

MAD, BAD AND DELECTABLE TO KNOW: TRUE BLOOD'S PARANORMAL MEN AND GOTHIC ROMANCE

Ananya Mukherjea

In an essay on the writer Dorothy Allison's contributions to, and revisions of, the genre of Southern Gothic, Peggy Dunn Bailey quotes Allison summing up Southern writing by saying, 'It's the grotesque' (Bailey 2010, 269). Bailey goes on to cite the literary grotesque as functioning as 'a distinctly American, frequently Southern, aspect of the Gothic' (Bailey 2010, 270). A hallmark of American Gothic is the placement of the (moral) monsters amongst the human characters, thus denying the reader the comfort of knowing the horror is not real while allowing for a direct line between the real terror of bleak economic circumstances and sexual predation that might exist in actual towns and the corresponding but fantastic horror depicted on the page. About supernatural horror set in the American South, Bailey writes: 'In contemporary Southern literature, the high visibility and popularity of Gothic texts that feature supernatural characters and events (for example, Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles* and Charlaine Harris's *Southern Vampire* series) have tended to obscure the legacy of the non-supernatural Southern Gothic' (Bailey 2010, 271). I believe Bailey would argue that HBO's *True Blood* does not qualify as Southern Gothic. It does not really fit in the genre of romance fiction either, certainly not as well or seemingly intentionally as would the first volumes of Harris's *Southern Vampire Mysteries*.

True Blood does, however, deal generously in tropes from both the Gothic and the romance genres and is set in a conspicuously Southern landscape. This landscape is meant to evoke all the horror, monstrous and social, of American Gothic: the crumbling mansions and cemeteries, the dim roadside bars and diners, the flashbacks to violence in Sookie's and Tara's childhoods and the dark and dangerous swamps and woods. The series also flirts heavily with the genre of Gothic romance, building mystery, violence and supernatural intrigue around a core of highly sensual emotionality. Further, in the fine tradition of Gothic and romantic fictions and of American Gothic, *True Blood* locates the worst evil in the most mundane characters – beginning with season one's lying, murdering René or sweet but unbalanced Amy – and reveals slowly but certainly that almost no one is who she or he seems to be. It is a slippery and protean text, meant to evoke much although frequently committing to little, and in this dynamic mutability is found much of its appeal and sexiness and the allure of its leading, dangerous, paranormal men.

In Harris's *Southern Vampire Mysteries*, Sookie Stackhouse admits to being an avid reader of romances and mysteries. She also suggests that, although she has relatively little formal education, she has garnered quite a bit of worldly information from her recreational reading. Harris, it seems, is being a little tongue-in-cheek with Sookie's musings on her literary tastes and their effects on her intelligence. Sookie herself, after all, is the star of romance mysteries and, as such, she fulfills a genre type: the plucky heroine, strongly principled but morally open-minded about others' misdeeds, an innocent who is inexperienced but adventurous and avid for new experiences, and, crucially, a woman who is intoxicatingly, sexually appealing (and palatable!) to every romantically significant man, mostly paranormal in this case, that she meets.

While Alan Ball's *True Blood* is a camper, more complicated take on the Gothic romance vehicle, Sookie remains a classically drawn romantic heroine and her vampire (and other) men are heroes of the classically romantic, 'hard-harder-hardest!' type

as well, although only Bill's relationship with Sookie is clearly spelled out in terms of love. In this chapter, I will chiefly consider vampire Bill and vampire Eric, and will touch briefly on shifter Sam, as romantic Gothic heroes.

The Strong, Domineering (Blood-Drinking) Hero

About the typical hero of mass-produced romance fiction, novelist Robyn Donald says:

The strong, domineering hero of the romance novel has long been the subject of criticism. What critics don't realise is that it is the hero's task in the book to present a suitable challenge to the heroine. *His strength is a measure of her power.* For it is she who must conquer him. Every good romance heroine must have a hero who is worthy of her. And in most cases he is a mean, moody, magnificent creature with a curling lip and mocking eyes and an arrogant air of self-assurance – *until he meets the heroine.* She is the only person who can make him forget his natural courtesy, lose his rigidly controlled temper; *when he is faced with her determination to do what she feels is right for her ... brutal though he may be, he never acts in a way which makes her truly fear for her physical safety.* (Donald 1992, 101–2, emphasis mine)

