



## THE DEAD RETURNED



## They Made a Tonic

HOLLYWOOD IS OBSESSED.

Sure, we often think of obsessions like sex, violence, gigantic robots, and of course epic battles between good and evil. But another obsession of Hollywood is vampires.

You have to admit, though, that there's a lot to love about vampires. Immortality, wealth, power, and superhuman abilities such as flight and strength. Yes, they come with trade-offs, such as incredibly bad sunburns, but every movie I've seen (and I've seen a lot, believe me) tends to show vampires that are fairly happy with their lot in life.

My exposure to the world of vampires happened in the late 1990s when I was in college. A friend recommended the Anne Rice novel *Interview with the Vampire*. I devoured that and many of the sequels. They're fun reads, and they certainly set the tone for a decade or more of vampire-centered entertainment.

I won't touch on the vampires of the *Twilight* series, mostly because I haven't read any of the books. But I will say this: those books, however lambasted they have been by critics, have shown that popular culture's love of all things vampire is as undying as the creatures themselves.

## VAMPIRES IN HISTORY

When most people think of vampires, they envision something that is a purely European creature: a foreign accent, Victorian-era dress, and dark manor homes and castles. It's a common visual language for most of the Western world, so I don't blame movies and books for portraying that image. But it's one small facet of a legend that has hundreds of expressions.

The single most prominent historical figure attached to the modern notion of vampirism is, of course, Vlad III of Wallachia, otherwise known as Vlad the Impaler. Vlad ruled the small Eastern European kingdom of Wallachia from 1456 to 1462.

He was known as Vlad the Impaler because he preferred to execute his enemies by impaling them on stakes. The Ottomans called him Lord Impaler after entering his kingdom and finding "forests" of impaled victims. Vlad was a violent guy, you see. Rather bloodthirsty, you might say.

He, like his father before him, belonged to something known as the Order of the Dragon, a group established to protect Christian Europe from the invading Ottoman Empire. Vlad's father, Vlad II, was known as Vlad Dracul, or "Vlad the Dragon." When Vlad III rose to power, he took the hereditary title and was known as Vlad Dracula, "son of the dragon."

That name might sound very similar to the most famous vampire story in the world, and that's because Bram Stoker, when creating his famous creature of the night, used Vlad III as his inspiration. Well, part of it, but we'll get into that more later.

The roots of most vampire stories, however, can be traced back to superstitions founded in ancient cultures all across the world. Western Europe played host to countless stories of reanimated dead known as revenants. These were animated corpses that climbed out of the grave to torment the living. The word "revenant" comes from the Latin that means "to come back."

Come back to do what? you might ask. Well, I'm glad you did. At first, it was just to terrorize the living, but as the centuries passed, the legend became more specific. Revenants were said to return from the grave to torment their living relatives and neigh-

bors. What was key, though, was that revenants were specific people, not anonymous zombies like the ones from our modern horror genre. These things had a past and a purpose.

In Norse mythology we can find tales of creatures known as *draugr*, "again-walkers," who would return from the grave and wreak havoc on the living. These creatures possessed superhuman strength, smelled of decay, and were pretty ugly in appearance. They could enter the dreams of the living, and they were said to leave a tangible object near the sleeping person so that, upon waking, their victims would know their dreams were more real than they feared.

Let's go back earlier than the Middle Ages, though. The legends of some ancient cultures spoke of creatures that, while not immediately similar to the vampires we know today, nonetheless shared many core characteristics.

First, we have the Greek myth of Empusa, who was a daughter of Hecate. Empusa was said to lure young men at night and then feast on their blood before moving on to the main course—their flesh. Another Greek tale involves Lamia, a mistress of Zeus who becomes cursed by Zeus's wife, Hera, and doomed to hunt children, devouring them.

Stories of undead creatures, or creatures that feed on the blood of the living, seem nearly as common as written language itself. On Madagascar, an island nation off the east coast of Africa, there are legends of a creature known as the *ramanga*, which was known to attack nobles, drinking their blood and eating their nail clippings.

Yeah, their *nail clippings*. Deal with it.

## VAMPIRES IN MEDICAL SCIENCE

Are vampires real? I'll let you make the final decision on that, but what is clear is that most of these stories find their genesis in the human need to explain the unexplainable. For instance, early Europeans used the myth as a way of explaining why a corpse wasn't decomposing at the normal, expected rate. You can see evidence

of this in Bulgaria, where graves dating back more than eight hundred years have been opened, revealing iron rods through the chest of skeletons.

And in a time when it was not unheard of to bury someone who was thought to be dead, only to find out that they really weren't, you can imagine that stories would quickly circulate that the dead were coming back to life. As a result, taphophobia, the fear of being buried alive, swept Europe and the United States. Of course, once medical science caught up, people got more practical by building alert systems into graves, just in case the person woke up and wanted out.

I realize that being buried alive sounds like a rare occurrence, but it happened frequently enough that many people were sufficiently paranoid about it to actually spend time looking for a solution. One of those people happened to be a medical doctor, a man named Adolf Gutmuth. In 1822, and driven by the fear of being buried alive, he invented a "safety coffin" for his own interment. And he tested it out himself.

Tested it out? You bet. Dr. Gutmuth allowed himself to be buried underground in his new "safety coffin" for several hours, during which he had meals delivered to him through a feeding tube. He enjoyed a wonderful meal of soup, sausages, and a local beer.

Sounds like a great date-night destination.

Dr. Timothy Smith of New Haven, Vermont, was another paranoid inventor. He created a grave that can be visited to this day if you happen to be passing by Evergreen Cemetery. It was a crypt buried in the usual manner, but it had a cement tube positioned over the face of the body. A glass plate was affixed to the top of the tube, at ground level.

