

CHANGING THE VAMPIRE TRADITION: THE VAMPIRES OF DARREN SHAN

By:

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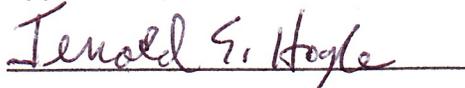
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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jerrold Hogle". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

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**Abstract**

This paper will explore the ways in which the *Cirque du Freak* series by Darren Shan both follows and deviates from the older vampire tradition that is seen in books such as *The Vampyre*, *Dracula*, *Varney the Vampire*, *Carmilla*, and *Interview the Vampire*. It will also look at the way the changes he made to the vampire tradition reflect the deep conflicts in modern western culture, especially the social interactions and relationships most relevant to his teenage readers, such as problems that involve gender roles, family relationships, and finding one's place in society. Finally, this paper will examine the way other modern day young-adult vampire novels reflect conflicts differently than Shan's novels.

## Introduction

The *Cirque du Freak* series (2000-04) – or *The Saga of Darren Shan* as it is known in most countries outside of the United States – is a twelve-book, young-adult series of novels written by Darren Shan. In the books, the main character, who shares the author's name, is forced to become a vampire's assistant due to circumstances that arise when he and a friend go to see the Cirque du Freak, a show that features a wolf-man, a man with two stomachs, and a lady who can grow a beard at will. Darren eventually becomes a vampire himself and is forced to find a place in a society he never wanted to join. In addition to the *Cirque du Freak* series, the author has also written a four-book spin-off series called *The Saga of Larten Crepsley* (2010-12), which tells the life story of the title character, the vampire who took Darren as his assistant, starting just before he is blooded and ending two hundred years later when Darren meets him at the Cirque du Freak. Both series immerse readers in the unique vampire world and culture created by Shan.

Echoes of the vampires in Gothic fiction that came before Shan's can be seen in his work. For example, in *Varney the Vampire* (1845-46) by Thomas Preskett Prest, the title character is described as having "a pale face, a stately brow, and a strange expression about the eyes, which no one cared to look on twice" (Prest 2). This description, while showing Sir Francis Varney as being dignified and powerful, also shows him as being strange and almost fearful, very like what we see in the first

introduction of the vampire Larten Crepsley in Shan's novels when he is described as being a "creepy-looking man" who everyone fell silent for as he took the stage (*Cirque du Freak* 75). J. Sheridan Le Fanu's novel *Carmilla* (1872) features an adolescent vampire that prefigures the character Darren in Shan's novels. As the series progresses, Shan's main character, like Carmilla, is stuck in a body that appears much younger than the character really is. Another example of Shan's work reflecting other vampire novels is the way he recalls *Dracula* (1897) by Bram Stoker. In order to become a vampire in Stoker's novel, a person must be bitten by a vampire and also drink the blood of the vampire; such an exchange of blood is also necessary for a human in Shan's novels to become a vampire. Another part of the vampire society in Shan's novels is the relationship between vampires and their assistants which seems to mirror the mentor relationship between Lord Ruthven and Aubrey in John Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819), the first full-fledged Gothic novel about vampires, as well as the one between Lestat and Louis in Anne Rice's novel *Interview with the Vampire* (1976).

Even though aspects of the older vampire tradition bleed through in Shan's work, he also deviates from the typical characteristics of vampires by making them mortal creatures who don't bite or kill the humans they feed from. Instead, they use their extremely sharp fingernails to make a small cut on a human and drink the blood from it, using the healing powers of their spit to close the cut, leaving no evidence of their presence behind except a small scar. Unlike many vampires in literature, Shan's

vampires also have their own society completely separate from humans, one that includes systems of social ranks, religions, and other beliefs. In addition to regular vampires, the world Shan created in *Cirque du Freak* also contains half-vampires and vampaneze. The latter are a species that evolved from vampires and are the real villains in this universe. Shan's combination of traditional vampire characteristics and his own deviations bring into question why he would choose to deliberately change some of the elements of the vampire tradition. I want to argue here that the changes he has made to the vampires in his novels make it possible for them to reflect the deep conflicts in modern western culture, especially the social interactions and relationships most relevant to his teenage readers.

