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The Vampire Returns to Britain
Considering the Images of Vampires, Werewolves
and Ghosts in BBC's Being Human

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HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

The Vampire Returns to Britain: Considering the Images of Vampires, Werewolves and Ghosts in BBC's *Being Human*

Terry Gunnell

We tend to look at the belief world of the past as being something that was very different to our own. Those who told the folk legends and wonder tales which were so avidly collected in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are similarly often seen as uneducated innocents who believed in a supernatural world that we know better than to be drawn to accept. As educated beings who have studied physics and chemistry, we tend to call spades “spades”, and ghosts “figments of our imagination”. In a similar way, we tend to look at the world in which legends used to be told in front of the farmhouse fire as part of communal *ceilidhs* and *kvöldvökur* (evening wakes) as being something that belonged to the past. What we often somewhat arrogantly forget is that our personal needs for wonder, mystery, suspense and good entertainment are as strong as those of our forefathers (if not stronger considering the hours that we work); and that as the poster on the wall of Fox Mulder, hero of *The X-Files* (Fox: 1993-2002) so succinctly pointed out, we all seem to have a great desire to believe (see http://x-files.wikia.com/wiki/%22I_Want_to_Believe%22_poster, retrieved 22 August 2014). This desire for the supernatural is something that can be seen in the enduring popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* and *Game of Thrones* books, films and television series; in the number of foreign journalists that regularly visit me to enquire excitedly about Icelandic beliefs in so-called “elves” (*huldufólk* and *álfar*); and not least in the ever-increasing numbers of films and television programmes over the last decade that have dealt with ghosts, vampires, werewolves, and, unfortunately, zombies. One such television series (*Being Human*) will be dealt with in the following article, which will consider the series first and foremost in the context of folk legends past and present, and the ways in which folk legends (rural and urban, old and new, on screen and off) always tend to work in the context of their environment and their audience’s cultural vocabulary.

Many might argue that television series and folk legends are totally different forms and thus incomparable. A television programme is visual, unchangeable and created by a team for mass, simultaneous reception; whereas the folk legends of the past (in their extant form) take the shape of written texts that we read alone in silence. In their original form, however, the legends now found in the folktale collections were received in a very different fashion. They were told in communal situations, often in the liminal space of the evenings, in between work and sleep, light and darkness. The storytellers telling them were observed in living contexts, often acting roles as they went along. In their rhetoric, as Elliott Oring has noted (Oring, 2008), the storytellers went out of their way to underline the believability of what they are talking about, firmly connecting their accounts to a society that everyone knew, to people they had met, and places where they had walked. Their stories subsequently subtly changed the ways in which people saw and experienced their environment, adding new levels of historical depth, mystery and uncertainty, while simultaneously drawing on, playing off and strengthening the belief systems the audiences had grown up with (Gunnell 2005, 2006, & 2009a).

In most countries, and in Iceland more deliberately than others, the radio took over from these communal evening gatherings which commonly offered a mixture of

news, rumour, mystery, music, and drama. The radio then went on to be replaced by television. 150 years later, we sit together in our lounges in the liminal spaces of the evenings in between work and sleep, light and darkness, watching other stories being enacted for us which contain similar motifs, similar structures, similar worldviews and, when it comes down to it, similar functions. The television news including a presidential address is followed by another equally believable presidential address on *West Wing* (NBC: 1999-2006); images of 9/11 are followed by images of Bruce Willis in *Die Hard* (1998); and accounts of illegal aliens appearing on our shores are succeeded by accounts of aliens taking over our bodies. When it comes down to it, things have not really changed that much, and “reality” is not that much more certain than it was for our great grandparents, who would have scoffed at the apparently uneducated, naïve worldview of their predecessors just as we do at theirs.

There is little question that the artistic creators of the modern television series dealing with the supernatural do not necessarily believe in the worlds they describe as some of the legend tellers did. This, however, does not detract from the fact that they, like the earlier storyteller-performers, deliberately make use of shared belief systems and shared environments for their stories, regularly borrowing and adapting motifs and scenes which are drawn not only from the modern oral tradition but also a *range* of other available recognisable sources, both oral and written, all of which are used to make their accounts more gripping and believable, however supernatural they may be.

