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The Dark Side, and the Light it Shines

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Abstract

Horror tropes are very popular for entertainment. From novels to films, to video games, we can't seem to get enough of vampires, witches and zombies. But these folkloric creatures were believed to be real by previous generations (and even some contemporary ones). It is worth engaging with our ancestors' history, their thought processes, their religious beliefs and general human psychology to see if this constant investment of energy that people give to malign supernatural agents can illuminate our thought processes and survival mechanisms.

An Epidemic of Vampires

In December 1731 infectious diseases specialist Dr Glaser made his way through the seasonal mud and freezing cold to get to a village called Medveda in Serbia. Much of Eastern Europe had, for centuries, been fought over by two great powers – Habsburg Austria and Ottoman Turkey. In a brief twenty-one year window between the Treaty of Passarowitz (1718) and the Treaty of Belgrade (1739), Austria had prevailed and found itself with the responsibility of governing new areas and peoples.

Medveda was in an area designated as a kind of buffer zone between the two great powers. But the Turks and the Austrians weren't just nervous of each other. Both sides were also terrified of epidemic disease. Since its reappearance on Europe in the 1340s *Yersinia pestis*, more commonly known as 'plague', had been a frequent and deadly visitor.

Dr Glaser must have relieved to find that the locals didn't have plague: they were suffering from malnutrition exacerbated by religious fasting. But the villagers told him about something far darker. Thirteen of their number had died in the space of the previous six weeks, and those people had had neither malnutrition nor plague.

They had been killed by vampires.

The locals stated their demands clearly. Their new government had either to relocate them to safety, or else to protect them by executing the undead using an established ritual.

So the graves of the revenant predators were opened, and Glaser was probably as astonished as any of his party to see that most of the corpses had not decomposed but were, instead, bloated. There was 'fresh' blood running from their noses and mouths.

A month later Glaser's enquiries were continued with another medical specialist, field surgeon Johann Fluckinger. The ensuing report, *Visum et Repertum* (roughly, 'Seen and Reported Upon'), became a sensation in Western Europe and was instrumental in introducing the new idea of the 'vampire' to a highly receptive audience.

Visum et Repertum told of how Medveda's troubles had started five years earlier when a local named Arnod Paole had fallen from a hay wagon and died of a broken neck. Paole had travelled during his lifetime, and had once

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been bothered by a vampire. He had employed the traditional remedies of smearing himself with its blood and eating some earth from its grave. The prophylactic measure seemed to have worked while Paole still lived. But it had not protected him in death, as he had returned to prey on his neighbours. The villagers insisted that when they had exhumed him those years ago he had been 'complete and undecayed', 'fresh blood had flowed from his eyes, nose, mouth and ears' and 'the old nails on his hands and feet … had fallen off, and … new ones had grown'.

Arnod Paole had clearly been sustaining life in the grave by taking it from the living.

All the Austrian authorities of 1731–2 were able to do about the historical Paole case was to take witness statements. The vampire himself was now ash. Well before they had arrived, the corpse had been exhumed, examined and staked, at which point it had reportedly groaned and bled copiously. Then Paole had been burned and his ashes slung back in his grave.

The villagers reasoned, however, that the vampiric contagion had clearly survived in whatever livestock Paole had attacked. The sudden deaths had started again recently and there could be no doubt about the ultimate cause.

A modern audience is often incredulous that people really believed in vampires all those years ago, or else the tales have nothing more than entertainment value: 'Weren't people silly before education.' But I think there's more to gain from it than that. The fact is that perfectly sane, intelligent people all over the world have believed in (and continue to believe in) all sorts of bizarre supernatural creatures. Either those creatures actually exist in the margins of our world, or else there is a pretty intransigent strand of human nature that reveals itself in these stories. I think it is the latter.

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Thinking with Vampires

The case of the Serbian vampire outbreak of 1731–2 gives us so much to consider. One thing is that people rarely think their own traditions odd. It takes the perspective of an outsider to question the schema – the rules of their world – that a whole community takes for granted. The temporary ceding of Medveda and its environs to a foreign authority meant that we are able, all these years later, to share the astonishment of a few long-dead Austrian military officers. The Ottoman Turkish government was often brutal, but was religiously liberal compared to its Catholic counterpart. In this way, a good many Medveda folk-practices had survived.

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No matter how obvious your ideas seem to you, they hang on a framework of rules about the world that you take for granted, and of which you are probably largely unaware. Those rules may even go on influence your perceptions. A botanist called Joseph Pitton de Tournefort who took a trip to Greece at the beginning of the eighteenth century was stunned to witness the difference between visitors' perceptions and those of local villagers when a suspected vampire corpse was dissected. The 'ham-fisted' butcher who conducted the examination thought the corpse had the warmth of life while the outsiders thought it was just the warmth of putrefaction. The locals thought the vampire's demonic spirit was rising in subtle form from the body, while the outsiders thought the smoke came from nearby candles illuminating the grisly ritual. And the locals swore there was no offensive smell while Pitton de Tournfort and his friends were 'well-nigh overcome' from it.

How did these two groups of people present at the same event come away with such different perceptions? Studies in psychology and neuroscience over recent decades have revealed that we don't create our world solely by sampling data multiple times per second in our brains: we simply don't have the bandwidth. Instead, sensory information coming in meets our assumptions to create an understanding using elements of both. In this way you can be 'primed' to see something one way instead of another by having a pre-existing belief. Even our memories of events get corrupted when they are recounted and mixed with the memories of others. Some story-forms are highly transmittable and the memories we pass on successfully have been 'optimized' in this way.

Of course, even Glaser and his colleagues were surprised at the 'fresh' state of the corpses they were shown. In fact, there are many traits of 'vampiric' corpses which are not unnatural, such as lack of rigidity (rigor mortis comes and goes), 'liquid blood' (there are other decomposition products which can pass for it), looking 'healthy' (bloating is normal) and groaning when they are staked (decomposition gases can escape and make noise). People in previous eras didn't keep bodies around for observation for the very good reason that it is unhygienic. It is a luxury of our modern world that we can study and understand these post-mortem changes.

Interestingly, the people of Medveda showed a very high awareness of the concept of 'contagion' even though it was to be over one hundred years before it was discovered that specific micro-organisms were linked to specific diseases. (That was Robert Koch discovering the bacillus that

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causes anthrax.) The villagers had identified potential animal vectors between Paole and the thirteen recent deaths. In this particular case the deaths were unrelated (the recent ones had been from a variety of causes) but their solution for limiting an epidemic would have been highly effective – cremation of infected remains. The principle that things and people contain unseen essences which can be transmitted is a very useful one and seems to come as second nature to us. It appears in other settings that may be familiar, for example the value placed upon religious relics that have been touched by holy people, and even movie-props that have been used by famous actors. People with a well-developed sense of 'essences' and 'contagion' will naturally have better hygiene and will survive to pass their fussy genes and behaviours on.

Perhaps the final observation is the most important: thirteen people had died in a small community in very short time. There were a variety of probable reasons – two women had died in complications after childbirth, for example. But most of them were young, not ready for death. This kind of stress often has people feeling helpless and scared. When you are helpless, you look for a cause so you stand a chance of either controlling it or reasoning with it.

You Only Get Answers to the Questions You Ask

In the mid-twentieth century, English anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard spent a great deal of time with the Central African Azande people. This meant he was present to observe the consequences of a doorway collapse which killed eight people. The Azande are no dafter than any other humans – and humans aren't daft. They knew that the door frame was infested with termites; but, they wondered, *why* the doorway had collapsed then. Why on *those specific people*.

This is called teleological thinking. It is when we ask 'why' instead of 'how'. Psychologist Deborah Keleman tested thinking processes to find that teleological thinking comes very naturally to us all: her samples who asked 'why?' included children and semi-literate adults. It is very useful to be able instead to ask 'how?', to think mechanically, but it doesn't come naturally. We need a great deal of education in counter-intuitive thought to do it.

It has been proposed that this tendency is a natural by-product of our evolutionary heritage. Since you are here today, your ancestors were highly attuned to the idea that there may be a malign intelligence in the environment. If they regularly jumped at random noises, they lost nothing. But if they ignored a tiger they wouldn't have survived to produce you. It is far safer to have a sub-routine that assumes there is something there which has an agenda – a so-called 'agent'.

'How?' assumes a mechanistic universe and 'Why?' assumes one with a conscious agent in it.

Agency detection goes up in stressful times, which is why Evans-Pritchard's Azande friends would probably not have made as much of the accident if nobody had died. It is difficult to live in a random and deadly world and our ancestors lived in that kind of world far more than we do.

A Fair Share

In 1979, researcher Wade Davis investigated the case of a zombie who had been found wandering in a market-place in Haiti three years' previously. She was now in a hospital but had barely improved. Her mental functioning was 'marginal', her eyes were blank, and every gesture was tragically 'swollen with effort'.

The woman had been identified as Francina Illeus, or 'Ti Femme', who had died three years previously at the age of thirty-five. There was dark talk that her jealous husband had played an active role in her demise. Davis went to Ti Femme's village and met the unfortunate zombie's mother who protested that her daughter had been well liked. But many others gave a different account. They said Ti Femme had been rude to people and – worst of all in a subsistence economy – she was a thief.

In Haiti, the religious model of human beings has it that we are composed of five 'elements': the body itself; the energy which keeps the body together; a person's 'destiny'; and two other elements which make up the personality. This is not particularly odd. Ancient Egyptians also had five parts to the person: Vikings had eight. The monotheistic religions have the concept of a body and soul. This quick survey of just a few

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traditions demonstrates that humans have a very hard time believing that our thoughts and personality emerge solely from our bodies. It is very hard to think that somebody has just 'gone' the instant they have died. In Haiti, it was thought that magicians separated the personality part of the person from the body in order to produce an unassertive, passive workhorse – a zombie.

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There are two important things here. The concept of a zombie arises naturally from Haitian religion just as the concept of a ghost can arise naturally from the Christian idea that we are made of a body and soul. And we can also see that the zombie folklore is associated with unfair advantage. Ti Femme was thought to be a thief; in addition, zombies are created by magicians to make unfair wealth. Moderns live in an economy where it is possible (though not easy!) to make more. Most people at most times have lived in a 'zero-sum economy' where there is a limited supply and elaborate mechanisms for sharing things out fairly. If you have extra in such a place … *you must have taken it from someone else*.

By now, the zombie-identification procedure has been observed by many anthropologists visiting Haiti. It is a social process whereby a candidate is suggested and either confirmed or denied by others in the group until there is a consensus. With modern techniques like DNA testing it is possible to demonstrate that the zombies are not products of dark magic, specific people back from the dead, but the vulnerable and mentally ill who sometimes lack support in a very poor and troubled country. 'Ti Femme' the zombie seems to have been completely unrelated to the real Ti Femme, the unpopular thief who had died under suspicious circumstances those three years earlier. But before modern identification techniques, zombies were an understandable concept in Haiti's religious environment, and could be used to convey a sense of immorality.

A Witch for Dunking

In 1699, Vicar James Boys visited a woman in the town of Coggeshall, Essex, a county which has the dubious honour of killing more people accused of witchcraft than any other in England. Widow Coman was 'melancholy', her husband having lately drowned in her well. She stared at the visiting vicar with a mad intensity and she seemed to be suffering from a 'disorder of the mind'. He left us a document detailing the next few weeks' events. It also referred to her reputation … *as a witch*.

The Widow was subjected, several times, to a dreadful ritual intended to test whether she really was a witch. Watched by all the townsfolk she was stripped naked, her thumbs tied to the opposite toes and she was thrown into the local river to see whether she bobbed to the surface or started to drown.

She didn't even seem to have any privacy at home. When the vicar went to see her there he mentioned three hostile neighbours who had stayed overnight. They interpreted her disordered sleep and noises as a consequence of familiars sucking at her body. And her property was being stolen from under her nose. Her family came and took her kettle, some sheets and a silver bodkin, worth half a crown (a considerable amount of money). After a final dunking in the middle of winter, Widow Coman died.

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So if the evidence that the former Mrs Coman was a witch was so strong … why had it taken till now for her accusers to press their claim? The inciting incident seems to have been that one of her neighbours accused her of making him lame. He seems to have had what we would think of as sciatica. But that's still not enough. People get random injuries all the time. It's not enough to go dunking your neighbours repeatedly in a cold river.

I picked Mrs Coman's case as it involves several factors which come up a lot in Western European witch trials from the seventeenth century or so. Firstly, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were a boom time for witch trials. People had a conceptual framework to hand, just as those vampire-seeking villagers in Medveda had.

Secondly, to judge by the fact that a village watched her being ritually nearly drowned, it seems Widow Coman didn't have many friends. In earlier eras, people didn't move around as much as we do and if you hated your friends and neighbours, that was just tough – you were stuck with them. These kinds of witch trials often have a years-long backstory full of feuds and arguments that break out at a critical time.

Thirdly, the Widow's husband had died recently. This was probably far more of an inciting incident than her neighbour's lameness. Had he been her protector from a hostile village? Or did her friends and neighbours suspect her of having pushed him down the well?

Fourthly, there was the unashamed looting of her possessions from her house before she died. We are back to poverty here. If your world doesn't have plenty and you can only get more things by taking other people's, you are unlikely to be comfortable self-labelling as a thief. You need an excuse, one that casts you as virtuous and the other person as immoral. Far from those with magical abilities being powerful and wealthy, accused witches in these kinds of cases were often poor. They sometimes needed charity to stay alive. This was a way of a community disposing of an undesirable or expensive neighbour while keeping their own consciences clear.

The Light from the Dark Side

Modern horror is used for entertainment – and how entertaining it is! If you have never read a Gothic novel or watched a Guillermo del Toro film, your weekend is now sorted.

But it's clear that our ancestors (and many people still) invested in these horrific ideas for other reasons than we moderns do. If you thought that the history of horror was entirely frivolous, I hope that I have now changed your mind.

So do people come up with horrific ideas because they are adaptive? They probably do. Scapegoating can help to bind a community together during difficult times, giving them rituals which help them feel that they have 'agency' of their own, the ability to fight a supernatural foe. It's worth remembering that the inhabitants of eighteenth-century Serbia were more humane than the villagers of seventeenth-century Essex, in that they performed their odd rituals on the dead rather than the living.

And do people also come up with horrific ideas because those ideas are a strange side-effect of our cognitive systems, a false positive from the dark side? This is a more recent theory, explored from the mid-twentieth century onwards. I think it has a massive amount of evidence to support it.

We can see that it is worth thinking about social dynamics with witches, economics with zombies, social reactions to epidemic death with vampires, cognition and neuroscience with eye-witness reports. This is just a small sample of the disciplines that can be brought to bear.

And although these strange creatures of folklore are by definition anomalous, living at the murky margins of our lives and experience, examining them properly can shed light on us.

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