### **Relatability to Teenagers**

Unlike in many traditional vampire novels, the characters in Shan's novel are not forced to be either a human or a vampire; there are, among other possibilities, half-vampires who have only been partially blooded which means they are still part human. Shan's half-vampires are a representation of the strange place teenagers hold in society because teenagers are no longer children, but they aren't adults yet either, much like how half-vampires are in a transitional phase between being a human and being a full-fledged vampire. The essay "Teen Gothic" by Glenis Byron and Sharon Deans has shown that teenagers are able to relate to vampires in literature because, like vampires, teenagers are "hovering between animal and angel" (Byron 90). They still have some

of the desires of children, but they are also beginning to understand more about the world and are trying to find their place in it. Shan's half-vampires become the relatable species for teenagers in his novels because the half-vampires, like teenagers, hold an in-between place in society. Half-vampires straddle the human and vampire worlds much in the way that teenagers are between the worlds of childhood and adulthood. Larten Crepsley explains to Darren the ways that being a half-vampire will be different than being a full vampire, which include being "able to move about during the day," having "certain powers but not all," and aging "at a fifth the regular rate, instead of the full vampire's tenth" (*Cirque Du Freak* 190). These differences, despite being small, enable full vampires to claim superiority over half-vampires, even while allowing them to participate in general society. Teenagers are able to relate to this weird in-between place in society because, even though they are included in more of the adult world than they were as children, they still aren't fully accepted; oftentimes, the adults in their lives treat them as either a child or an adult, depending on what is more to the liking of the adult in each particular situation. Shan's vampires treat half-vampires the same way. When the vampire prince Paris apologizes to Darren for the way they are conversing in front of him, he says he talks that way because they "are unused to children" just before they decide that Darren should prove himself by going through the Trials of Initiation even though they "are not for children" (*Vampire Mountain* 178, 190). The princes, as well as other full vampires, change their

perspective on Darren with each different situation because he occupies a strange in-between place between being a human adolescent and a vampire.

Some of the differences between full and half-vampires, such as the lack of some vampire powers, show how full vampires are superior to half-vampires just as adults are in many ways superior to teenagers. For example, half-vampires only develop certain vampire powers and do not acquire the rest until they eventually become full vampires. This liminal condition is similar to how adults, because they are older and have had more of a chance to learn and develop skills, tend to be more knowledgeable and capable than teenagers. At the same time, the differences between full and half-vampires show how teenagers have some advantages of their own, even if they aren't always as obvious. For example, half-vampires age twice as fast as full vampires which means that, for vampires like Darren who are blooded at a young age, they don't have to wait quite as long for their bodies to mature to adulthood. Full vampires are also required to allow the Stone of Blood, a "magical artifact" given to the vampires, to absorb some of their blood in a process which allows anyone with access to the stone to "pinpoint [their] exact location anywhere on Earth," making it a kind of GPS (*Vampire Mountain* 164, 168). Half-vampires are not required to give their blood to the stone until they become full vampires, which means they are still able to act on their own without being linked "to the mental collective of the clan forever" (*Vampire Mountain* 167). Full vampires are also unable to move around in the

daylight without experiencing extreme discomfort from the glare of the sun and a sunburn that will eventually be bad enough to kill them if they are exposed for too long. By contrast, half-vampires are able to go out in the sun as easily as a human. The flexibility of half-vampires in Shan's world thereby shows how teenagers have more options and flexibility in their own lives compared to many adults. Adults often have family obligations and careers that make it difficult for them to make changes in their lives; that problem is similar to how full-fledged vampires are forever stuck being creatures of the night, while teenagers still have opportunities to choose where they want to go in life, much as half-vampires can choose to live in either the daytime or nighttime.