As with *The Lord of the Rings*, *Game of Thrones* and modern urban legends (Brunvand, 1981, 1984, 1986, 1989 and 1993; af Klintberg, 1986, 1994, 2005; Smith, 1983, 1986; Rakeł Pálsdóttir, 2001; Dale, 2005; Gunnell, 2009b), many of these modern television series and films also display both deliberate and inadvertent connections with the folk legends and beliefs of earlier times, suggesting that what we are observing can also be seen as a development rather than a mere reflection of the earlier narrative and belief traditions of the western world (Koven, 2008). This applies particularly well to *Being Human* (2011), which will be examined here, which directly and deliberately plays off motifs which have roots in earlier classical legendary which reaches back into the Middle Ages, if not earlier (Simpson & Roud, 2000; Baring-Gould, 2006; de Blécourt 2005 on werewolves and vampires both of which go back to the thirteenth century; af Klintberg, 2008). At the same time, watchers are never allowed to forget that this is a 21st-century series, which has evolved against the background of 21st-century urban storytelling, in which potential levels of intertextuality have grown ever more complicated, modern narrative “traditions” now drawing not only on the living oral legends heard in the city pub or classroom, but also the older published classical collections of legends we have all read and enjoyed, as well as the novels that have been based upon these legends, the films that have been subsequently based on these novels, and the television series that have sprung from these films, as well as the websites and blogs which have grown up around them. The range of narratives that we daily encounter, as compared with those of the past, is vast, multifarious and interconnected.

Being Human (2011) was the brainchild of scriptwriter Toby Whithouse. After a successful pilot in 2008, interestingly enough, in the same year that saw the beginning of the *True Blood* series [HBO: 2008-, now into a seventh series based on Charlaine Harris’ *Southern Vampire Mysteries*] and the *Twilight* films [three films, based on novels by Stephanie Meyers], *Being Human* came to involve a total of five television series which were shown on BBC 3, a digital channel aimed primarily at the teens and twenties, between 2009 and 2013. The first three series, which I will be concentrating on here fetched British audiences of more than a million, before going on to become a cult hit in other countries. They were later remade less effectively and in more exaggerated form for American audiences (Syfy: 2011-2014).

The background of the *Being Human* series needs to be borne in mind when we consider the format it came to take and its international success. In various interviews, Whithouse has said he was originally asked by the BBC to write yet another comic series about a “group of college students” sharing a house, a tried, but now somewhat unoriginal motif with roots in earlier comedies like *Rising Damp* (Yorkshire Television: 1974-1978), *The Young Ones* (BBC 2: 1982-1984), and of course, more recently, *Friends* (NBC: 1994-2004). Frustrated at the unoriginality of the idea, Whithouse suddenly decided that his household, which had reached the stage of containing a “recovering sex-addict”, a female “borderline agoraphobic”, and a “punctilious house-proud anal character” with anger issues (McWeeny 2010; Martin 2010), should become a young vampire, a ghost and a werewolf living in a messy corner flat in working-class Bristol. To make things ever more complicated, the Northern Irish vampire, John Mitchell, played by Aiden Turner was trying to de-toxify himself from his addiction to blood; the love-lorn ghost, Annie Sawyer (played by Lenora Chichlow) was obsessed with making cups of tea she could not drink, and refusing to go through death’s door (which is literal in the series); and the Jewish werewolf, George Sands (played by Russell Tovey), was trying to juggle his “time of the month” with holding down both a job and a new girlfriend.

