

MYTHS AND MONSTERS

For centuries, myths and legends have tried to shine light on the things that go bump in the night. It's from these stories that we have discovered our fascination with fright — and created our modern monsters.

VAMPIRES



Vampire myths go back thousands of years and occur in almost every culture. The vampires we are familiar with today are largely based on Eastern European myths. These myths were born from the vampire legends of the Far East.

The birth of the undead

Vampire legends came about for two reasons — superstition and fear. Most early cultures created stories to explain what they didn't understand. When bodies of the recently deceased would be dug up, it appeared that they had been rising from the grave. The body was bloated, as if it had been feeding, the hair and nails would have grown, and the body may have shifted. These things are explainable now. Hair and nails continue to grow after death, and the bloating of the body is from decomposition. But to most people before the 19th century, the unknown was enough to keep legends alive.

Count Dracula

In 1897, Bram Stoker's novel "Dracula" was published, spreading the myths of vampirism to a mass audience. In the novel, the 500-year-old Count Dracula of Transylvania is a vampire who has bled his country dry and must move to England in search of new victims.

Stoker's count is based on a real-life terror, Vlad Tepes. Prince Vlad was a 15th-century figure known for excessive cruelty and acts of torture. Vlad was often referred to by his title, Dracula, which means "son of the dragon" or "son of the devil" in Romanian.

The modern vampire

Modern vampiric acts such as drinking blood, returning from the dead, and hunting humans at night are from the Eastern European myths. However, many familiar vampire traits such as capes with tall collars, no reflection in a mirror and turning into bats are more recent inventions of film and fiction. Tales of vampires are more popular now than ever, and the myths continue to evolve in popular novels such as Anne Rice's "Vampire Chronicles." Even Dracula's nemesis, Dr. Van Helsing, has a modern counterpart in TV's vampire slayer, Buffy (right).



WEREWOLVES

"Even a man who is pure in heart, and says his prayers by night, may become a wolf when the wolfbane blooms and the autumn moon is bright."

— Gypsy legend from "The Wolf Man"



The curse of the lycanthrope

The myth of a half-man, half-wolf beast is just as old as that of vampires, and almost as varied. In most werewolf stories, however, a beast would silently enter settlements at night and steal away with a young child or an animal. Protection against werewolves varied, though the most common were saying the werewolf's real name, hitting the werewolf three times on the forehead, and making the sign of the cross.

The use of silver to end a werewolf's curse did not appear until 1941 with the release of the film "The Wolf Man."

The myth exposed

The most common explanation of werewolf myths is that the beast was usually an ordinary wolf. Most settlements were near woods, giving wolves easy access to unguarded towns. The genetic disorder hypertrichosis, in which a person is afflicted with excess body hair, may have led to some myths. Although the disorder is extremely rare there were documented cases before the 20th century, such as the man in the 19th century woodcut to the right.



The beast within

According to various werewolf legends, you may become a werewolf if you:

- Are bitten by a werewolf.
- Are born on Christmas Eve.
- Wear/smell the plant wolfbane.
- Have eaten the brain of a wolf.

MISFITS OF SCIENCE

For every technological advancement there's always a cautionary tale with the same moral lesson: Don't mess with Mother Nature.



Frankenstein

The story of Dr. Frankenstein and his quest to create a human being unfolded in 1818 with the printing of Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein." But the legend of Frankenstein may have been planted in Shelley's mind four years earlier when she visited Castle Frankenstein in Germany. At that time, it was the home of Konrad Dippel, an alchemist, who supposedly wanted to build a laboratory to make gold and perform experiments on extending a person's life. In his pursuits, he dug up graves and collected cadavers. Shelley learned of Dippel's experiments during her stay at the castle, and the idea behind the legend of Frankenstein was born.

The Invisible Man

In H.G. Wells' 1897 story, the protagonist Griffin succeeded in turning himself invisible but could not find a way to become visible again. The scientist slowly goes mad, thinking that his crimes cannot be punished since no one can catch him. Wells' tale owed a great deal to a legendary story by the Greek philosopher Plato. Plato's "Republic" tells the story of the original invisible man: Gyges. Thrilled by the fact that his crimes will go unpunished, Gyges murders the king, seduces the queen, and takes over the Kingdom of Lydia.



Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde

Robert Louis Stevenson's 1886 novel of Dr. Jekyll and his evil double, Mr. Hyde, is possibly the most well-known story of the dual nature within man. Many psychological aspects influenced Stevenson's writings, but it is the ancient myth of the doppelganger that fuels it. In German folklore, the doppelganger is the exact spirit double of a person. Eventually, the doppelganger myth soon evolved into symbolizing a person's evil twin.



SOURCES: Universal Studios; Warner Bros.; Paramount Pictures; Vampire: The Masquerade by White Wolf Games; Vampires in Myth and History by Beverly Richardson; Boston College; Duke University; World Book Encyclopedia; Dracula by Bram Stoker; Frankenstein by Mary Shelley

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