Another aspect of the half-vampire life that teens can relate to is the so-called "purge." In Shan's world, the purge his half-vampires experience in order to become full vampires mimics the physical transitions teenagers have to go through as they move into adulthood. When Crepsley realizes that Darren is beginning to experience the first stages of the purge, he sits down with him to explain the changes his body will be going through, mimicking "the talk" many parents have with their children about puberty. During the purge, a half-vampire's "vampire cells...attack the human cells and convert them, resulting in full-vampirism" (*Hunters of the Dusk* 74). While going through the changes involved with the purge, half-vampires experience various symptoms including extreme hair growth, rapid aging, headaches, heightened senses,

and bursts of energy. Experiencing the purge is much like going through puberty for adolescents, but has more rapid and extreme changes. Instead of spending years going through puberty, half-vampires only spend about six weeks going through the purge. These parallels between Shan's half-vampires and teenagers make the half-vampires relatable for teenage readers while showing some of the struggles teenagers go through because of the position they hold in society and the place they are at in their lives.

### **Mortality and Risk Taking**

Meanwhile, just as humans do, Shan's vampires maintain their own philosophies regarding death and the afterlife, and thereby reflect an unresolved debate of long standing still going in the present day. Unlike many vampires, such as those in *Dracula*, *Carmilla*, and *Interview with the Vampire*, the vampires in Shan's novels are mortal. They age much more slowly than humans and can live for hundreds of years, but they do eventually die of old age if they aren't killed in battle first. Shan's vampires also have their own religion, about which Crepsley gives Darren this brief explanation:

We believe in Paradise. It lies beyond the stars. When we die, if we have lived good lives, our spirits float free of the earth, cross the stars and galaxies, and come at last to a wonderful world at the other side of the universe – Paradise...[Vampires who don't live good lives] stay here.

They remain bound to this earth as ghosts, doomed to wander the face of this planet forever. (*Cirque Du Freak* 302)

As Darren pushes for more information, Crepsley also reveals that vampires who live a good life “live cleanly. [They] do not kill unless necessary. Do not hurt people. Do not spoil the world” (*Cirque Du Freak* 302). The general beliefs of this vampire religion are relatable in the eyes of many people, no matter what religion they are part of, because the idea of living a good life in order to eventually go to a better place when a person dies is the main belief of most religions. Religion, after all, is used as a form of coping with a person’s own mortality as well as the deaths of others, and Shan’s vampires are no exception to that. By making them mortal, Shan makes them easier for readers to relate to and shows that no one, not even a powerful creature like a vampire, can avoid death and live forever. For many people, after all, their teenage years are when they begin to start thinking about their own mortality and realizing that they aren’t going to live forever, and Shan’s novels help readers deal with their mixed feelings about that prospect.

Another part of Shan’s vampires’ concept of a “good life” is the respect given to them by other members of the clan, and that value system reminds us of certain concerns—and conflicts around them—that stem from the modern tension between peer pressure and adult approval. Earning the desired respect involves “push[ing themselves] to the limit, undergoing many tests of strength, wit, and courage”

(*Vampire Mountain* 107). They often take risks and will partake in dangerous activities simply to prove they are capable and not cowardly. Because of their desire to earn this respect up until their deaths, “most [vampires], when they grow too old to care for themselves, meet death on their feet, rather than let their friends look after them”

(*Vampire Mountain* 107). It is shameful for them to die after spending the end of their lives taking it easy and failing to prove that they are still of some worth to the clan, so an earlier, less shameful death, is always preferred by the vampires. Teenagers, like Shan’s vampires, often judge their lives’ worth based on how their peers view them, which makes them more likely to push themselves to do as much as they can when they are around friends or other people around their age whose respect they would like to earn. In 2007, a study done on risk-taking in adolescents showed that “the presence of peers increases risk taking substantially among teenagers, moderately among college-age individuals, and not at all among adults” (Steinberg 57). One reason is that teenagers have a heightened sensitivity to emotional and social stimuli which causes their decision-making to be more affected by their peers. Shan’s vampires seem to have a similar decision-making process because their risk taking increases when surrounded by other members of the clan who are constantly pushing each other and threatening to shame any vampire who isn’t willing to step up and take the challenges that are set for them. The belief that vampires should be strong and unafraid to accept even the most difficult of challenges is so strong in Shan’s tales that during the festival

