quite popular until the 1960’s and 70’s when society went through a sexual revelation and nothing was seen as “forbidden” anymore. But the interest in vampires,

blood and violence increased again during the 1980's with the rise of AIDS. This made the vampires a sexual symbol once more, but this time a sexual symbol for homosexual men. Vampires in popular culture reflect and provoke "homosexual panic" because of the mythical link between gay men, AIDS, blood and death during the 1980s (Darren Elliott-Smith 140). According to Elliott-Smith gay men have always been stigmatized as vampiric, or "as sexually exotic, alien, unnatural, oral, anal, compulsive, violent, protean, polymorphic, polyvocal, polysemous, invisible, soulless, transient, superhumanly mobile, infectious, murderous, suicidal, and a threat to wife, children, home and phallus" (140).

Not only do gay men and vampires share the same stigmatizing traits but the vampire itself can be seen as a metaphor for homosexuality. To be a deviant group from the norm trying to fit in with the dominant norm is one similarity to start with. The connection between vampires "coming out of the coffin" and homosexuals "coming out of the closet" is not far fetched. In *Dead until Dark* the general opinion and politically correct theory is that vampires are victims of a virus that has made them what they are, in other words: vampirism is an illness. Homosexuality has also been seen as an illness and still is among conservative groups. Vampires are not able to conceive biological children just as homosexual couples are not able to conceive biological children but have to rely on adoption or other options such as insemination. There is one male vampire in the novel who has a male human lover. This lover is infected with the so-called "Sino-virus¹", a virus that is transmitted to the vampires when they feed on the human having it. The Sino-virus makes vampires sick, weak and could even kill them, which can be compared with AIDS and HIV among homosexual gay men.

Sex, blood and violence frequently occur together in the narrative. The protagonist of the novel is inexperienced when it comes to sex (she is a virgin) but the story as such contains several sexual elements. Sookie's brother is notoriously famous for his active sexual life. The patrons at the bar where Sookie works are thinking about sex most of the time and the vampires of the narrative (both male and female) are portrayed as very sexual beings. Sex with a vampire is supposed to be violent, bloody and very intense. The fact that vampires can have sex but not conceive children is another appealing trait for the human characters in the novel. There are

¹ A fictional virus that causes Sino-AIDS.

even prostitutes who specialise in vampire costumers only. There are humans in the narrative, so called “fang-bangers”, who want to and offer the vampires to suck their blood and have sex with them just for their own pleasure. The fictional term “fang-banger” can be compared to so-called “fag hags” in contemporary society. A fag hag is a heterosexual woman who associates mostly with homosexual or bisexual men and the term was first used as an insult just as “fang-banger” is in the novel.

As the story proceeds Sookie starts having a relationship, including sex, with Bill the vampire. This is, however, not described as something violent or bloody but more as an act of love:

He carried me in as we were, my legs locked around him, my head on his shoulder, and he lay me on the clean bed. He stood by the bed and in the moonlight coming in the unshaded windows, I saw him undress, quickly and neatly. Though I was getting great pleasure from watching him, I knew I had to do the same; but still a little embarrassed, I just drew off the nightshirt and tossed it onto the floor. I stared at him. I'd never seen anything so beautiful or so scary in my life (161).

Vampires are usually not driven by emotions, like humans, only by their drive for settling their basic needs, which makes Bill different from other vampires. Different or not, violence, sex and blood is an occurring theme even between Bill and Sookie as indicated by another instance later on in the novel:

The next moment his teeth grazed my shoulder, and his body, hard and rigid and ready, shoved me so forcefully I was suddenly on my back in the mud. He slid directly into me as if he were trying to reach through me to the soil. I shrieked, and he growled in response, as though we were truly mud people, primitive from the caves. My hands, gripping the flesh of his back, felt the rain pelting down and the blood under my nails, and his relentless movement. I thought I would be plowed into this mud, into my grave. His fangs sank into my neck (202-3).

Working with this theme, vampires and sexuality, with the students could be seen as difficult, inappropriate or even obscene. However, when choosing a theme

and a text to work with in the classroom Jodie A. Kreider and Meghan K. Winchell claim that it is our job as teachers not only to provide the students with new texts that contains depth, but also to always look “for new ways to enliven the classroom, engage students in difficult conversations about complicated topics, and spur them to think critically about the text in front of them and the world outside” (5). The aim of this theme is to discuss vampires and sexuality in the narrative with the students and to raise critical awareness concerning sexuality. This goes in line with the fundamental values the school should promote as mentioned in the introduction of this essay.

