

THE MONSTER-AS-SLAYER IN BLADE (1998): BLADE AND POSTHUMAN IDENTITY

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The Monster-as-Slayer in *Blade* (1998): Blade and Posthuman Identity

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ABSTRACT

Blade (1998) features an African American half-vampire whose goals seem contradictory: save the humans that would fear and hate him. A new character trope, the monster-as-slayer, is introduced in the movie's eponymous hero, Blade, the half-vampire half-human private eye. Via this trope, the movie explores contradictions in its hero's identity and motivations, leaving audiences in suspense throughout the film. Although there are examples of the monster-as-slayer in other media, *Blade* seems to begin this trend for modern film by combining classic elements of the vampire with new science fiction approaches. The result is the creation of a show-stopping posthuman superhero with whom the audience cannot help but empathize, monster or no monster. By analyzing the monster-as-slayer trope, I demonstrate a posthuman future on screen that encourages audiences to accept the monsters we are.

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INTRODUCTION

Monsters have become a staple for several genres of film. They are used to compel action, add uncertainty, and create suspense. As the film industry has evolved over the past century, so have monsters, offering new incarnations and interpretations of classic monster types, such as the werewolf, the creature, and the undead. A notable entry is the vampire, with its rich history in folklore and as a literary figure and film icon. The great variety of vampire films that have hit the silver screen traces Dracula's (a name that is often used synonymously with the word vampire) evolution, from the legendary *Nosferatu* (Ganz, 1922) and the classic Bela Lugosi rendition, *Dracula* (Browning and Freund, 1931), to the blaxploitation film *Blacula* (Crain, 1972), and Francis Ford Coppola's Gothic revival, *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (Coppola, 1992), starring Gary Oldman, Winona Rider, and Keanu Reeves. Even the 2020 Netflix TV series *Dracula* shows us how vampire portrayals push at the boundaries of what and who vampires are, as they revise and update our Dracula figure of old. Science fiction and horror movies, such as *Underworld* (Wiseman, 2003) and *Van Helsing* (Sommers, 2004), offer versions of what Dracula, or vampires more generally, may become--when given access to enough old magic and new technology. Especially in these more recent versions, we see the vampire morphed into something new and beyond its traditional status as a villainous beast; this new vampire probes the very boundaries of not just the vampire mythos but also those of bestiality and of what it means to be a monster.

By contrast and in a deliberate challenge to the monster-villain dichotomy, shows like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Whedon, 1997-2003), *Angel* (Whedon and Greenwalt 1999-2004), *The Discovery of Witches* (Blackburn, Donoughue, Troughton, Walker, Langdale, Paterson, Medina, Teplitzky, 2018-2022) and movies like the *Twilight* Saga (2008-2012), *Interview with*

the Vampire (1994), and *Kiss of the Damned* (2012) offer glimpses of a monster-hero, that is, a noble vampire whose need for human blood is carefully poised against the sanctity of human life. At the heart of this development, we find the monster-as-slayer trope, which offers the monster-as-anti-hero as an alternative and as a more evolved version of the traditional vampire figure. Importantly, the monster-as-slayer simultaneously straddles and challenges the boundaries between the human and the monstrous all while thanklessly protecting humans from other monsters. Combating the equal pull of blood thirst and protective heroism, the monster-as-slayer vampire lives a half life or, avoiding the pun, sports a double identity. Because despite its heroism, the monster-as-slayer is never truly human nor accepted among humans; rather, this contemporary revision of the vampire presents us with vigilante characters that live on the fringes of society, hunting monsters that haunt and threaten humanity, while their own survival is sought through more socially acceptable sources of sustenance than feeding on humans.