that is held at Vampire Mountain, it is even “a law...that [a vampire] never refuse[s] a challenge” (*Trials of Death* 76). The vampire Kurda Smahlt, who is known for refusing to fight, is himself convinced to accept a challenge against Arra Sails when she reminds him that “not even a pacifist like [him] has the right to refuse a challenge during the Festival of the Undead” despite trying to get out of it by mentioning that he has an injured leg (*Trials of Death* 78). Shan’s vampire’s views on death and mortality reflect the conflicts teenagers experience when trying to decide what their own beliefs are and which people in their lives should be allowed to influence their beliefs and choices.

### **Family Connections**

The relationship created when a vampire and his assistant exchange blood brings into question the expected loyalty between family members, which is very much a modern issue in a time of many broken families. It isn’t possible for people to choose their family members, and, in most cases, vampires and their assistants don’t know each other well before the assistants are blooded. In Darren’s case, he did not know exactly what he was getting himself into when he agreed to become a half-vampire and Crepsley’s assistant. Crepsley can only give him a quick explanation of some of the things Darren would be expected to do:

You will be my traveling companion...You will travel with me across the world. You will be my eyes and hands during the day. You will

guard me while I sleep. You will find food for me if it is scarce. You will take my clothes to the laundry. You will polish my shoes. You will look after [my pet spider] Madam Octa. In short, you will see to my every need. In return, I will teach you the ways of the vampires. (*Cirque Du Freak* 190)

Crepsley's description of the duties of a vampire's assistant shows a kind of trade that is made between the assistant and the vampire who blooded them; the assistant does whatever is asked of him or her, and the vampire teaches the assistant everything he or she needs to know about being a vampire. The relationship is similar to that of a child and parent or guardian. The parents take care of their children, teaching them everything they need to know in order to eventually go out on their own and take care of themselves, and, in return, the children are supposed to listen to their parents and do what is asked of them. There are increasing conflicts within that norm in modern times, however, and those are reflected in how the different kinds and levels of vampires relate to each other in Shan's world.

Seba, the vampire who blooded Crepsley, also describes the vampire-assistant relationship very much like the relationship between a parent and their child, specifically one who is in their teens, even though he never uses those terms. He says that when Crepsley was a young vampire, he had to let him "ask [his] questions and air [his] rage, and in time [he] learned that [his] was not the wisest head in the world, and

that the old ways might indeed be best” (*Vampire Mountain* 109). Many young vampires and half-vampires believe they are invincible, given their new powers, and often don’t see the need to listen to older vampires with more experience. Similarly, teenagers tend to believe they know more than they actually do and will ignore what their parents and other adults have to say. Seba also points out that “students never appreciate their teachers while they are learning” (*Vampire Mountain* 109). His wisdom on the subject of vampires and their assistants seems to be a lesson for Shan’s younger readers, who may not fully appreciate the help given to them by not only their parents, but also other adults in their lives.

In addition to the parent-child relationship that is reflected by Shan’s vampires, there is also a type of husband-wife relationship. Vampires seem to have a very different view on marriage than humans do, but, in a way, it is similar to the way people in the western world are becoming more comfortable with the idea of divorce. Crepsley reveals to Darren that he, at one point, was Arra’s mate, but is not anymore. He explains that:

Vampires neither marry nor divorce as humans do. [They] make temporary mating commitments instead...If two vampires wish to mate...they agree to share their lives for a set amount of time, usually five or ten years. At the end of that time, they can agree to another five or ten years, or separate. [Vampires’] relationships are not like those of

humans. Since [they]...live such a long time, very few vampires stay mated for their whole lives. (*Trials of Death* 17).