Before working with this theme both in terms of how to raise critically awareness concerning sexuality and how to analyse it within the narrative the students need some prior knowledge. This will be given during a class where the teacher together with the students discuss men’s and women’s sexuality, homosexuality and sexual behaviour and sexuality connected with identity. *The Curriculum for the upper secondary school* declares that teachers should “openly discuss and together with the students analyse different values, views and problems, and the consequences of these” (Skolverket 11). The lesson should also explain the terms of stereotypes, metaphors and archetypes and how to analyse a text using these components in a critical way. After the class on sexuality the students should read chapter 2-6 in the novel. While reading the students will analyse the text, just as in the previous section about gender, using these questions in order to prepare for an oral discussion in class:

- How do the chapters challenge or affirm our expectations of women’s and men’s sexuality?
- If vampires are seen as a metaphor for homosexuality, how is gay/lesbian sexuality presented from the narrative?
- In absence of sexual behaviour, how do we know or “read” a character’s sexuality (Grzanka 191-2)?
- What about these characters and their descriptions:

Lafayette: “He winked at me with a sweep of his thick, false lashes. Lafayette wears a lot of make up. I was so used to him I never thought of it any more,” (101).

Pam: “this woman talked pure American, and her round face and sweet features would have done credit to a milkmaid. She smiled, and her fangs ran out, kind of ruining the image” (120).

Sam: “He is always a little sunburned, and though he looks slight in his clothes, I have seen him unload trucks with his shirt off, and he has plenty of upper body strength” (4).

After the discussion the students are supposed to write a text concerning and answering these questions once more using the input from the oral discussion and the novel for quotations. This text will then be included as the second part of the essay on gender, sexuality and race in progress.

Race and Minorities

‘I thought you were going to say you were dating a black, but you’ve gone one better, ain’t you, girl?’ (167).

One of few black people represented in the story, Lafayette, says the above line when he finds out that Sookie is dating a vampire. Both black people and vampires are minorities in the narrative. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari define minorities as “those social and cultural groupings whose sense of identity diverges from the axiomatically defining structures of the culture that surrounds them” (in Dennis Rothermel 98). Consequently, vampires can be classified as a minority in the fictional world of *Dead until Dark*. Being a minority usually comes with prejudices, segregation, isolation or even hate and violence from the majority group in society. It is a reaction to the so-called “Other”; something unknown and unfamiliar, and thus associated with fear. To remove the fear of the unknown and make it something “known” instead is a process of integration. This process raises worries, or as Deborah Mutch puts it: “[a]s the dead now walk among us, albeit attending schools or hiring plumbers rather than stalking our arteries, our anxieties focus on integration rather than expulsion” (76).

To integrate vampires in society in the novel is a challenging process just like other minorities have fought and still fights to integrate with society today. Not only

can vampires and their situation in the narrative thus be seen as a metaphor for homosexuality but also serve as a comparison to African-Americans and their struggle for civil rights in the US. The story is set in the American South a place known, among other things, for its history of segregation, the civil rights movement, backwardness and poverty. To set the story here is pertinent, according to Caroline Ruddell and Brigid Cherry, since it is a place where prejudices and damaged relationships are lingering right under the surface (49).

In the story the vampires have only recently got the legal right to exist and to vote, and are thus in a similar situation to black people after the civil war, who had just got the legal right to be free men and women and to vote. Serious relationships between vampires and humans are something unusual in the novel and as Sookie indicates, the relationships are mostly based on sex: "I couldn't recall anyone dating a vampire who wasn't an indiscriminate vampire groupie, a fang-banger who would just go with any bloodsucker" (243). Just as mixed couples of black and white people have been the target for bias and cynicism throughout history, mixed couples of vampires and humans in the narrative are also prejudiced as implied by the quote below:

'The police,' I said. I could see a figure get out of the patrol car and start toward Bill's window. 'Don't let them know you're a vampire, Bill,' I said hastily ... Though most police forces loved having vampires join them on the job, there was a lot of prejudice against vampires on the street, especially as part of mixed couple (127).

Oppression from the church and the influence of religion and faith in order to justify arguments for segregation between groups are also present. Sid Matt, Sookie's lawyer, exemplifies this:

'You know, Miss Sookie, I'm not for this vampire stuff. I think it's taking a chink out of a wall we should keep built up, a wall between us and the so-called virus-infected. I think God intended that wall to be there, and I for one will hold up my section' (296).

