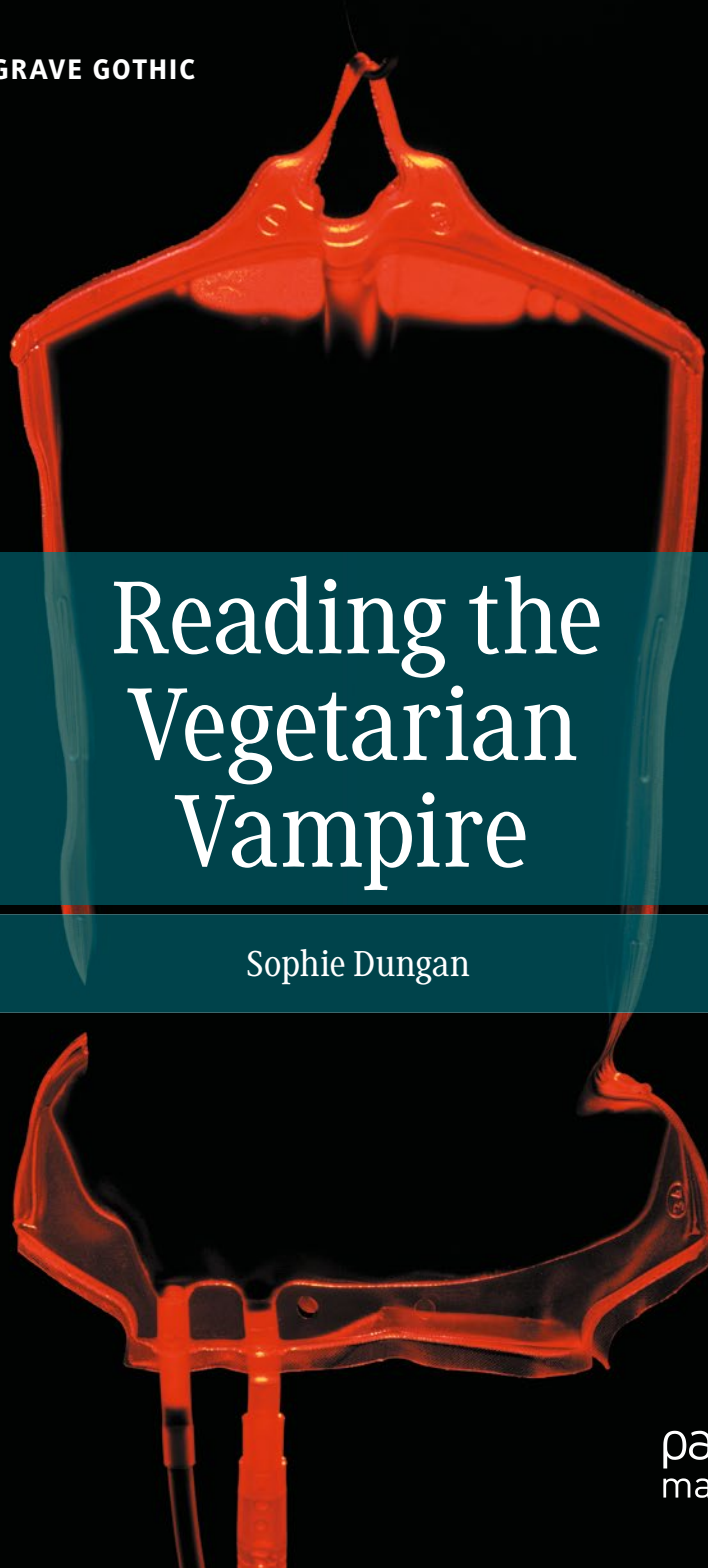




PALGRAVE GOTHIC



# Reading the Vegetarian Vampire

Sophie Dungan

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Sophie Dungan

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*For Oskar.*

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## Introduction: Vampires and Vegetarians

**Abstract** The vampire of folklore, like its offspring in cinematic and literary productions and popular culture, is an undead creature of the night who drinks, by preference, human blood to survive. However, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the vampire's diet was redefined by the emergence, in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* (2005), of the so-called 'vegetarian' vampire, who abstains from consuming human blood. The 'vegetarian' vampire chooses to slake its thirst with animal or synthetic blood and/or to access human blood in ways that do not harm the human from which it is drawn. This introductory chapter considers the emergence of the vegetarian vampire and provides a brief review of the scholarship on the vampire's changing diet, as well as explaining the focus and organisation of the rest of the volume.

**Keywords** Vegetarianism • Vampires • *Twilight* • Animal-blood diet • Anthropocene

As Mary Pharr states in *The Blood Is the Life: Vampires in Literature*, hunger, or rather thirst, is ‘the linchpin of [the vampire’s] undead existence’ (93), and what a vampire thirsts for, by preference, is human blood.<sup>1</sup> The vampire’s thirst for human blood is long-standing, reported in folklore (Summers, *Vampire in Europe* 117, 218–19, 288–89), speculative histories (Summers, *Vampires and Vampirism* 1–77) and etymologies (Cooper; Summers, *Vampires and Vampirism* 19), and even clinical psychology (Dundes 19). For contemporary readers and audiences, the vampire’s predilection for human blood is most commonly affirmed through the array of literary and cinematic vampires whose lust for human blood is their most pervasive and enduring trait.

However, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the vampire’s diet was redefined by the emergence, in Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* (2005), of the so-called ‘vegetarian’ vampire.<sup>2</sup> The term ‘vegetarian’ is used here as a descriptor for vampires who choose to abstain from drinking human blood. Instead, these vampires (the Cullens) consume animal blood, opting for deer, mountain lions, grizzly bears and the like to slake their thirst. To be a vegetarian vampire, in Meyer’s sense of the term, is to feed on animal rather than human blood. In *Twilight*, this label is treated as something of a ‘joke’ (164). As the Cullens are aware, their particular brand of vegetarianism is the ‘very antithesis of [vegetarianism’s] actual meaning’ (Wright 54). Unlike vegetarians of the usual (human) variety, the Cullens kill and consume the blood of animals to survive. However, when the Cullens (and Meyer) use the term, they mean that a diet of animals, and not human blood, is comparable or analogous to a human’s vegetarian diet. According to Edward Cullen, subsisting on animal blood is ‘like living on tofu and soymilk ... it doesn’t satiate the hunger—or rather [the] thirst. But it keeps us strong enough to resist’. Edward admits he ‘can’t be sure’ that the analogy is legitimate—he is a vampire, after all,

<sup>1</sup> Some vampire legends refer to vampires who sometimes drink milk instead of blood. For further details, see Dundes 20–28. There also exists the phenomenon of psychic vampires who feed on energy, emotions and memories, which dates back to the nineteenth century. For a discussion of psychic vampires, see Auerbach 101–13 and McFarland-Taylor 132–33.

<sup>2</sup> Stephenie Meyer did not invent the phrase ‘vegetarian vampire’. It was first coined in *Count Duckula* (1988–93), a British animated comedy/horror television series in which the eponymous character, as the theme song states, ‘won’t bite beast or man, ‘cause he’s a vegetarian’ (Rosewarne 98). Unlike the Cullens and the other vegetarian (or quasi-vegetarian) vampires considered in this study, Count Duckula has given up animal as well as human blood and feeds instead on carrots.

and even when he was a human, he wasn't a vegetarian, so he cannot be entirely certain what it is like to live off tofu and soymilk (*Twilight* 164). But for Edward and his family (and for Meyer as well), the analogy holds insofar as both animal blood and tofu are substitutes for the primary sources of food that, respectively, vampires and humans are normally thought to depend on. This view accords with Julie Twigg's assertion that vegetarianism requires a person (living or undead) to 'step outside [of] the culturally prescribed forms of eating' (19). In both instances, living and undead disengage from the hegemony of carnionormative and human-blood drinking cultures and seek nourishment from a source lower down the chain of being.

At about the time when *Twilight* was published, a number of other vampire films, television series and novels also appeared which featured variations of the vegetarian vampire.<sup>3</sup> In the long-running television series *The Vampire Diaries* (2009–17), there are vampires who, like the Cullens, subsist on a diet of animal blood. This kind of vampire features in a season two episode of *Supernatural* ('Bloodlust') and *True Blood* (2008–14), where vampires have a newly developed synthetic blood at their disposal that meets all of their nutritional needs. In *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*, other feeding alternatives feature in the form of donated human blood sourced from local hospitals (banked blood) and willing blood donors. In *Legacies* (2018–22), a *Vampire Diaries* spin-off, vampire students who attend the Salvatore School for magical beings are taught to subsist on donated human blood. Vampires who subsist on human blood drawn from blood banks are also found in the British television series *Being Human* (2009), later adapted for the US in 2011, and the film *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013). Vampires who subsist on variations of synthetic blood are also found in the *Underworld* (2003–16) and *Blade* (1998–2004) film franchises,<sup>4</sup> in *Daybreakers* (2009),<sup>5</sup> in the television series *Ultraviolet* (1998) and *V Wars* (2019), and in Kerrelyn Sparks's *Love at Stake* novels

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this book, I describe as vegetarian vampires those who feed on animal, synthetic or donated human blood. Its use in this book, as an umbrella term to refer to vampires who follow diets that do not harm humans, functions as a device to bring the texts I discuss into conversation with each other and, in so doing, to map the relation between recent changes in the vampire's diet and changing social and environmental conditions in the Anthropocene.

<sup>4</sup> See Abbott, *Celluloid Vampires*, Chap. 11, for an in-depth discussion of the re-imagination of blood in the *Underworld* and *Blade* film franchises. See also Stephanou, 124–28.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of *Daybreakers*, see McFarland-Taylor 160–61; and Stephanou 124–35.

(2005–14). The vegetarian vampire also appears in Cassandra Clare’s widely popular young adult book series, *The Mortal Instruments* (2007–14), which has since been adapted for film (*The Mortal Instruments: The City of Bones* 2014) and television (*Shadowhunters* 2016–19) and Deborah Harkness’s historical fantasy *All Souls* novels (2011–14), recently adapted for television (*A Discovery of Witches* 2018–22).<sup>6</sup>

Despite being prevalent in popular culture and playing important roles in the works in which they appear, the vegetarian (or human-blood abstinent) vampire is anomalous. Although in a handful of films, television series and novels some vampires choose to quench their thirst on animal, donated, or synthetic blood, the majority stick to the vampire’s conventional diet. The same can be said for the genre as a whole. As Brigid Cherry has pointed out, when texts featuring a ‘defanged’ vampire—the phrase popular among critics for describing the sympathetic (and often vegetarian) vampire—began to surge, ‘horror cinema’ often featured ‘a more violent and monstrous form of the vampire in films [and television series] such as *30 Days of Night* (2007)’, ‘*Let the Right One In* (2008)’ (‘Defanging the Vampire’ 174), *I Am Legend* (2007), *Thirst* (2009), *Stakeland* (2010), *Priest* (2011), *Fright Night* (2011) and *A Girl Walks Home at Night* (2014) and *The Strain* (2014–17); seen more recently in the television series *The Passage* (2019), *NOS4A2* (2019–20), *Dracula* (2020), *Chapelwaite* (2021), *Midnight Mass* (2021), *Black as Night* (2021) and *Firebite* (2021–). Such works restore ‘the edge that once defined [vampires] monstrosity’ (Tenga and Zimmermann 76), which had been softened by the development of articulate, attractive, introspective sympathetic vampires in the 1970s. As Stacey Abbott writes, the vampires of horror cinema and television ‘are visually coded as monstrous, often with twisted, deformed or scarred bodies, misshapen skulls and protruding fangs’. They are unable to ‘communicate, restricted to feral snarls and growls,’ and ‘lose their individuality’. This is reflected in the horror vampire’s feeding habits: ‘When they feed, they brutally rip into flesh to access the blood. There is no intimate seduction, but a violent

<sup>6</sup> Monsters that look to animals rather than human bodies for nourishment can also be found in the film adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2016), in which pig’s brains feature as a dietary alternative to human brains (this alternative is not present in Grahame Smith’s novel on which the film is based). This diet stops the devolution from human to zombie and enables the ‘unmentionables’ (as zombies are called in the film) to retain a degree of humanity not seen in their human-brain-eating counterparts.