Vampires do not believe it is realistic to expect two people to stay together for their entire lives. Instead, they decide to make more realistic commitments of five to ten years at a time which allows for them to choose to end a relationship if the two vampires change in some way and their lives no longer fit together well. In comparison, humans, when they marry, supposedly make a lifetime commitment to their spouse. In earlier times, it used to be unacceptable to get a divorce in most cases; people were expected to stick to the commitment they make. However, now, it is much less uncommon for people to decide to get a divorce when, for whatever reason, they begin to drift apart and are no longer compatible. Shan's vampires seem to reflect this shift in opinion in western culture.

### **Gender Roles**

The rarity and treatment of female vampires in Shan's books, in turn, show how hard women must work in order to be considered equals with men and tells how much gender discrimination remains an issue in the twenty-first century, even among teens. In the entire *Cirque du Freak* series, there is only one female vampire the readers get to know: Arra Sails. Darren first meets Arra when he and Crepsley travel to Vampire Mountain—a looming monolith with an intricate tunnel system inside of it used by vampires as a meeting place and headquarters for the vampire princes. Arra is known

to be one of the best fighters in the vampire society, but she has had to work harder than the male vampires to get to that position. In most cases, “a vampire usually has to pass the Trials of Initiation to earn the respect of his peers” (*Trials of Death* 7). The Trials are a test for vampires to prove themselves to the rest of the clan. Vampires must:

Perform five acts of physical courage...The tests are picked at random and are different for each vampire...Some tests are more difficult than others, but none are easy. The risk is great, and though most vampires survive, death by misadventure is not unheard-of. (*Vampire Mountain* 189)

Since she is female, going through the Trials once has not been enough for Arra to be respected, so she has “been through the Trials three times to prove...that [she is] a worthy vampire” (*Trials of Death* 16). When it comes to physical ability, even today, humans are often just as likely to make a woman do more to prove herself than a man in order to earn the same amount of respect. Boys, especially when they are in teenage years and believe they are invincible, seem to have a hard time believing that a girl could be as physically capable as they are. Even in a work setting, when both men and women have the same job and experience, “women often work harder than men, and typically for less money” (Bielby 1057). This prejudice is mirrored by the expectations that are set for Shan’s female vampires to prove themselves worthy.

The problem of gender roles is even intensified when Arra explains to Darren that the reason there are so few female vampires is, not only because of the difficulty of being part of the society, but also because “no vampire can sire or bear a child. The only way [they] can add to [their] ranks is by blooding humans” (*Vampire Mountain* 146). Many females turn down the chance to become a vampire when they are given the choice because they aren’t willing to give up the opportunity to become mothers some day. This view recalls the idea that a woman’s main role is to have children and that being a mother is what most women want, which is still a major cultural issue, even today. One article that discusses the roles of women at home and work states that “despite increased female labor force participation, women remain largely responsible for childcare and other household tasks” (Bielby 1031). People recognize that women are capable of working outside the home, but they still often choose to stay at home to take care of their children and the household tasks. However, Arra is portrayed as a woman who rejects those ideas and is perfectly content to live as an independent woman, without children, who isn’t afraid to prove that she is just as strong and capable as the men. At the same time, Darren, very briefly, expresses the idea that it isn’t just women who might decide to not become a vampire because of their desire to have children; some men may feel the same way. He found it “alarming to learn that [he] could never father a son or a daughter” and was never told that he wouldn’t be able to have children prior to being blooded (*Vampire Mountain* 146). The

disappointment that comes with the knowledge that a person cannot have children is usually associated with women who are unable to get pregnant, and this moment of Darren's shock shows that there is another side to that as well. A man could actually be incapable of fathering a child in the same way Darren and other male vampires cannot have children, or there could be other circumstances that prevent them from having the opportunity to be a father for a child, such as a woman choosing to have an abortion after an unexpected pregnancy without consulting the father or a woman getting custody of a child and keeping him or her from the father. These previously mentioned moments with Arra successfully reflect challenges faced by both genders in modern day western culture, not just the gender role issues associated with women.

### **Position in Society**

Shan's vampires are divided into classes and forced to be outcasts in ways similar to some humans, both as individuals and as groups. Even though vampires are portrayed as the "good guys" in Shan's world, they are still misunderstood creatures that are outcasts in human society. Darren, as an individual, is shown as an outcast in multiple scenarios because of the ways being a vampire makes him different than others. One of the first instances of this problem in the series is shortly after he has been blooded and is trying to adjust to being a half-vampire. He tries to play street hockey with a group of human boys one day to pass the time while Crepsley sleeps, avoiding the sun. Because he isn't used to his new strength, though, he ends up

accidentally breaking both the legs of one of the boys and is instantly seen as being “a monster” who needs to be avoided (*Cirque du Freak* 289). Later in the series, when he thinks he has finally been accepted by the members of the Cirque du Freak, he begins to realize that he’s being forced onto the outside again because he isn’t aging normally. Even his best friend, Evra Von the snake boy, finds it “hard...to treat [him] like an equal,” which makes it difficult for Darren to fit in. In book eight of Shan’s series, Darren has one more chance to try and fit in with humans again when he is enrolled in a school and decides to attend to help keep up the appearance of being a teenager, even though he is much older. However, because of the age gap, he finds it hard to connect with them, and they make fun of him, saying things like “That guy’s seriously weird!” and “He spoke weird...And looked even weirder” (*Allies of the Night* 41). The way Darren is outcast as an individual, of course, appeals to many teenagers who feel that they don’t fit in. Many other young adult and middle grade novels feature the same type of outcast character, both those with vampires, such as *The Chronicles of Vladimir Tod* (2007-2010) by Heather Brewer and *Sucks to Be Me* (2010) by Kimberley Pauley, and those books containing other types of stories, like *Paper Towns* (2008) by John Green, *The Raven Boys* (2012) by Maggie Stiefvater, and the Percy Jackson series (2005-2009) by Rick Riordan.

In addition to being outcasts on an individual level, Shan’s vampires are also stereotyped as a collective. In the world of Shan’s novels, the vampires are split into

two different groups: the vampires and the vampaneze. Humans in his world, both the ones who believe vampires are real and the ones who think they are only in stories, don't see them as being different. As a result of this oddity, the two species of vampires are a reflection on the problem people have today of stereotyping a single group as being "good" or "bad" without considering the differences between individuals in the group or subgroups that make up the whole. Originally, vampires were one group who fed upon humans and would "drink dry a couple of people a week" (*Cirque Du Freak* 631). Eventually, vampires decided that killing was unacceptable and made laws against it which caused the existing divide in the vampires, as Crepsley explains to Darren:

Most vampires were content to obey the laws...but some felt our cause had been betrayed. Certain vampires believed humans were put on this planet for us to feed upon...Seventy vampires broke away from the rest and declared themselves a separate race. They called themselves the vampaneze and established their own rules and governing bodies.

Basically, the vampaneze believe it is wrong to feed from a human without killing...Unfortunately, [humans] could not tell the difference between vampires and vampaneze, so both were tracked down and killed. (*Cirque Du Freak* 632-33).

The way vampires were treated by people mirrors the way humans have treated other groups of people in the past and even today. Humans have a tendency to stereotype people based on groups they belong to. For example, after 9/11, Muslims in the United States, even though they were Americans, were treated differently. In the United States, Muslims are “a population that experiences misunderstanding based on what they look like, how they dress, where they come from, and confusion about their religion” (Tindongan 73). People began to see the words “Muslim” and “terrorist” as being synonymous even though it was only a small group of Muslims who orchestrated the terrorist attacks on 9/11. The way people stereotyped Muslims as a whole is similar to the way the humans in Shan’s novels began to see vampires as killers even though it was only a small group of them who believed that killing was acceptable. In both cases, people chose to base their opinion of a larger group on just a small number of them instead of looking at the individual members of the group. Since most of Shan’s vampire novels appeared after 9/11, it is possible that this influenced the treatment of vampires in his novels.