In my study here, I will look at the character of Blade in the movie of the same name, *Blade* (Norrington, 1998), as a prime example of the monster-as-slayer. I will argue that the film mixes genre conventions to explore the multi-modality of character and identity in the very character of Blade, a half-vampire vampire slayer. Originally, Blade was introduced into the Marvel Universe through comic books in 1973. Since then, the character's story has been adapted into a 1998 film which soon expanded into a trilogy and a franchise.¹ As I will show here, the construction of Blade's character relies on hallmarks of several film genres to provide visual and narrative markers, all of which help to identify Blade's intersectionality and his

¹ An anticipated revival of Blade's story in film and as part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe is currently set to release in 2024.

complexity as a person. With the help of a posthuman lens, I aim to expose how different aspects of Blade's identity inform his whole character. Using the posthumanist concept of cyborgization, I will demonstrate how the label of "half-vampire" brings with it a deluge of literary history, both through association and iconography, all of which ultimately help Blade to emerge as a deeply engaging, culturally-embedded, and empathetic posthuman character. His monstrosity (i.e., his vampirism), I will argue, helps to establish an innate commentary about race, sexuality, disability, and belonging in a post-modern post-human culture.

Ultimately, I trust that my approach to Blade-the-character will allow me to show how the film, via Blade and his cultural embeddedness, uses vampirism and the monster-as-slayer trope to create a complex social commentary on perceptions of monsters and identity in modern contexts, in which Blade emerges as simultaneously monstrous, (anti-)heroic, and empathetic. I will draw on the original vampire figure of Dracula and his evolution to help frame how Blade functions as the movie's eponymous, monstrous, category-blurring anti-hero.

CHAPTER 1. THE VAMPIRE AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

My analysis of the character Blade starts by demonstrating how he is inherently unstable, classified, as he is, as both a vampire and a vampire hunter. Bruce McClelland uncovers the relationship between the vampire and vampire slayer in his book, *Slayers and Their Vampires: A Cultural History of Killing the Dead* and details that, despite the disconnect from oral tradition and written literature of the vampire (148-50), both the vampire and the slayer function in literature and media similarly to how they functioned in oral tradition (183-85). Put another way, McClelland identifies that the folkloric and practical vampire, when reduced to metaphor, reaffirms the function of the vampire as a scapegoat on which to enact violence while the slayer becomes the enactor who exonerates the common people from socially undesirable violence (75, 151). Like slayers of folklore-past, Blade is both the dealer of justice for the people and the evil-doing vampire that threatens the people; he does humanity's dirty work and protects the species from being monstrously violent in defense of their own. His classification as half-vampire vampire slayer helps us see how these two supposedly oppositional markers (vampire and vampire-slayer) are not mutually exclusive, but a site of identity formation that invites exploration.

Blade's identity performance challenges the concept of stability commonly connected with character types and safeguards related values. Blade is a half-vampire vampire hunter whose goal it is to seek revenge for his mother, who was assaulted and effectively killed by a vampire during pregnancy. Blade's own half-vampirism in embryo and his birth after her death emulates the premise of the *vampirdžia* in folklore (McClelland 59-60). To his quest, Blade adds the talents of his mentor Abraham Whistler, a human vampire hunter looking to avenge his wife and daughter, and the human hematologist Karen Jensen, a recent survivor of a vampire attack.

Together they hunt Deacon Frost, a fully-turned vampire who is conspiring to become a blood god keen on subjugating humanity under a new vampire order and overthrowing the old vampire hierarchy. As the story unfolds, Blade learns that Frost is his mother's attacker and has not only turned her into a vampire but also converted her into a faithful disciple and proponent for his cause. Confronted with her fall and betrayal, Blade is forced to balance his desire for revenge and his fear of following in her footsteps and losing his humanity. Within the film, vampires are the epitome of the subversive and the socially disruptive--they stage blood raves, engage in blood orgies, and bingedrink from their human victims publicly--but they also, in a sense, showcase a return to the bestiality and inhumanness of the vampire from bygone days: they are a separate species that preys on humans, without remorse and with impunity. Even the extremity of their delight in hunting humans for sport and erotically dancing in literal blood baths can be traced back to the vampire of old who reigned supremely over his human subjects and concubines. Dracula's unsavory infatuation with Mina Harker may serve as an example here:

With his left hand he held both Mrs Harker's hands, keeping them away with her arms at full tension; his right hand gripped her by the back of the neck, forcing her face down on his bosom. Her white nightdress was smeared with blood, and a thin stream trickled down the man's bare chest, which was shown by his torn-open dress. The attitude of the two had a terrible resemblance to a child forcing a kitten's nose into a saucer of milk to compel it to drink. As we burst into the room, the Count turned his face, and the hellish look that I had heard described seemed to leap into it. His eyes flamed red with devilish passion; the great nostrils of the white aquiline nose opened wide and quivered at the edges; and the white sharp teeth, behind the full lips of the blood-dripping mouth, champed together like those of a wild beast. (262)

Dracula's erotic feeding of Mina is textually linked to a kitten drinking milk, but visually reminds us more closely of a mother nursing a child, with Dracula filling in for the mother and lactation being replaced by the blood he encourages Mina to suck from his chest. Words like "compel" and "passion" drive home the forced, nonconsensual eroticism of this scene.

Despite the relatively modern leather trench coats, sleek sunglasses, and the advanced scientific knowledge of blood, many aspects of Blade's vampires, including the characterization of its antagonists, have a rich 200-year history that revolves around the story of Dracula. Examining vampire lore, Benson Saler and Charles Ziegler identify Dracula as the "exemplar" vampire and compare him to the eponymous vampire in Sheridan Le Fanu's novella *Carmilla* (1872). Where McClelland uses Stoker's work to locate Dracula at the epicenter of the transition of the vampire from folklore to literature (153-55), Saler and Ziegler identify specific traits that were carried over to shape the iconic vampire we know today. Chiefly they include the physical characteristics that inscribe vampirism upon the body, such as the long fangs that enable vampires to drink blood and their ability to shapeshift which allows them to both hunt and hide (221-22). Saler and Ziegler argue that Dracula, as a vampire stereotype, works because he is ontologically engaging while still being a clear "Other" who needs to be vanquished to re-establish order (224-26). Deacon Frost and his blood sucking cronies generally follow all the same parameters as the original Dracula figure, both in their transitional and physical nature. Reading Frost as a foil for Blade, therefore, allows me to ask questions about ontology in culture through film, with *Blade* serving as a space to interrogate how the vampire works as a social construct. The movie explores identity through its constant rationalizing of the existence of the vampire via technology and blood science. It is through blood as a symbol of the vampiric

identity and the behavior and properties of blood that the research into *Dracula* can inform the reading of *Blade*.

Jeffrey Cohen's monster theory initiates a discussion of how the monster is both subversive and constructive within a narrative. He offers seven theses and creates a framework for "understanding cultures through the monsters they bear" (4). Important to this study, Cohen identifies that monsters are a cultural sign built over time through a multitude of entries. In the context of *Blade*, this means that, as a half-vampire, Blade already embodies cultural lineage through previous on-screen vampires. Cohen's claim that the monster is a "cultural body" in which "[t]he monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy... giving them life and an uncanny independence" is especially helpful to my analysis, as it informs my reading of *Blade* and highlights how he challenges culture through his embodied vampirism. To Cohen, "The monstrous body is pure culture" (4). *Blade*, who already interacts with culture through his intersectionality as a Black American man, additionally embodies Cohen's thesis by layering his (half) vampirism onto his intersectionality and cultural identity. Following previous source materials that have drawn connections between *Blade* and *Dracula* and that have read *Dracula* as the exemplar vampire (Saler and Ziegler 219-220), I want to begin by identifying how culturally ripe vampires are for critical analysis and then demonstrate how *Blade*'s vampirism functions at the cultural and symbolic level.

One facet of the vampire that marks its social significance and symbolism are race and ethnicity. Stephen Arata argues that *Dracula* is "a narrative of reverse colonization... [that] expresses both fear and guilt" concerning Victorian England and the colonization of other people and countries (623). Ultimately, Arata identifies how through Harker, "British culture sees its own imperial practices mirrored back in monstrous forms" (623). Jack Halberstam makes similar

observations in his essay “Technologies of Monstrosity: Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*,” noting how Dracula “resembled stereotypical anti-Semitic nineteenth-century representations of the Jew” (86). Similar undertones are explored in *Blade* through the juxtaposition of Frost and Blade. Frost and many of his vampire cronies are white or white-passing and are working to achieve Frost’s goal of vampire supremacy. Frost’s whiteness is reinforced by his pale complexion on screen and potentially heightened by his and his follower’s application of thick layers of white sunscreen during many of Frost’s scenes. In contrast, Blade is an African American half-vampire; his goals stand in contrast to Frost in that they are aimed at both inclusion and diversity: he wants to liberate all humans from vampires, regardless of race, gender, or ethnicity. Symbolically, he saves Karen, an African American woman and scientist, liberates the Asian-descendent child that Frost holds as a hostage, and collaborates with Whistler, a white man whose family was murdered by vampires. By siding with humans and helping humans regardless who they are and what they represent, Blade establishes a continued connection between vampires and inclusivity that stands in stark contrast to Frost’s Aryan designs at world domination.

In its exploration of vampirism and ethnic identity, *Blade* harkens back to Florence Marryat’s 1897 novel *The Blood of the Vampire* which creates connections between race, blood, and identity in Marryat’s drawing of the Black social vampire Harriet Brandt. Scholars have pointed out how Marryat’s vampire is a symbol of ambiguous non-whiteness, but also a symbol of otherness from biased historical societal ideals (Hammack 887-89, 893-94). Elaine Graham explains that monsters, such as the vampire, symbolize how “[t]hat which is different becomes pathologized as ‘monstrous’ and thus inhuman... the monster is a personified threat to purity and homogeneity” (53). For *Blade* now as it was for *Dracula* and *Brandt* then, race and vampirism

are closely intertwined. All three vampires blur the line between the reason for their existence and the nature of their monstrosity. Although the film locates vampirism as the “monstrous” part of Blade, a commentary on prejudice and race is implied in Blade’s Black identity.²

Blade also offers a new way to examine vampires as subversive symbols of sexuality. Talia Schaffer speculates that Stoker’s *Dracula* is based on Oscar Wilde and used to highlight the conflict regarding Wilde’s sexuality during the time the novel was written in 1895. In this argument, Schaffer notes the similarities between Stoker’s literary focus on reticence and morality and his treatment of his own (suspected) same-sex sexuality and reaction to Oscar Wilde’s incarceration by connecting real-life events with documentation to the narrative of *Dracula* through a new historicist lens (381-82, 398). For example, Schaffer highlights how Wilde and *Dracula* are both “super-criminal” due to similar word choices and rhetoric used to describe them (408), or how Stoker is himself like Wilde in the same way in which Van Helsing is similar to *Dracula* (390-91). What Schaffer’s argument does not fully address is the continuing transference of *Dracula*’s symbolism. Much of her argument relates to *Dracula* itself and its immediate history. By contrast, Jack Halberstam also acknowledges the sexuality of the vampire but attributes it to the technology of the monster. Halberstam asserts that “*Dracula* is indeed not simply a monster but a technology of monstrosity. Technologies of monstrosity are also technologies of sex. ... the novel transforms metaphors of otherness into technologies of sex, into machinic texts, in other words, that produce perverse identities” (88-9). Halberstam effectively builds upon Schaffer’s work by labeling the vampire as a symbol for what he calls

² Perhaps this commentary is relevant again through the impending release of the 2024 extension to the franchise and in the context of recent Black Lives Matters movements.

“perverse” sexuality and identifies as a technology, something akin to ingredients or, as described above, markers inscribed on the vampiric body, thus making its application more mobile and modern. The posthuman reading of the vampire I offer here follows Halberstam and does away with the labels “perversity,” “deviance,” and “deviant sexuality” and instead promotes an examination of the vampire as a built body. With an eye to how the monster and the monstrous body challenge societal labels, I acknowledge the vampire’s instability in categorization on multiple fronts and embrace the multiple ways to interpret the monster, its function and its symbolism, within a text.

It is not accidental that sexuality remains an important theme throughout the film *Blade*, where vampires are depicted as hypersexualized: female and male vampires are dressed provocatively in styles of the late 90s and operate in environments that would evoke sexual promiscuity (raves, clubs, and house parties); music, drugs, and alcohol underscore their performance of sexual innuendos and accentuate their overt sexual activities. As we have seen, these depictions of vampires draw on fictional, historical precedents and symbolism (i.e., Mina and Dracula’s sex-driven concubines), but we also see how Blade’s embodiment of vampirism challenges that history. Since he was taken in by Whistler, Blade has not fed on humans and when Karen offers her blood, he adamantly refuses until his taking of her blood is necessary to secure their joint survival.

One way to reconsider the social construction of the vampire is through the lens of posthumanism. Posthumanism, as a theory, posits that humanism’s anthropocentric worldview needs revision in light of ecological, technological, and medical developments. Ultimately, posthumanism holds that humans are part of nature and not a category unto itself and above other species; humans change and are altered by the natural world they inhabit and with which they

interact. Posthumanism thus, by definition, directly challenges ontological hygiene by acknowledging how human experience is often centered only to then destabilize this centering. Elaine Graham notes how posthumanism creates space to acknowledge past fabrications and dichotomies entrenched in culture. In noting the fabrication of “nature,” Graham notes “[t]he fact that representations of ‘nature’ emerge in particular historical and cultural contexts suggests... that it may be more appropriate to think of the categories of humanity and nature as constructed in relation to each other, both materially and symbolically” (32). Florian Cord additionally points out how newer forms of theory such as object-oriented ontology, speculative realism have been connected with theories like affect theory, animal studies, and new media theory to challenge “human exceptionalism” (25). Further, he explains how these theories are “continuing and radicalizing the project of ‘[decentering] the subject’ pursued most consistently by post/structuralism, and to have ushered in a new, *postanthropocentric* phase of posthumanism” (25). Here Cord identifies the decentering of the human from theoretical considerations as a hallmark of posthumanist theory. Graham elects to reframe posthumanism as post/human to likewise emphasize this decentering and rejection of dichotomy, explaining how post/human “denotes perhaps less a *condition* (signifying a degree of fixity...) than an intervention.” She continues, “talk about representations of the post/human is an occasion for acknowledging... that ‘human nature’ is as much a piece of human artifice as all the other things human being have invented” (37). This intervention created by the posthuman disrupts anthropocentric, or human-centered, lines of logic as it points out the fallacy in such “logic.” Questions about “what is human?” are thus answered with an eye toward what “human” means, but also what “human” may entail or become, as humans evolve, reinvent themselves, and reconsider their place in the

world around them. Monsters, such as the vampire, and cyborgs lie at the heart of that discussion.

Posthumanism, as it is tied to identity and culture, is evoked in the form of monsters, mutants, and modified humans. One of the more enduring ideas of posthumanism thus is the deconstruction and decentering of the fabled stability of human form and human nature. Societal messages are mediated through representations, which in itself obfuscates the underlying messaging. We can most clearly discern this in the theory of spectrality, which argues that communication from bygone people and time persist and where messages are left for the enduring generations through various forms of media, including film (Herbrechter 30). Another recurring hypothesis is that the posthuman is often rhetorical and that posthuman bodies are a “technology,” if not by nature, then by invention (Halberstam and Livingston qtd. in Graham 36, Halberstam 88-9). But the idea of technology also invites new cultural considerations. Moving this consideration of posthumanism into cultural studies because of its destabilizing nature, Cord argues that “Cultural studies... has always been committed to this messiness... What counts, therefore, is not perfect theoretical purity and consistency – inappropriate for studying a world everywhere characterized by hybridity – but *practicality*” (35). Posthumanism provides malleable conditions in which to consider the truth or fallacy of categorical rigidity or “truth,” and brings into question many of the hallmarks of postmodernist study. Donna Haraway in “The Cyborg Manifesto,” notes how “Irony is about humor and serious play. It is also a rhetorical strategy... At the center of my ironic faith, my blasphemy, is the image of the cyborg,” or the manifestation of the technology of the posthuman body (5). The “irony,” the “blasphemy” that fuels her cyborg is the same that nourishes every vampire leaping across pages and screens: vampires demonstrate the fragility of categorization through the transgression of fabricated

boundaries, making all attempts to categorize moot; instead, they promote an assemblage of identity based on cultural construction. Posthumanism grants us space and the vocabulary, in other words, to recognize and discuss the hybridity of vampires as technology in a post-anthropocene world.

Posthuman considerations of the vampire, furthermore, allow us to incorporate how modern adaptations connect an individual's vampirism more abstractly with the world around them. As it is concerned with the intentional combination of technological and biological aspects within humans and the creation of a "post human" entity whose mental and physical ability supersedes the natural or biological capacity of the brain and body, posthumanism, in some ways, builds on the concepts of social construction of identity, noting that the political connections with identity envelop an individual's actions and behaviors in larger social environments. For example, Verena Bernardi examines in her article, "Subtropical Gothic: New Orleans and Posthuman Supernaturals in *The Originals*," how vampires connect their sense of identity to place. When vampires move and "lay claim" to territory, she argues, they, in a sense, also encourage audiences to confront similar "turf wars" that occur in real life by mirroring them on screen with vampires and other monsters (103). Similarly, Laura Wright points out in her article, "Post-Vampire: The Politics of Drinking Humans and Animals in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Twilight* and *True Blood*," how the way in which vampires approach feeding and sustaining themselves helps inform how an audience will read or interpret vampires both individually and as a group. Bernardi identifies the politics of identity through the connection between vampires and place while Wright identifies identity politics of the vampire through vampire veganism (361). Blade engages in similar "turf wars" in the fictional city in which the movie is set and thus performs his identity both through his interaction with land and with his

approach to blood consumption. He enters vampire identity politics as he tries to circumvent his vampiric thirst for blood in ways not completely dissimilar to that of *Twilight* (Hardwicke, 2008), *Kiss of the Damned* (Cassavetes, 2012), or *Only Lovers Left Alive* (Jarmusch, 2013), all of which feature vampires who rely on bagged blood and blood banks for their sustenance. With this shift in considering what is monstrous as opposed to what is simply different to the normalcy human audiences consider, posthumanism helps to identify how external markers of film and genre consider internal markers of identity and identity politics. In *Blade*, representations of identity politics help foster a better understanding of the complexity of identity and subsequently promote a wider breadth of empathy for different identities.

Critics have referred to the act of re-formation of the posthuman as cyborgization, in that what is created is both human and invention, both natural and artificial, as first proposed by Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" and expanded upon by Elaine Graham in her book *Representations of the Post/Human: Monsters, Aliens and Others in Popular Culture* (201-204). For my purposes, I am interested in how posthumanism can encapsulate different considerations of identity and the plasticity of identity, especially considering how monsters, as an embodiment of culture and a social construct, interact with posthumanist theory. I use posthumanism here to connect the history of the vampire's identity as the ethnic other and sexually subversive to present discussions of race and sexuality in vampire films.

Anticipating the future of the posthuman in film, I analyze vampire monstrosity as part of a posthuman cyborgization and examine how cyborgization works prosthetically within the context of disability studies. In the world of *Blade* (1998), where vampires and humans coexist, multiple depictions of disability converge; both humans and monsters lack coveted abilities: Whistler has a leg injury and treats Blade for his affliction, i.e. vampirism. Deacon Frost, on the

other hand, shares Blade's vampirism and possesses his speed and strength in equal measure, but he lacks Blade's ability to not just survive but, indeed, walk in sunlight. Disability studies creates a space for me to consider how the characters in *Blade* have adapted and evolved alongside their abilities and/or in spite of their afflictions. As mentioned before, blood is the site of the posthuman in *Blade*, as it carries all of these identity markers and subsists the life of both full and half vampires. As *Blade* can be read as a cyborg who is part human and part vampire, his cyborgization becomes a part of his intersectionality and vice versa.

Vampires, Blood, and Symbolism

Vampire fiction is grounded in blood. Historically, blood has been associated with ideas of purity and contamination. As both an internal and external marker of one's character and being, blood has traditionally been used to validate marginalization and to ostracize and segregate ethnic groups from mainstream, typically white society. Much of that racialized history carries over into vampire fiction. In this analysis I expound how the monster-as-slayer character supports a more inclusive posthuman future by demonstrating how cultural symbolism has changed and how, in movies like *Blade*, blood's symbolism is subverted: *Blade* is a film that calls attention to the importance of blood, but actively challenges dated notions of "purity" by making blood a site of cyborgization.

When blood was still considered a tangible representation of humans' cultural connection with the supernatural, blood rituals and other practices were a way for people to connect with the spirits around them and to connect with humans outside themselves in a myriad of ways and for different purposes. While humans have largely diverged from these practices, the belief in the power attached to blood has not changed. There has always been a historical scientific association between blood and identity, thus serving as a basis for identity anxieties.

From the standpoint of *Dracula* and the Victorian medicalization of blood, a long tradition of associating traits with embodiment exists. Much of this embodiment leads back to race, sexuality, and also social standing (Summerville, 246). McClelland notes how the literary vampire is far removed from its original folkloric origin, but he argues that traits from the folkloric vampire have transferred to literature with enhanced metaphorical impact (86-87). The sociocultural history of blood and the history of the vampire are connected in how they function as literary symbols.

Notably, there are several texts in the near 200-year history of the literary vampire that demonstrate the literary use of blood. Although many vampire stories have come both before and after, *Dracula* (1897) by Bram Stoker has remained one of the most popular touchstones to the “modern” vampire, including all the lore and superstition around the fabled creature. *Dracula* is used as a scapegoat upon which humans can hang their problems, thus removing humans from their own culpability (McClelland 86). A litany of studies connects *Dracula* to a host of modern cultural concerns and contentions, including race and ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, among others; *Dracula* is effectively the recipient of prejudiced aggression veiled as triumphant justice in each of these analyses. But the fixation on blood and its attachment to identity does not stem from *Dracula* alone. Brenda Mann Hammack mentions *Blood of the Vampire* (1897) and how author Florence Marryat genuinely subscribed to certain medical theories revolving around teratology. Hammack notes how Florence associates Harriet’s vampirism with a vampire bat attack on the character’s mother, causing her vampiric mutation (887-88). *Blade* likewise embodies the pathologizing of blood and carries with it all previous medical readings of blood into modern analyses.

Identity through blood has not gone out of fashion yet; it continues to influence vampire films. Aspasia Stephanou identifies how the vampire is brought back through blood. In her article, “A ‘Ghastly Operation’: Transfusing Blood, Science, and the Supernatural in Vampire Texts,” Stephanou identifies how “[b]lood, being inside the body, was believed to carry identity and the individual’s temperament.” She argues that “blood was a synecdoche of the body and of the embodied self” (54). Stephanou traces the use of blood from *Dracula* (both the novel and early film adaptations) to the film *Near Dark* (1987) and identifies how it is used to uphold the ideals of the nuclear family rather than as an outcry about debauchery (60-61). Both Halberstam and Stephanou make it clear that the purpose of the vampire is not necessarily to embody a specific trait or to act as a conduit for one anxiety, but that the technology of the monster, in its transgression of rigid category boundaries, offers an exploration of multiple anxieties.

Stephanou’s work identifies how it is the vampire’s act of taking blood that demonstrates the transgression of boundaries, while demonstrating that the context around the blood’s symbolism can change depending on the identity of the vampire and their victim(s). Stephanou shows how blood has moved from a purely supernatural realm to one of medicalization and rationality, separating blood and vampire (62). *Blade* relies on the scientizing of blood, the mixing of supernatural and scientific, and on the continuation and subversion of how blood is used in vampire films.

In *Blade*, blood bridges technological and supernatural phenomena and signals the transgression of category boundaries. In essence, the film connects the vampire’s past and blood’s more modern symbolism in American culture today with its focus on identity. It also initiates a new focus on a posthuman alternative future that examines what it means to be a “monster.” Through *Blade* and its titular character, audiences can begin to explore their own

interpretation of identity and values surrounding identity as the film aims to dismantle myths about identity and intersectionality through the representation of a Black American half-vampire vampire slayer who vanquishes vampires in an attempt to reclaim his identity while utilizing his half-vampire abilities to protect humans who may not even accept him.

CHAPTER 2. *BLADE* AND GENRE CROSSING

Blade challenges and complicates the classic horror genre by combining film noir conventions and futuristic sci-fi technologies with old-school vampire lore. *Blade* himself, I argue, functions as a cultural sign while his embodiment of the monster-as-slayer trope subverts conventional genre expectations. In an effort to answer the question “How is the medium of the movie and how are film genres used to explore identity formation, posthumanism, intersectionality, and border crossing?”, I briefly draw on Derrida’s concept of *différance* in so far as I situate Cohen’s concept of the monster as a “cultural body” and a sign within Derrida’s theoretical framework.

The vampire, as a monster, represents what is not human and demarcates categorical boundaries, yet is itself elusive in that it can never be pinned down; and, as a cultural body, the vampire inherently carries cultural meaning. Elaine Graham most succinctly describes this in her book, *Representations of the Post/Human: Monsters, Aliens and Others in Popular Culture*:

Monsters are... effectively the demonstration of the workings of *différance*. Their otherness to the norm of the human, the natural and the moral, is that which must be repressed in order to secure the boundaries of the same. Yet at the same time, by showing forth the fault-lines of binary opposition – between human/non-human, natural/unnatural, virtue/vice – monsters bear the trace of difference that destabilizes the distinction. (54)

She connects *différance* with Cohen’s seventh thesis, “The Monster Stands at the Threshold... of Becoming,” where Cohen asserts how “monsters ask us how we perceive the world... They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions... They ask us why we have created them” (Cohen 20, qtd in Graham 55). When adding “spectrality” to this cultural body-as-sign

concept, another concept of Derrida's explored by Stefan Herbrechter in his essay "Derrida on Screen," we can recognize *différance* on screen. Herbrechter likens the images of people as "ghosts," or specters that haunt the film, to "spectrality" (29). Film communicates through images as signs and effectively communicates what is repressed through what is represented. Herbrechter notes how media "have always been 'spectralizing,' because of the necessarily 'teleological' character of communication (of their message-sending and destination logic)" (30). *Blade*, in this reading, is a cultural sign that tells us that something is there to see, while the vampire-as-slayer represents what is repressed and shifts focus away from the Other and back to ourselves by way of its liminal protagonist.

Blade provides a space for reevaluating "our cultural assumptions," Jeffrey Cohen's seventh thesis, precisely through the juxtaposition of genre conventions and horror expectations. The character of Blade is a representation of an intersectional posthuman identity, one that activates and subverts cultural signs through traces of its own boundary-crossing and categorization crisis. *Blade*, the film, despite all the vampire tradition the character Blade exhibits, is also essential to the development of a new vampire canon. By blending elements from film noir, science fiction, and superhero movies, *Blade* subverts expectations of the vampire horror movie and, in the process, creates a hybrid genre that uniquely lends itself to conveying a traditional story in a new way more appropriate to the vampire figure's newfound complexity. *Blade* builds a bridge that leads us out of the semi-lit darkness of noir horror and gives us access to a vampire of the future.

Specifically, what we find in *Blade* is a distinct move away from the horror genre that traditionally served as the vehicle for vampire tales. Other modern vampire movies have performed a similar genre-switching exercise, of course, to shed new light on an old tale: *The*

Twilight Saga (2008-2012) famously tells a coming-of-age story in which its (forever) young adult struggles with his vampire identity and finds true love; *Underworld* (2003) tells the story of a vampire who realizes her found family killed her original family as she tries to protect her coven; and *Interview With a Vampire* (1994) tells the story of a newly made vampire trying to cope with the monster he has become as he struggles to retain his humanity. What makes *Blade* unique and groundbreaking is its overt move to use the vampire's monstrosity, its otherness by way of a scientific mutation (i.e., blood) and scientific discovery as its premise and to recast its unlikely hero not just as the movie's protagonist but as its vigilante superhero, effectively creating a vampire-as-slayer whose superpower and his affliction originate in his blood.

Film language is a visual language that requires and presupposes a visual literacy from its audience and a familiarity with the tools of the trade, such as costuming, mise-en-scene, cinematography, and editing. Film genres additionally help to locate a series of signs and symbols that can be used to quickly communicate expected messages to an audience. *Blade's* indebtedness to classic horror and film noir reinforces the vampire's deep roots in literary and cultural history, but the film also allows the vampire to step beyond subscribed boundaries as it creates an origin story that breaks with traditional lore, evokes contemporary superhero movies, and offers choices to *Blade* that traditional vampires are not given: to remain half-vampire or become fully human.

Genre matters, and horror, film noir, superhero, and science fiction conventions work together to establish *Blade's* multiple or layered identities. To begin with horror and film noir as genres, *Blade* not only pushes the human/monster binary but exists wholly within that binary as he interacts with the world. