

INTRODUCTION

AS vampires go, Count Dracula was doing pretty well. Sure, he lived alone, in a dank, creepy castle, with bats for company. But he was also wealthier and better looking, and had a lot more nifty powers than his ancestors. In fact, when Dracula appeared in Bram Stoker's novel in 1897, he barely resembled the vampires that had existed in mythology for thousands of years.

Today, vampires are everywhere in our culture. A vampire might be a mysterious high school student who all the girls like, a misunderstood loner with no social life, or a friendly character on the outside of a cereal box.

Many modern vampires are attractive and likable. But centuries ago, vampires were pretty gross creatures, unlikely to make anyone's "hottie" list. They were usually ugly, half-rotted corpses in serious need of a bath. Their breath was terrible—a vampire in Chinese culture could even kill with its obnoxious breath!

There will always be a debate between people who believe in the existence of vampires and those who do not. But one thing is clear. Even if vampires are not actual "real" creatures, the myth of vampires is very real. The belief in these creatures has

influenced people's behavior for thousands of years.

Myths are stories that people have made up to help explain their world. For example, ancient cultures did not understand why the seasons changed or why volcanoes erupted. So they invented stories that explained these events.

From ancient times on up to the 1700s, vampires were more than just scary creatures. They served a real purpose in society, helping people to explain death, disease, and other evils. Did someone die mysteriously? Vampires must have gotten to him. Did the wheat crop fail? Was there an earthquake? Probably the vampires' fault. Even minor problems, like nightmares or headaches, might be blamed on vampires.

Vampires even brought people together. No matter what your differences with your parents or friends, you could agree on one thing: vampires were bad.

In early mythology, vampires were living creatures that terrorized people. Later, they gained even more power by being able to cross the line between living and dead. It turned out being "undead" was a convenient way to irritate the living without having to suffer the consequences. This ability to come back from the grave and move between worlds has given vampires a special place in mythology.

By the nineteenth century, the vampire's role was beginning to change. Science had cleared up a lot of the mysteries of death, so vampires became more the stuff of horror novels. And by the twentieth century, vampires came in all forms. Some were disgusting. Others were charming. We were as likely to love them as we were to hate them. We might feel sorry for them, or we might envy their special powers and place in the world. We might—if we were to be totally honest—even wish to be one.