### **The Freak Show and Acceptance**

In Shan’s novels, vampires aren’t the only strange creatures. The Cirque du Freak, the freak show Crepsley is travelling with when Darren first meets him, has a large variety of performers who are what many people would recognize as freaks with a small supernatural element added to each act. An example of one of these magical

twists of the acts is the way Truska, the Cirque's bearded lady, is able to magically grow a beard at will and also make it disappear back into her skin. Vampires and members of freak shows have always been portrayed as outcasts in both books and movies. In his novels, Shan brings the two groups together, and they are able to accept each other. The freaks' acceptance of outsiders in Shan's novels could be an echo of the film *Freaks* (1932) directed by Tod Browning when the freaks declare, "We accept you, one of us!" (*Freaks*). Except for the time spent in Vampire Mountain, the vampire characters spend most of their time traveling with the Cirque du Freak. In that setting, no one is considered an outcast because of his or her differences, and the freaks, who are all at least half-human, understand that vampires aren't the evil creatures most people believe them to be.

When Darren first meets the members of the Cirque du Freak, he thinks it will be a shock for them to learn he is a half-vampire. However, the performers gladly welcome him, and one of them informs him that, "Half-vampires are nothing new. If [he] had a silver dollar for every half-vampire [he'd] seen [he'd] have...twenty-nine silver dollars" (*Cirque du Freak* 320). The welcoming environment is somewhat shocking to Darren, which is not surprising considering his previous experiences where he tried to fit in with a group, such as the human boys he played hockey with and ended up injuring. He expects to be ostracized because he is an outsider coming into the already-formed community, but the members of the Cirque are used to being

ignored, misunderstood, and treated as outcasts, so they are willing to be more welcoming.

Shan seems to have made the connection between the way vampires and freaks are often stereotyped and used that to further reflect the way society functions. For many people, especially for teenagers and adolescents, being accepted into some sort of group or community is important. Darren's reaction to entering the Cirque du Freak community reflects the way some people actually expect to be outsiders in a new setting because they are so used to being ostracized for being different in some way. However, sometimes, those same people are able to find a group that accepts them because the members of the group have come together after being outcasts themselves.

### **Modern Teen Vampires**

There are many modern vampire novels targeted at teen readers. Some of them follow the older vampire tradition more closely than others, but all of them adapt the vampires in a way that makes the characters more relatable for the intended audience. In many cases, such as in the novels written by Heather Brewer, Stephenie Meyer, P.C. Cast and Kristin Cast, and Kimberly Pauley, the changes further integrate the vampires into human society instead of giving them a society of their own. Some of the themes presented in these novels reflect similar conflicts to those explored in Shan's novels. However, I believe the changes made by these other authors, despite them making their

vampires participate more in human society, do not reflect as wide of a range of modern day conflicts as Shan's novels.

In Heather Brewer's novel *Eighth Grade Bites* (2007), readers follow a teenage boy named Vladimir Tod who was born as a half vampire; his father was a vampire, and his mother was a human. The book is set in a junior high school, and Vlad is one of the main targets of the bullies. Many people seem to realize that something about Vlad is different, but they are not able to determine exactly what makes him unlike everyone else—his best friend Henry and adopted guardian Nelly are the only humans who know he is half vampire. Despite the supernatural elements brought to the text by the presence of vampires, the main points of the story are about Vlad trying to fit in and deal with average problems like bullying while dealing with the added challenge of hiding his true nature which he considers to be a “daily chore” (Brewer 48).

*Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer is about a teenage girl named Bella Swan who moves from Phoenix, Arizona to Forks, Washington and discovers that some of her classmates at her new school are actually vampires. One vampire in particular, Edward Cullen, falls in love with her. The main focus of the book, and the rest of the series, is the relationship between Bella and Edward and how they struggle with their forbidden romance—Bella is not supposed to know that Edward is a vampire, and vampires in this world, other than the Cullen family, see humans as a source of food, not as beings equal to themselves.

Kimberley Pauley's novel *Sucks to be Me* also focuses on a human teenage girl in high school who happens to also be part of the vampire world. The main character Mina, whose name is taken from the novel *Dracula*, is a human whose parents are both vampires. As she begins to near adulthood, she must decide whether or not she wants to be a vampire like her parents or remain a human for the rest of her life. However, the catch is that if she chooses to not become a vampire, she may lose access to her family forever. A big theme in this novel is family loyalty because Mina has to decide whether or not to choose a life like her parents, and, ultimately, whether or not to continue to be part of her family.

The novel *Marked* by P.C. Cast and Kristin Cast, like the three books previously mentioned, takes place in a school setting, but in this world, young vampires attend a boarding school that will specifically train them to transition from being a teenager to an adult vampire. In addition to dealing with the normal problems in high school, the main character Zoey Redbird is also trying to figure out what her destiny is after the vampire goddess Nyx comes to her and says, "You are special. Accept that about yourself, and you will begin to understand there is true power in your uniqueness" before marking her, signaling that she is destined for something great (Cast 40). Because Zoey is marked by the goddess, much of the novel explores the difficulties teenagers have while trying to find their place in society.

The conflicts reflected in these more recent young adult vampire novels—coping with bullying and trying to fit in, working through a difficult and unlikely relationship, deciding whether or not to remain loyal to one’s family, and trying to find one’s place in society and purpose in life—are all problems that modern day teenagers may have to cope with. These are conflicts experienced more on an individual level instead of being problems entire groups must work through. Shan’s novels go further by not only reflecting the individual-based problems, but also the conflicts that larger groups are facing today. For example, Shan’s vampires show problems individuals face, such as dealing with the expectations of family loyalty and trying to find a place to fit in, as well as conflicts faced by entire groups of people, such as trying to overcome obstacles created by expected gender roles and stereotypes given to certain groups of people.

### **Conclusion**

In his vampire novels, Shan successfully follows the vampire tradition while still putting his own spin on it and creating a unique world that is different than all of the other vampire novels that have been published both before and after his own books. Through the changes he made to the older vampire tradition, he was able to reflect some modern day conflicts present in western culture. Shan’s half-vampires create a type of character who holds an in-between place in society—halfway between the human and vampire worlds—similarly to the way teenagers are transitioning from

childhood to the world of adults. His vampire's religion and ideals puts into question the beliefs of the readers, who are often teenagers trying to determine their own belief system, while also reflecting the conflict many teenagers go through when they have to choose whether or not to give in to peer pressure. Family conflicts are also shown in Shan's novel through the relationships vampires have with each other, even though vampires do not really have what people normally consider families. Relationships between parents and children are paralleled in Shan's books by the relationships created between vampires and their assistants, which involves a similar unspoken agreement that the adult-type figure in the relationship will teach the less experienced person what they need to know to survive. The attitudes behind modern day marriages are also reflected by Shan's vampires' views on mating where they accept the concept of committing to each other for a certain amount of time instead of their entire lives. The struggles of coping with the gender roles society has given both women and men are also shown in Shan's novels with the treatment of female vampires, such as Arra, and the attitudes vampires have towards the fact that they cannot have children. The problem many people face of being an outcast either on an individual level or because they are part of a larger stereotyped group is also shown through the treatment of the different types of vampires. In contrast to that conflict, the problem of someone who is an outcast being accepted into a group is shown through Darren's reaction when he is unexpectedly accepted by the members of the Cirque du Freak. Through all of these

aspects of Shan's novels and the society he created for his vampires, Shan is able to reflect many of the social conflicts experienced by people in the western world, particularly the teenagers who are likely to be reading his books, while still following the vampire tradition in many ways.

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