Dr. Smith died a real, natural death, and was buried in his fancy "coffin with a view." He never woke up, but early visitors to his grave reported that they had a clear view of his decomposing head until condensation obscured the glass.

*Side note: Vampires no longer scare me. Waking up inside a small box buried six feet below the surface of the earth is what true fright looks like to me.*

Another culprit in humanity's use of the vampire label was porphyria, a rare blood disorder, but modern science has pretty much closed the case on that one, saying that it's too far of a stretch to connect the two topics. Rabies, of all conditions, has also been used as an explanation for the rise of vampire mythology. Surprisingly, there are a lot of commonalities between victims of rabies and vampires, such as sensitivity to light and garlic, as well as altered sleep patterns.

The most recent medical condition with a strong connection to vampire mythology was actually tuberculosis. Those who suffer from TB had no vampire-like symptoms, though, and that makes this connection harder to explain. It's also, incidentally, where one of my favorite New England legends comes into the picture.

Ladies and gentlemen, meet Mercy Brown.

Lena Mercy Brown was a young woman who lived in the latter half of the nineteenth century in the rural town of Exeter, Rhode Island, and she was a major player in what is now known as the Great New England Vampire Panic.

Stories like hers can be found all across Rhode Island, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont, echoed in the lives of others in similar situations. And the results have surprising connections to both the modern idea of vampires and the ancient stories, as we will see.

The first person to die was Mercy's mother, Mary Eliza. That was December 1882, and she fell victim to what was then known as "consumption," so called because as the TB ravaged the body, the person would appear to waste away—consumed, if you will, by the illness. She, of course, was buried, because that's what you do with a loved one who passes away.

The next year, though, Mercy's sister Mary Olive died at the age of twenty. Same illness, same symptoms. I'm not sure when the people of Exeter, Rhode Island, started to wonder if the deaths were connected, but it might have been then, or it might have been a few years later when Mercy's brother, Edwin, took ill.

Edwin, though, was smart. He packed up and moved across the country to Colorado Springs, which had a great reputation for

the healing properties of its dry climate. When he returned from the West some years later, he was alive but not doing well. And in December 1891, he took a turn for the worse.

That was also the month that Mercy herself became ill. Her tuberculosis moved fast, though. They called it the “galloping” kind, and it moved through her body quickly. By January 1892 she was dead, and the people of Exeter were more worried than ever. You see, they suspected something supernatural.

Now, this was surprising, considering how close Exeter is to Newport. That’s the seaside city known for the “summer cottages” of the wealthy—folks like the Vanderbilts, the Astors, the Wideners, and the Wetmores. It was the pinnacle of educated society. Yet just a handful of miles away, one small town that should have known better was about to do something very, very creepy.

Edwin was still alive, you see. And someone got it in their mind that one of the women who died before him, either his mother or one of his sisters, was somehow draining him of his life from beyond the grave. They were so convinced of this, you see, that they wanted to dig them all up.

Yes. All of them.

Once they received the father’s permission to do this horrible thing, a group of men gathered in the cemetery on the morning of March 17 and began to dig up the bodies.

What they were looking for was any evidence of an unnatural state. Blood in the heart, blood around the mouth, or other similar signs. The first body, that of Mary Eliza, the mother, was satisfactorily decomposed, though, so they ruled her out. Of course she was, you might say; she had been dead and buried for a decade.

Mary Olive was also in a normal state of decomposition. Again, being dead ten years usually helps convince people you’re really dead. But when they examined Mercy’s body—a body that had not been buried because she died in the middle of winter, but instead had been stored in a stone building that was essentially a walk-in freezer—they discovered a remarkable state of preservation.

Shocking, I know.

So what did they do? Well, these superstitious townsfolk did what they learned from their ancestors: they cut out Mercy’s heart and liver (within which they found red, clotted blood), burned them on a nearby stone (which is still there, by the way, near her headstone in the cemetery), and then mixed the ashes with a tonic. That tonic was then given to Edwin to drink.

Yes, Edwin Brown drank his own sister’s liver and heart.

Did it work? Nope. Edwin died less than two months later. What it did do, however, was set up Mercy Brown to be the “first American vampire.” I suppose it’s not important to mention that she wasn’t really a vampire, because you are an intelligent person, but it doesn’t hurt to say it.

As unusual as an event like this must sound, you might be surprised to learn that it happened quite frequently. In 1817, nearly a century before Mercy Brown’s exhumation, a Dartmouth College student named Frederick Ransom died of TB. His father, so worried that the young man would leave the grave and attack the family, had him dug up. Ransom’s heart was cut out and burned on a blacksmith’s forge.

Even Henry David Thoreau heard tales of these types of events, mentioning one in his personal journal. He wrote on September 26, 1859:

*The savage in man is never quite eradicated. I have just read of a family in Vermont who, several of its members having died of consumption, just burned the lungs, heart, and liver of the last deceased, in order to prevent any more from having it.*

So, of course, word spread about what happened to Mercy Brown, as it usually did when a body was dug up and carved into pieces like that. Mercy’s case actually made it into a newspaper called the *New York World*, and it made quite an impression on the people who read it.

How do we know? Because a clipping of that article was found in the personal papers of a London stage manager after his death.

You see, his theater company had been touring America in 1892. He evidently found the story inspiring, so much so that he sat down a few years later and wrote a book.

The man? Bram Stoker. The book? Oh, I'm sure you guessed that already. It was *Dracula*, published in 1897.