Anne Stuart, author of Gothic romance novels, also explains why she likes to make her typical hero a vampire: 'It's a fantasy that [fulfills] *emotional needs I've never bothered to define... I want more than just a man...* [I want] a creature of light and darkness, good and evil, love and hate. A creature of life and death' (Stuart 1992, 105–6, emphasis mine). Bill Compton and Eric Northman do, of course, far outdo the social dominance of their human counterparts, and they are, most certainly, full of both light and darkness, simultaneously very alive and (un)dead. The chiselled, Adonis-like bodies of Jason Stackhouse

and Lafayette Reynolds do not prevent these men from seeming, respectively, silly or weak next to Bill or Eric. Even Sam, who is supernatural himself and dislikes Bill as a rival for Sookie's attentions, finds himself having erotic dreams about the vampire by the beginning of season three after drinking his blood at the end of the previous season.

The vampires are dominant among their male peers, are thoroughly desirable, and they are riveted by Sookie. *True Blood* offers more of an ensemble cast, with multiple storylines emphasized, than do Harris's books, but it still rotates the story around Sookie's character. She is the focal point, although less emphatically so than in the *Southern Vampire* series, and the men and women around her all react or respond to her and are moved and acted on by her. Her romantic interests, in particular, are significant for their interactions with her at least as much as for their own backstories. Eric's history with Godric, revealed in season two ('I Will Rise Up', 2.9), offers insights into Eric's past vulnerabilities and heroism and culminates in a striking image of Eric bowed, in tears and begging – moving for how strongly this vision cuts against his character's type. However, it still serves, in large part, to advance Sookie's relationship with Eric and as a plot device towards an intensifying intimacy between the two. While Godric is a fascinating character in and of himself, he also provides a humbling and humanizing factor in Eric's character arc. The magnificent, all-powerful Viking is shown to harbour deep emotion and loyalty, shading his masculine dominance with feminine sensitivity, and transforming him from a man who is simply dominant amongst his peers (minimum requirements) to someone who also has the potential to be promoted to romantic hero – although, importantly, still not fully knowable or trustworthy – for Sookie.

This unknowability is crucial for the Gothic romantic hero, whose true nature and intentions remain unclear until his heroine alone forgives, tames and reveals him to be a righteous man. This is a type of character that Deborah Lutz calls the 'dangerous lover'. As she describes him, he is 'the one whose eroticism lies in his dark past, his restless inquietude, his remorseful and

rebellious exile from comfortable everyday living' (Lutz 2006, ix). In *True Blood*, Bill is already warning Sookie of the dangers he poses to her by the second episode ('The First Taste', 1.2), just after she saves him from the Rattrays and as they clearly explore their fascination for each other. While his intentions in this scene are thrown into question two seasons later, he is revealed to be a character as dangerous as he is seductive. He soon becomes fiercely protective of Sookie, to the point of being possessive, but the viewer also knows from his actions with Lorena during flashbacks in season two and while he is held captive in season three, that Bill Compton is capable of gruesome and spectacular violence. Like the transformed Irish American mobster Tom Stall/Joey Cusack, played by Viggo Mortensen in David Cronenberg's American Gothic film, *A History of Violence* (2005, USA/Germany), the viewer is left uncertain as to whether the kinder, gentler man is the result of an inner wish for reform or a convenient path to a less risky existence. These are gothicly beguiling men and their dangerous natures interpenetrate the potential to be, as with Bill, a great romantic hero.

The Grotesque, the Gothic and the Dual Nature of Vampires

In an essay on the abject and the grotesque in Gothic literature, Kelly Hurley cites Bakhtin's understanding that the grotesque 'involves an act of degradation ... Bakhtin associates the grotesque with the human body in all its coarse, clumsy earthiness and changeful mortality' (Hurley 2007, 138). Hurley goes on to say that the concept of the grotesque deals with blurred and indistinguishable 'admixtures' of unlike forms. Hurley writes that Gothic ornamentation of the classical era was seen as violating the laws of nature '[in] its refusal to render individual figures in their distinctness and perfection, and its blurring of the boundaries between types of organism generally' (Hurley 2007, 139–40). The Gothic grotesque, then, might present weird bodies that straddle categories, perhaps

covered with effluent substances that render what should be on the inside of the person onto its outside. George A. Romero's not-dead, not-living, oozing zombies provide one obvious popular culture example. The image of a snarling, gnashing Eric covered in the viscera of the captive V-dealer he has just dismembered ('Nothing But the Blood', 2.1) or of flashback Bill in bed with Lorena and their human victims, awash with blood ('Hard-Hearted Hanna', 2.6) provide other, and perhaps more oddly sympathetic, examples. These are images of the distance between life and death, of the deeply organic nature of the mortal body as it gives itself over to something undead, beyond the natural, and difficult to categorize. Such grotesque images occupy the threshold between what is comical and what is weird and Alan Ball's use of camp heightens the duality of these scenes. Such both-here-and-there images also reflect the dualistic and obscure nature of the Gothic hero. Is he, as in du Maurier's *Rebecca*, a cold-blooded (in the vampire's case, literally so) killer or a tenderly devoted husband or, possibly, is he both, serially or simultaneously?