This choice of figures immediately moved the series into the field of direct fantasy and folkloric reference, including the obvious E 251 (Vampire) and D 113.1.1. (Werewolf) folk-tale motifs (Thompson, 1955-1958); the ML 4005 (*The Werewolf Husband*) migratory-legend type (Christiansen, 1958); and the numerous legends involving ghosts of the *Wuthering Heights*-kind that are held in this world because of love (see, for example, motif E215: Lenore). While the vampires of *Being Human* do not dress up in capes, sleep in coffins or sprout batwings, and are little bothered by garlic or the crosses that used to frustrate their forebears, they do wear black, do need sunglasses in sunlight, and desperately need ideally fresh, good quality blood (blood type A positive being seen as the equivalent of a Jacob’s Creek wine from the viewpoint of the discerning specialist: *Being Human*: Series 1: Episode 1). Their teeth also grow and their eyes go black when they get excited, and stakes and beheading remain an effective means of putting an end to them. Werewolves have the same problems related to the full moon as usual, but in the series have learnt to limit their danger to others (and their own embarrassment) by taking de-frosted chickens and some spare clothes out with them. The ghosts of *Being Human* also draw strongly on tradition, in that they are able to flit between rooms and throw objects about if they have tantrums (for example, if they encounter their ex-lovers meeting someone else). They nonetheless get a little bored of always having to wear the same clothes.

As is already apparent from the above, in addition to drawing on long-standing legendary motifs from folklore, the series also builds on numerous new connections with popular literature, starting with the vampire’s Irishness (Bram Stoker [1847-1912] who wrote *Dracula* was Irish), and the werewolf’s name (the French author George Sand [1804-1876] was in fact a woman writing under a man’s name). With regard to film and television narratives, deliberate references are made by characters not only to *Dracula* (1931), *Interview with the Vampire* (1994), and *An American Werewolf in London* (1981), but also popular teen-TV series, like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB: 1997-2003). The difference is that the characters in *Being Human*, somewhat like Louis and Lestat in Anne Rice’s *Vampire Chronicle* novels (1976-2014), actually watch *Buffy*, *Dracula*, *West Wing* and *The Wolfman* for fun, and are well aware that these programmes and films are nothing more than fantasy representations. These entities belong to fiction, whereas “this” (that is the world of *Being Human*) is reality, albeit, as one character notes, a new kind of reality (George: “You have to understand the reality we inhabit now”: *Being Human*: Series 2, Episode 2).

Searching out borrowings and echoes and tracing a historical-geographic timeline for the series (of the kind that has often been used for folk legends and wonder tales) is mildly entertaining, but in following pages I would like to concentrate more on the way in which the series works with and on belief in a similar way to earlier folk legends past and present, and also the ways in which it builds on its oral predecessors, taking them into new territories. While the programmes may not be short and mono-episodic like most folk legends, there is good reason to argue that they meet Timothy Tangherlini's definition of the folk legend as:

a short (mono-)episodic, traditional, highly ecotypified historicized narrative performed in a conversational mode, reflecting on a psychological level a symbolic representation of folk belief and collective experiences and serving as a reaffirmation of commonly held values of the group to whose tradition it belongs (Tangherlini, 1990: 385).

It should be underlined immediately that *Being Human* is not as interested in story and fantasy as it is in characters, relationships and modern day society. This results in the series being first and foremost about very ordinary-looking unintentional young outsiders living in the United Kingdom in Bristol (and later Cardiff) who are desperate to fit into a world that is not the most attractive of places for anyone to want to inhabit. Like folk legends, the series works hard to underline the trustworthy reality of the outside world in which the house is situated, which is far from eighteenth-century New Orleans (*Interview with the Vampire*), Bon Temps Louisiana (*True Blood*), and Sunnyvale California (*Buffy*). The setting is no liminal high-school, or cut-off township, but rather a very lowly area of densely-populated urban Bristol. The people one observes in the series are also very recognizable and very ordinary. They drink beer in shoddy pubs, walk dogs, and try to avoid the rain. They also vomit on hospital floors, and while they are open to the prospect of ghosts, they certainly do not believe in vampires or werewolves, which, as noted above, are seen as belonging essentially to the fantasy world of films and television. This is a world of addicts, potential pedophiles, gangs, terrorists and political fanatics. When it comes down to it, it is clear from the series that the set of outsiders in the house who are trying to fit in, and live a "normal" life are not really so different to the other outsiders that inhabit the world we all know. Like the rest of us, none of the main characters asked for their present afflictions. They draw our sympathy.

Believability in the series and the characters involved is helped still further by the fact that the Britain of the series is also a world of Goths, maskers and role-players. As anyone who has ever spent any time in England in recent years knows, English city streets in the evenings (especially in university towns) are full of potential vampires, werewolves and other legendary monsters (related to stag, hen, or fancy-dress parties, or simply cult fashion). Mitchell, the vampire in *Being Human*, even finds himself being called a "Goth" at one point. On another occasion, he tries to explain to a doctor why a man has been found with fang marks on his neck:

I've heard they found a lot of occult stuff in the guy's house. Chances are it could turn out to be a fetish thing. Oh, come on, you know those people. They work in IT but at the weekends they put on frilly shirts and make out they're in a vampire novel. The fellas pretend to be Dracula, and the women all have heaving breasts under their nighties. And then they get changed and it's back in the Ford Focus (*Being Human*: Series 2, Episode 2).

In short, in *Being Human*, the endless cups-of-tea, bowls of cereal, mops and plumbing problems that mark out the characters' lives effectively serve to nail the series to the day to day and the down to earth, dragging the series away from the

fantastic and fictional into the present that we all inhabit, simultaneously allowing it effectively to swing by the moment from tragedy to comedy to horror to sentiment to tragicomedy and heart-break (tragic feelings only being involved when we believe in what we see, and can identify). This is not least because, as with legends, the reality of the surroundings in the series encourages audiences to believe (at least momentarily) in the reality of its legendary figures. This is perhaps helped by the fact that the types of legendary figures that Whithouse chose to use for his series already have an urban background in our cultural imagination: Bram Stoker's *Dracula* also walked the streets of London and Whitby, while movie werewolves and their likes (like Stevenson's Dr Jekyll) have long lurked in the alleyways of London, Paris and Edinburgh. It is noteworthy that the series carefully avoids the elves, witches, selkies and leprechauns of the old folk lore collections (and *True Blood*), although it does momentarily (and arguably mistakenly) get lured into the modern realm of the zombie for one episode (Series 3, Episode 1). One also notes that the werewolf of the series has Dutch gnomes on his fading wallpaper (which suggests they belong to the realm of fantasy).

Essentially, as noted above, the series concentrates on the psychological difficulties involved in suddenly finding yourself different to most other people, and in having to fight baser instincts. As much as anything else, the series is not so much about vampires and werewolves as it is about AIDS, addiction, homosexuality, racism, political extremism and terrorism, elements which feed the newer forms of (often prejudicial) folk belief that have come to haunt the lives of modern western city dwellers, preventing them from letting their children play outside on the streets (where they might be kidnapped). One could argue that the beliefs that feed these fears are the equivalents of the plagues, droughts, starvation, classes and religious persecution that haunted the lives of the rural people of the past and helped to shape their folk narratives. As with the earlier legends, the use of the folkloric motifs as a means of discussing other deeper problems that lie behind the stories adds an attractive element of nostalgia and fantasy. These sugar the pill, while simultaneously raising questions about whether the apparent reality that we perceive can be trusted any more than the inhabitants of Orwell's *1984* could trust their environment, media or history (Orwell, 1984). In a sense, as with the appearance of the Ghost of Hamlet's father in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1968, 51) which puts time "out of joint" (III, v), or other popular series which draw on the news like the *X-Files*, the day-to-day realism of the setting of *Being Human* and the lives of its characters weakens our scientific self-confidence that there really is nothing out there beyond what Horatio dreamt of in his philosophies (Shakespeare, 1968: *Hamlet*, V, iii, 166-167).

In their quest to instil uncertainty (albeit temporarily), series like *Being Human* are aided by newspapers and news programmes (along with the constant stream of realistic murder mysteries and thrillers shown on the television sets in our lounges alongside programmes like *Being Human*) which constantly remind us that daily people disappear without trace from large urban cities, that strange hospital deaths are on the increase, and that groups of terrorists, like much the organised vampire villains of *Being Human*, are at this moment meeting in rooms to plan our extermination. They might even be next door. We have all witnessed how people can take on sudden transformations as a result of strokes, drugs, alcohol, bi-polar disorders or simply because they are pregnant or (like the werewolves of the series) at "that time of the month". Similarly politicians, policemen, media-moguls and bankers have all been shown to have their own agendas that do not necessarily involve our personal good, something that applies particularly to the last five or six years. It is noteworthy that the recent wave of films and series about parasitic vampires feeding off society at large began in earnest in 2008.

The juxtaposed background reality and applied folklore of the series also works in another fashion. As noted above, though, alongside the darkness of the *Being Human*

series, there is also a great deal of humour which has encouraged some writers to class it wrongly as a comedy. Here too, as with the shared cultural vocabulary the series taps into for its horror, the audience and their expectations and knowledge play an intrinsic role in helping the comic moments to work. These are especially important as a means of creating the central element of what Arthur Koestler calls “bisociation” (Koestler, 1969), whereby laughter comes about as a response to seeing two conflicting understandings of something at one time, and not least when an air of tension has previously been established, meaning that the course of events cannot be predicted. Much of the art of the comedy of *Being Human* evolves from playing the associations of simple legendary beliefs that we all know against the more complex realities of the day to day. Perfect examples of how this works can be seen in the scenes depicting the difficulties of a werewolf desperately trying to find somewhere private to undergo transformation in a modern local forest which is now full of dirty old men, campers, gay pairs, and Tai Chi exercisers. (As George mutters: “Haven’t you people got homes?”: *Being Human*: Series 1, Episode 1). Other examples involving a similar juxtaposition are seen in the ghost attempting to learn to be scary in front of a mirror; in the vampire trying to explain why his relationships have tended to be “rather short-lived”, and the following scenes, all of which play off audience expectations (based on the folk traditions they have been brought up with):

George (about the ghost in his house): “Why is she here anyway? Other people move in somewhere, they have damp, they have woodlice. Why do we get Casper the Friendly Ghost?” (*Being Human*: Series 1, Episode 1)

Nina: “It’s a lot to take in. Werewolves, ghosts, vampires. I didn’t believe in homeopathy before this.” (*Being Human*: Series 2, Episode 1)

Girl vampire: “A lot of vampires, it’s all about the blood and world domination. We’re just about the tourism.” (*Being Human*: Series 2, Episode 1)

George: “Someone actually recruited an old woman?”

Herrick: “Well, you know how it is. You’re out and about, you get the munchies, you’ll eat anything.” (*Being Human*: Series 1, Episode 6.)

Mitchell: “I can’t believe he’s never heard of Laurel and Hardy! Immortality makes me feel so *old*.” (*Being Human*: Series 1, Episode 1.)

George (trying to explain to a priest why his services might not be very beneficial for him and his vampire friend (who has been wounded): “I’m Jewish. He’s complicated.” (*Being Human*: Series 1, Episode 6.)

To my mind, the quote effectively sums up the art of *Being Human*, and not least its humour and the way in which it feeds off the modern folklore, multifarious narratives,

and culture of its audience, simultaneously encouraging old and new folk beliefs as well as conspiracy theories. Mitchell has just suggested that all vampires should come out of the closet. Another vampire called Ivan answers:

What, are you imagining some kind of peaceful co-existence? It'd be chaos! Worldwide panic. Good news for religion, mind, especially Christianity. There'd be standing room only in the churches all of a sudden. And as soon as they knew about vampires, they'd know about werewolves, they'd know about ghosts. They'd be next. And when humanity had finally finished with us, it would turn on itself. First the other religions, massively in the minority now, then the homosexuals, the disabled... Do you want to know what the future looks like? Enforced worship in churches a *mile* high, and every country surrounded by a coral reef of bones. But fuck it, maybe it should happen – there's nothing on TV at the moment. (*Being Human*: Series 2, Episode 1.)

The humour in question is very British. However the quote also underlines what has been said above about blurred lines and the grey area between religion, politics, the media and popular belief that modern folk legends inhabit in a post-crash world of distrust and fear in which earlier certainties and the realities that people used to trust no longer exist. The quote also emphasises in no uncertain terms that the return of the vampire to people's lounges and bedrooms in Britain (and elsewhere where the series has been seen) does not so much represent a nostalgic longing for fantasy as an attempt to understand and express the sense of isolation and longing for identity and belonging that is felt by many young people in modern cities. In a sense, one can argue that much like the folk legends of earlier times, television series of this kind serve as a means of giving shape to the uncertain shadows that swarm around us in our daily lives.

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