When it comes to black representation within the narrative there are three characters being black, or African-American. One is, as mentioned before, Lafayette a gay man working as a chef at the bar Merlotte's where Sookie also works. Being a gay black man he represents a character that is not usually displayed in literature in general and within vampire narratives in particular. Lafayette wears make up, colourful clothes and picks his eyebrows:

'You highlighted your hair, Sookie?' I shook my head. Under the enveloping white apron, Lafayette was a symphony of color; he was wearing a fuschia thin-strap tee, dark purple jeans, red thong sandals, and he had a sort of raspberry eye shadow on. 'It sure looks lighter,' he said sceptically, raising his own plucked brows. (236)

Another black character is Kenya Jones, a woman working as a local police officer. She is described as "at least five foot eleven, the color of bitter-chocolate, and built to weather hurricanes" (90). The way Kenya works in the text is not primarily to represent a black woman, yet the black identity is present, but instead to represent the stereotype of a police officer: "Kenya was thinking she was sorry she'd eaten that extra doughnut that morning at the Nut Hut because it might come back up and that would shame her as a black woman police officer" (91), "Kenya came in then, massive, impassive, and holding a steaming Styrofoam cup of coffee" (313).

The third and last black character is a female vampire, Diane. She lives together with two other vampires who are not "mainstreaming". Instead they represent the group of vampires who want to live as they always have done, feeding on humans, roaming the nights and wanting to be seen as a divergent group from the humans. Diane is described as tall, gorgeous and "flamboyant" (169). She is known for crossing the lines for what is socially accepted such as dancing naked in bars and wearing outrageous outfits.

In order to draw conclusions from the narrative black characters are present, however not very frequent. Black characters within the story do not represent black identity first and foremost but instead gay men, police officers and offensive women. To be a black character comes second. This is representative for a desirable, multicultural and pluralistic society where who you are and what you do matters, not the colour of your skin. Although the history of oppression of African-Americans has

been present in the American South for quite a long time, it is not what this narrative focuses on but rather the oppression and distrust of vampires. Actually, one thing that connects and strengthens the bond between white and black people in the story is the unanimous distaste towards vampires (Amador 127).

This is the last and third theme for the students to work with when it comes to the essay they are writing. Before reading the last chapters of the novel the students need prior knowledge concerning the civil rights movement, segregation and integration. *The curriculum for the upper secondary school* says that “[t]eachers should cooperate with other teachers in order to achieve the goals for education” (9), which makes it suitable for the social studies or history teacher to give a lecture about this topic. This is, again, to give the students a greater knowledge in order to draw conclusions of their own. This is also done because teachers should:

make clear the fundamental democratic values of Swedish society and human rights, and together with the students discuss conflicts that can occur between these values and rights and actual events (Skolverket 11).

After the lecture the students should finish the book by reading the last chapters, 7-12, and while reading analyse the text using these questions in order to prepare for an oral discussion in class:

- What similarities, allusions, symbols and/or metaphors can you find in the chapter concerning attitudes and prejudice between vampires and African Americans in the US? What about the civil rights movement? Think about legal rights (such as the right to vote), riots, religion etc.

- There is a clear notion of integration and segregation within the vampire community. Bill is “mainstreaming” meaning he wants to live in peace integrated with humans but there are other vampires in the narrative who do not like this way of living. Malcolm, Liam and Diane want to keep their vampire identity and live a life segregated from the humans as Malcolm indicates: “Some of us don’t want to go to – baseball – games and ...’ (here he was searching his memory for something disgustingly human, I could tell) ‘barbecues! We are Vampire!’” (171).

Why do you think that Bill wants to mainstream and Malcolm, Liam and Diane do not? How is this applicable and reflective of the society we live in today? Is it possible to keep your identity or way of living and still mainstream?

- The murderer in the story is a white male who is filled with prejudice toward vampires. What is the morality in that? Why do you think the author chose this character as the murderer? What is the author telling us?

After having discussed these questions in class the students are going to answer the questions once again but this time in written text as the third and last part of their essay. The students have now written an essay analysing gender, sexuality and race within the story and it is time for the students to start reflecting on how gender, sexuality and race shape themselves and their identity. This will be done within the next theme. Grzanka suggests that “[b]y first providing content-based knowledge about these dimensions of difference, instructors can then begin the process of helping students to unpack these categories and investigate how they shape their own perspectives on the world around them” (193). This is additionally one of the aims in the subject of English in the upper secondary school. It is stated in the syllabus that “students should meet written and spoken English of different kinds, and relate the content to their own experiences and knowledge” (Skolverket 1).

Diets and Identity

The vampire was hungry. I’d always heard that the synthetic blood the Japanese had developed kept vampires up to par as far as nutrition, but didn’t really satisfy their hunger, which was why there were ‘Unfortunate Incidents’ from time to time (Harris 5).

As mentioned before, vampires in the narrative used to feed on humans but can now drink synthetic blood instead as a source for food and nutrition. But as indicated from the passage above the vampires still prefer human blood compared to the synthetic

blood. To drink the synthetic blood, despite the unsettling taste, is a way for the vampires to construct their “mainstreaming” identity. According to Mutch, identity is something deliberately constructed and also not stable but instead adaptable and fluent. Every individual can more or less decide what nationality, religion or other attributes wanted or not wanted in his or her identity (86). Surely it is a questionable argument since nationality and religion most often are given by birth. It is possible to change though, but perhaps not a very common thing to do. None the less, what is actually possible to do and also what Mutch actually is referring to is whether an individual chooses to identify with that specific trait or not. This is how identity is constructed in one way. There is also another way, namely to construct identity in the eyes of other’s. This means how other people envision us. To rely identity construction on how other people recognise our identity and ourselves can be dangerous though since if this recognition stops the self and the identity fades as well (Rod Romesburg 86).

One thing we can decide, and what has come to be rather popular today, is what we choose to or choose not to eat. Nowadays there are more diets and eating habits than we can count: vegetarian, vegan, the LCHF diet, the Atkins diet, the 5:2 diet, the Paleolithic diet, and the GI diet to just mention some. What is also worth to mention are the different intolerances such as lactose and gluten, which forces people to change diet. There are different reasons for deciding what to eat or abstain from eating such as political statements, health motives, upbringing or religious reasons. To make this decision also shapes who we are and how other people consider us to be. To not eat meat as a political statement comes with assumptions of specific attributes to that individual, just as deciding to go with a GI diet for health reasons comes with other assumptions to another individual. It is a way of identity forming both constructed by the individual him or herself since it is an individual decision, but also a way of constructing identity envisioned by others.

In the novel eating habits and diet is a political statement for the vampires. Not feeding from humans but instead from synthetic blood is the only way for vampires to truly integrate with human society. Vampires are a threat to humans since they are extremely strong, unreliable and use humans as a source for food. To drink synthetic blood instead is a statement saying that the vampire in question no longer wants to harm humans. To drink synthetic blood is the first step toward “mainstreaming” and it certainly is a deliberate step since the synthetic blood satisfies the vampires

nutritionally but not desirably. Human blood tastes better, simply put. To choose to eat something when you rather wish to eat something else in order to prove a point is a thoughtful decision connected to identity. Bill, the vampire boyfriend in the narrative, makes a statement for himself and his identity by drinking synthetic blood saying that he no longer sees humans as a source for food but as fellow companions. He also sends a message to humans around him that he wants to be a part of their community and not be associated with those other dangerous vampires. The inhabitants of the town where Bill lives correspondingly perceive this message as this conversation between Mrs Fortenberry, a woman living in Bon Temps, and Sookie shows:

‘I said to Andy [the police officer], you should go after some of those others, the ones that don’t want to learn how to live with us, not like Bill Compton, who’s really making an effort to settle in. He was telling me at the funeral home that he’d gotten his kitchen finished, finally.’ (152).

This theme has focused on diets connected with identity but the purpose is to introduce the notion of identity construction and to link the previous themes of gender, sexuality and race with identity. In order for the content to be more easily grasped by the students they will start to focus on their own eating habits connected to identity and then move on to the more in-depth themes gender, sexuality and race. This will be done during a final lesson to conclude the topic. On this lesson a so-called “four-corner exercise” will be performed. In a four-corner exercise the teacher gives a statement or question and four different responses to this statement or question to the students. Each response corresponds to a corner in the room. The students must then decide for themselves which response they think is the best one and stand in that corresponding corner. When every student has taken a stand the teacher randomly picks a student and asks why he or she is standing in that particular corner. The student does not need to answer and there is always a corner for the response “no comment” or “other responses” in order to not force students unwilling to take a stand. The point with this exercise is not to find the “right” or “correct” answer but to make the students negotiate with themselves and express their opinions. The questions or statements for the four-corner exercise are:

- I eat meat because –
 1. It tastes good, 2. I'm raised to eat meat, 3. It's human nature, 4. Other answers
- I do not eat meat because –
 1. Meat is murder, 2. It's environmentally friendly, 3. I'm raised to not eat meat, 4. Other answers
- I'm on a LCHF (low carb, high fat) diet. This makes me –
 1. A healthy person, 2. A stupid person, 3. Normal, 4. Other answers
- I'm abstaining from alcohol. This makes me –
 1. A boring person, 2. A wise person, 3. A religious person, 4. Other answers
- Being typically female is to –
 1. Have good grades, 2. Work out, 3. Party and hang out with friends, 4. Other
- Being typically masculine is to –
 1. Have good grades, 2. Work out, 3. Party and hang out with friends, 4. Other
- A person's gender or sex is something –
 1. Constructed by social and cultural norms, 2. Biological and decided by birth, 3. You can choose, 4. Other answers
- A person's sexuality is something –
 1. Constructed by social and cultural norms, 2. Biological and decided by birth, 3. You can choose, 4. Other answers
- Prejudice toward minorities are –
 1. Based on fear, 2. A lack of knowledge, 3. Often true, 4. Other answers
- In the process of shaping and defining myself, I identify mostly with my –
 1. Gender, 2. Sexuality, 3. Race or ethnic background, 4. Other

To conclude, to do this four-corner exercise after finished reading the novel the students will hopefully have a greater knowledge and understanding of identity and the construction of it. This is something that the school should encourage. The *Curriculum for the upper secondary school* states that:

The task of the school is to encourage all students to discover their own uniqueness as individuals and thereby actively participate in the life of society by giving of their best in responsible freedom (Skolverket 4).

The purpose of this theme then is to meet this task and it is a relevant topic since the students are in the process of shaping their identity. The purpose is also to connect how active identity shaping choices, such as being a vegetarian, comes with other characteristics in the contemporary society of today that the students are engaging.

Conclusion

As a fundamental value the *Curriculum for the upper secondary school* states that:

[t]he school should promote understanding of other people and the ability to empathise. No one in school should be subjected to discrimination on the grounds of gender, ethnic affiliation, religion or other belief system, transgender identity or its expression, sexual orientation, age or functional impairment, or to other forms of degrading treatment. All tendencies to discrimination or degrading treatment should be actively combated. Xenophobia and intolerance must be confronted with knowledge, open discussion and active measures (Skolverket 4).

In this essay I have tried to attain this by using the novel *Dead Until Dark* by Charlaine Harris in classroom teaching in upper secondary school. Four different themes in the novel have been analysed; gender, sexuality, race and minorities, and diets connected with identity.

Gender is an important theme in the classroom teaching since it raises awareness about inequalities, prejudices and misconceptions between men and women and how to change or prevent these reoccurring societal patterns. It is even stated in the *Curriculum for the upper secondary school* that teaching should use a gender perspective (Skolverket 4-9). There are gender stereotypes in the novel that uphold inequalities between men and women but there are also evidence of playing with traditional gender roles. All in all, the male characters in the novel are the ones with power and the ones who lack status and respect are the women. This is important to raise awareness about and make the students think critically of in order to use a gender perspective in teaching and to combat discrimination and negative treatment.

Sexuality and sex are always present in vampire narratives and this novel is no exception. The vampire can be seen as an unconscious symbol for sexual repressed energy both from the reader of the text, the author who has written the text and the characters within the narrative. The novel is supposed to tell its story for a heterosexual female reader, nevertheless, the vampire itself can also be seen as a metaphor for homosexuality. Working with this theme in the classroom could be seen as difficult. However, when choosing a theme and a text to work with Jodie A. Kreider and Meghan K. Winchell claim that it is our job as teachers to always look “for new ways to enliven the classroom, engage students in difficult conversations about complicated topics, and spur them to think critically about the text in front of them and the world outside” (5). *The Curriculum for the upper secondary school* also declares that teachers should “openly discuss and together with the students analyse different values, views and problems, and the consequences of these” (Skolverket 11). This means that sexuality and sex, a difficult theme in the classroom or not, is a suitable topic for teaching when openly discussed and analysed in a way to raise knowledge, promote understanding and combating sexual discrimination.

Black people and vampires are minorities in the narrative. To be a minority often comes with fear for the so called “Other”. It is also an issue of segregation and integration. This is something that needs to be confronted with knowledge, open discussions and active measures in school in order to prevent Xenophobia and promote understanding instead. As an active measure this novel could be used in the classroom to attain knowledge and prevent degrading treatment regarding ethnical affiliation and understanding of different cultures.

Identity forming is an on-going process for the students in the upper secondary school and hence a current and relevant topic. Identity is a broad subject and in order for the content to get more easily grasped the students are supposed to think of what choices they can make to shape who they are and how other people consider them, just as the mainstreaming vampires do in the novel. To conclude my findings, the students are supposed to reflect on how gender, sexuality and race, analysed in the novel, shape themselves and their identity. Grzanka suggests that “[b]y first providing content-based knowledge about these dimensions of difference, instructors can then begin the process of helping students to unpack these categories and investigate how they shape their own perspectives on the world around them” (193). This will then attain the fundamental value in school as mentioned above.

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