



Presentation of an Argument:

“vampire scares in America were due to the lack of understanding of disease and death.”

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Sources:

“The Great New England Vampire Scare”
 by Apigail Tucker, Smithsonian Magazine. (This mentions author **Michael E. Bell**, expert on NE vamps.)

“The Life of a Vampire Hunter Isn’t as Sexy as You Might Imagine” by Randall Beach, New Haven Register.

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Bell’s research found:

- Many rural New Englanders believed that vampires stalked their towns.
- This belief occurred long before the novel Dracula was written by Bram Stoker in 1897.

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Mercy Lena Brown

- 19-year-old farm girl.
- Ran household after mom’s death.
- Talented seamstress.
- **And one of the last known vampire cases in New England.**



Mercy Brown’s grave is so popular her headstone has been stolen several times. Metal straps now hold it in place.
 (Source: thefairytaletraveler.com)

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Her story made headlines.

- When it came to news media, **Mercy Lena Brown** was the **Miley Cyrus of vampires**.
- Newspaper reporters covered what happened to her and her family.
- A well known anthropologist did, too.



Miley's vampire-like grin.
(Source: theroot.com)

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Did Mercy Brown's story influence Bram Stoker?

- An 1896 newspaper story from the New York World about her was found in Stoker's papers.
- Dracula was published only a year later, so some Stoker experts disagree on the newspaper story's significance.

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But let's look at names:

- We call her Mercy Brown; but her family called her Lena.
- Lena + Mercy = Leroy. (Say this quickly and it sounds like "Lucy.")
- Mercy + Lena = Mena (Say this quickly and it sounds like "Mina.")
- Two main female characters in Stoker's Dracula: **Lucy and Mina**.

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What happened to Mercy Brown?

- She lived in Exeter, Rhode Island, a small town decimated by the Civil War.
- Farming difficult due to rocky soil. The few young men left in town were leaving to find better life out West.
- By late 19th Century, sections of town were abandoned.
- By year Mercy died, 1,000 people left.

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Consumption, or TB, took its toll.

- By 1800s, consumption caused one-fourth of all deaths in the Northeast.
- Its name described its symptoms:
- **Fever, hacking, bloody cough, and body wasting away as if consumed.**



An ad for a cure in Feb. 27, 1873 edition of The Evening Standard in Lawrence, Kan. (Source: theoldtimes.com)

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As Bell describes it:

- “You cough up blood. Your family sees the blood at the corners of your mouth. They say, **‘Oh my God, somebody is sucking the blood out.’**”



Consumption, or tuberculosis, also was known as “the white plague” for the pallor its victims experienced from the illness. (Source: ghostsofcamell.ca)

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What happened to the Browns?

- First victim was **Mercy’s mom, Mary Eliza.**
- **Mary Olive, Mercy’s sister,** died at age 20. A popular dressmaker, the town came to the funeral.
- **Mercy’s brother, Edwin,** became ill. He left for Colorado Springs resort to find a cure.
- **Mercy became ill 10 years later.** As she was dying in 1892, Edwin returned home.

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The neighbors had an idea.

- After Mercy died, a group of Exeter residents approached George Brown, the children’s father. They told him:
- **Edwin was dying because one of the three women in the family was a vampire who was sucking the blood out of him.**
- George Brown did not believe in vampires, but he gave permission for his wife and two daughters to be dug up and their bodies examined. (He may have done this to live with his neighbors; he did not die from TB until 1922.)

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What happened to Mercy's body?

- Brown did not attend the exhumation, but the family doctor did.
- After 10 years, there were few remains of Mercy's mom and sister; but Mercy had been dead a short-time. **It was winter, and her body was well-preserved.**
- Her heart and liver were removed. **Blood was found inside her heart, "proof" she had been feeding on others.** The doctor argued her lungs showed signs of tuberculosis to no avail.

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The group took no chances.

- They burned Mercy's heart and liver on a nearby rock.
- **They fed the ashes to Edwin, thinking this would cure him.**
- Edwin died within two months.

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Mercy was one of 80 suspected cases of vampires in New England.

- Bodies would be dug up and body parts destroyed in various ways.
- **Corpses could be staked and sometimes beheaded.**
- In Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Vermont, **the body's ribs would be broken so the heart could be removed and burned.**

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What possessed level-headed farmers to do this in New England?

- **My argument will show that based on the limited medical knowledge rural residents had at this time, and based upon the devastating symptoms of consumption, the existence of vampires was a logical conclusion.**

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Main ideas, or premises, in these articles:

- Vampire panics had occurred in 18th-century Europe in Slavic Countries. Immigrants brought vampire superstitions with them to America.
- TB was identified as a disease in 1892, but news of its discovery wasn't well known in rural areas. (Drug treatments for TB only began in the 1940s.)

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Main ideas or premises:

What was known about consumption often was the result of misinformation, even among doctors:

- Sometimes consumption was blamed on drunkenness or poverty.
- Consumption or TB was the leading cause of death at the time.

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Main ideas or premises:

Symptoms of consumption echoed vampire superstitions:

- Blood from hacking cough on mouth looked like person had been drinking blood, much like a vampire.
- After death, body bloats with gases. Bloating appearance looks like body had feasted upon someone else.
- Body bloated with gas makes an eerie sound like a human scream if you drive a stake through it.
- Contagious illness supported belief in vampires: Sickness created more sickness and death created more death.

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On the plus side, vampire scares did bring communities together. 😊

- Desperate with fear, they tried anything to protect their families.
- Now beheading granny or cutting out her heart may seem like a strange way to show unconditional love, but it did prove to the community that the family cared.

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My argument's flaw or weakness:

- Digging up bodies and desecrating them is a sin. Many New Englanders were Puritans who would never agree to this. **(This is my counter-argument or opposing idea.)**
- This would be a stronger argument for New Englanders who lived in cities and attended church, but only 10 percent of rural residents were church members **(This, and facts below, show the weakness of my counter-argument.)**
- Rhode Island was founded as a place for religious dissent. Many were anti-organized religion. **Superstition took religion's place.** (Ex: upside-down horseshoes above doors; daisy wheel, a hex sign, carved into doors; and buried shoes near hearth so they could catch the Devil if he came down the chimney.)

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Conclusion:

- **Based upon immigrant superstitions, vampire panics in rural New England were triggered by farmers' lack of knowledge of disease and death.**
- **Exhuming bodies and desecrating them was a desperate attempt by dying communities to protect loved ones from an illness they did not understand.**

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Does my argument work based on the five steps?

- **Step 1:** I found premises and conclusions in the article and I cite these.
- **Step 2:** Is the argument understandable? Is it fair? (I have included a counter-argument about religion and then showed the weakness in that counter-argument.)
- **Step 3:** Check the logic. Have I missed steps?
- **Step 4:** Are the facts accurate? Any facts left out?
- **Step 5:** If the argument is clear, omits nothing significant, is logical with true premises, it is a sound argument.

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One final thought about Mercy Brown:

- She is buried between her brother, who ate the ashes of her heart, and her father, who let this horrible act occur.
- But today, George and Edwin Brown are forgotten.
- **Tourists visit Mercy's grave instead.**



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