In *True Blood*, the grotesque is available everywhere, from the scenes that flash along with the theme song in the introduction, documenting decaying road kill and decaying social norms in tandem, to the sequence of a dirt-covered, naked Bill Compton rising out of the earth of the cemetery and directly onto the shocked but willing Sookie Stackhouse. The viewer repeatedly receives the message that such decomposition and recomposition, passage from one state into another, is ever-present and natural. Fairly early in the first season, the viewer is shown how grotesquely vampires can live and kill, with the three nest-sharing vampires who visit Bill and then kill and eat their human companions ('Mine', 1.3), and how grotesquely they die, as when Bill stakes Longshadow ('Plaisir d'Amour', 1.9) or when Amy stakes Eddie ('I Don't Wanna Know', 1.10). Bill Compton, meantime, is hiring electricians and contractors to make the crumbling Compton estate functional and modern again and Eric runs a tight, hierarchical, corporate ship as the vampire sheriff of his area. Bill and Eric are grotesque in

their undead and sometimes amoral vampire nature but highly structured and distinct in their manner of *living*. This is what distinguishes them from the other monsters providing horrific ambiance for the Gothic romance and places them, instead, in contention for the role of hero.

The Byronic Hero and the Hero(ine)'s Journey

Deborah Lutz explains some of the dangerous lover's pervasive appeal as follows:

Our hero tells us that the dangerousness of existence itself must be suffered. The forest is dark and in order to penetrate deeper, one must exile oneself, one must live the Kantian wound – the rupture between interiority and everything exterior. The dangerous lover – the Byronic hero – becomes an emblem of the hero who ventures out into the anguished world in order to find, paradoxically, the self (Lutz 2006, x).

The Byronic hero, then, is a perfect mate for the innocent but adventure-hungry heroine who, typically (and certainly in the case of Sookie), seeks to break beyond the small social circle and realm of experience in which she exists and to discover herself by discovering the world. During the first two seasons, we follow Sookie as she transitions from the waitress who is dismissed by others as crazy, trashy and ditzy as she struggles to suppress her telepathy, to the woman with a marketable, supernatural skill and fighting spirit, who travels to Dallas as a consultant working with Eric. In allying herself with Bill as he tries to mainstream and rebuild something like the life he had to leave after he was made a vampire, Sookie comes into her own and enters into a continuous engagement with the world far beyond her previous knowledge.

Similarly, Abigail E. Myers argues, in an essay positing *Twilight's* Edward Cullen as a Byronic hero, that such a male

love interest allows the female protagonist – whether Bella Swan or Jane Eyre – to go out into the world and to learn what she herself is made of (see Myers 2009). As I suggest above, the dominant, brooding, paranormal hero may draw the eye and serve to highlight the heroine's importance and uniqueness through his interest in her, but her story is the main story and she is the focal point of the narrative. This is significant in respect of the Gothic romance form, a genre that has long been feminized and, concomitantly, has been derided as low-brow and flimsy, famously satirized by Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey* and yielding a lucrative genre of mass-produced paperbacks from the mid-twentieth century on. The Gothic romance, traditionally, tells its story for a heterosexual, female reader who is invited to identify strongly with the heroine. As I have written elsewhere, in the distillation of this model that is frequently reproduced in mass-market Gothic romance novels, the female protagonist has the opportunity to have her dominant lover but also to find the sensitivity and need beneath his hard, muscular surface. She is able to act assertively and self-interestedly towards the end of expanding her own horizons and pleasures but to do so in a legitimately feminine style, through her exploration of romantic love and through seeking to assist her male lover's search for his own redemption (see Mukherjea 2011).

The dominant lover and his attraction to her serve to indicate that she is a more interesting and promising figure than her mousiness/shyness/lack of social standing (depending on the story) may initially imply. His grotesque nature – whether that comprises vampire Bill's blood-tears and lack of brain waves or insinuations of wife-killing tendencies in du Maurier's Maxim de Winter – produces mystery and suspense and raises the question of self-making, of active identity-formation. And that hero's long and painful journey to (re)find himself opens the door for the heroine to venture out and have her own existential trip. In *Rebecca*, the second Mrs de Winter, after learning her husband is a murderer (though a hot-blooded, not cold-blooded, one) and after the destruction of the quasi-mythical Manderley, sums up her own alteration as follows: 'I have lost my diffidence,

my timidity, ... I am very different from that self who drove to Manderley for the first time, hopeful and eager, handicapped by a rather desperate gaucherie. ... How young and inexperienced I must have seemed, and how I felt it, too' (du Maurier 1938, 9–10). Sookie, in the first episode of the series ('Strange Love', 1.1), is shocked by the dirty talk casually exchanged by Lafayette, Dawn and Arlene, babbles nervously to Bill when he first comes into Merlotte's and is intellectually dismissed even by such people as the Rattrays. Two episodes later, Sookie is embarrassed when she wakes from a sexual dream about Bill to find her cat watching her. By the end of season three, however, she is the one with wonderful powers that all the vampires want, she has multiple romantic interests in Bill, Eric and Alcide and she holds significant sway over each of these supernatural men.

In particular, through seasons two and three, the viewer learns more and more about Eric's backstory, motivations and alliances. We witness him at the brink of human death, an extraordinary Viking hero facing his own lingering end stoically; through this flashback, we also learn about his intimacy with and loyalty to his maker, Godric. Season three reveals that Eric feels protective towards Pam, as her maker, but is also intensely committed to avenging the slaughter and robbery of his human family, a mission he has carried for centuries and which he ultimately executes with startling forethought and cruelty, even forsaking Godric's phantom counsel when it interferes with his plan for revenge. And through both seasons, Eric's feelings for Sookie – and the fact that he actually *has* feelings for her – are explored and questioned. Eric's journey – both through the world around him and of his interior self – is a long, dramatic and frenetic one. His character is presented as especially enthralling and particularly confounding, difficult to decipher and potentially impossible to redeem fully, but as Sookie's romantic attentions shift from Bill to Eric and back again, her search to understand and actualize herself gains depth and nuance.

True Blood as Gothic romance offers sensuality, romance, atmosphere and thrills, but it also offers a multi-strand story of characters seeking to make or rehabilitate themselves.

Throughout season three, Bill and Eric seem to swerve madly back-and-forth, striving to protect or avenge their loved ones but also both engaging in acts of increasingly spectacular brutality, regretting past bad actions even as they plot further violence. Sookie, amidst all this, cannot figure out whom she should trust, but her path is more open. While she is unsure how to achieve it, her goal of living a simpler, more peaceful life seems clear; at the end of the season, because of the chaos brought to her by her vampire men, because of the wild journey she has been through with them, she makes a choice to leave the world she knows altogether in search of her true kin ('Evil Is Going On', 3.12).

Sookie's, Bill's and Eric's stories are the ones presented most compellingly to us throughout the series, but viewers watch almost all the regular characters set off on similar, convoluted paths. Let me briefly consider Sam's trajectory as an unexpectedly, incompletely Gothic hero and his early role as a lonesome man carrying a torch for Sookie. Sam is initially presented as the good-guy, brother-like loser to Bill's brooding leading man. He has long loved Sookie from afar, but his only date with her ends awkwardly and abortively. Sam finds sexual consolation with Tara, but she makes a habit of leaving him before he wakes, refusing to talk about their dalliances after the fact. Season one slowly reveals Sam's dark secret and lonely history, but it is in the following two seasons that the viewer begins to learn how dark Sam's history, like his temper, has been. Visually smaller and lighter compared to Bill and Eric, Sam's parallel capacity for violence and regret for past violent acts gradually emerge until the finale to season three ('Evil Is Going On') suggests that he is still a deeply disturbed man and possibly a hot-headed killer.

Sam presents a Gothic foil to the characters of Bill and Eric in the first three seasons. He is supernatural, but he is mortal, so his story is, quite simply, shorter than those of the vampires. Sam's charms are sometimes tempting and comforting for Sookie, but they are insufficient to hold her attention for long. Sam also succeeds, to a significant extent, in presenting himself as one of the everyday folk, a hub of the prosaic little community in which he lives humbly. That prosaic little community, however,

is rendered lurid and grotesque in *True Blood* and Sam's own grotesque nature and lurid history are served up for inspection in dribs and drabs. The women he sleeps with are less innocent than damaged. Sam is *almost* a Gothic hero in the landscape of *True Blood*, but he functions primarily as a counterpoint to the Gothic vampires.

Conclusion

I have tried, in this chapter, to show how *True Blood* fits within the tradition of Gothic romance and, as well, to highlight how it overlaps with the American, in particular Southern, Gothic. I argue that the series draws from traditional tropes and images of American Gothic and, specifically, Southern Gothic: the crumbling mansions and cemeteries, the insidious and frightening secrets found within the family or small town, rather than brought in by an exotic stranger, the intimations of child abuse that Tara's and Sookie's family histories present, and the isolating and constraining nature of one's over-small, over-tight community. These elements would be equally at home in the novels of William Faulkner or Stephen King. Sookie, too, is a Southern Gothic character, an oddball with a dark past, a strange ability, a 'trashy' family (to use a highly problematic but common term) and a deep yearning to know more of the world. Her perspective on her life at the beginning of the series is not so different from how Faulkner's Jewel Bundren sees his own life in *As I Lay Dying*. Beyond Sookie's characterization and the American Gothic elements of setting, however, *True Blood* presents Gothic romantic heroes more in the style of men from twentieth-century Gothic romance genre novels or their predecessors in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English Gothic fiction.

As an example of Gothic romance, the female protagonist's character evolves and grows in a kind of dance with the journeys that the Gothic heroes take, alternately gravitating towards them and fleeing to elude them. The Gothic romance model is an

effective way of presenting an active, restless, inquisitive female character who tests the tensions and risks inherent in real, heterosexual partnerships but, at the same time, to retain her within the bounds of legitimate femininity and moral rightness. In part, this is achieved through offering her story against the relief of a bad girl's story: in the *Southern Vampire* books, Tara is a kind of lost loser and in *True Blood*, she is smart and active but grating, damaged and abused. This is also achieved by linking Sookie's explorations with her search for romantic love, by offering her the Gothic heroes as instigators for or guides to her adventures.

However, *True Blood* deftly chooses key aspects of American Gothic setting and characterization together with facets of Gothic romance in developing its narrative and pacing and weaves these with styles from other genres, including supernatural horror and crime fiction, in producing a series that does not fit neatly into any one category. The Southern Gothic elements in *True Blood* function to give the story moral heft, allowing it to pose tricky questions of existence and evil alongside the vivid sex and violence. It also extracts the show from a format 'for heterosexual women only', garnering a wider audience and more serious, critical consideration than more typical Gothic romances or genre television generally would. It comprises a delicate balance of compromises, styles and literary lineages, but *True Blood* provides another example of the enduring appeal of Gothic narrative in all its forms.

Bibliography

- Austen, Jane. [1817] 1998. *Northanger Abbey*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bailey, Peggy Dunn. 2010. 'Female Gothic Fiction, Grotesque Realities, and *Bastard Out of Carolina*: Dorothy Allison Revises the Southern Gothic.' *Mississippi Quarterly* 63.1/2: 269–90.
- Donald, Robyn. 1992. 'Mean, Moody, and Magificent: The Hero in Romance Literature.' In *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance*, ed. Jayne Ann Krentz. New York: Harper Collins.

- du Maurier, Daphne. [1938] 1971. *Rebecca*. New York: Avon Books.
- Faulkner, William. 1957. *As I Lay Dying*. New York: Vintage.
- Hurley, Kelly. 2007. 'Abject and Grotesque.' In *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, ed. Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy. New York: Routledge.
- Lutz, Deborah. 2006. *The Dangerous Lover: Gothic Villains, Byronism, and the Nineteenth-Century Seduction Narrative*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press.
- Mukherjea, Ananya. 2011. 'My Vampire Boyfriend: Postfeminism, "Perfect" Masculinity, and the Contemporary Appeal of Paranormal Romance.' *Studies in Popular Culture* 33.2: 1–20.
- Myers, Abigail E. 2009. 'Edward Cullen and Bella Swan: Byronic and Feminist Heroes ... or Not.' In *Twilight and Philosophy: Vampires, Vegetarians, and the Pursuit of Immortality*, ed. Rebecca Housel and J. Heremy Wisniewski. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.
- Stuart, Anne. 1992. 'Legends of Seductive Elegance.' In *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance*, ed. Jayne Ann Krentz. New York: Harper Collins.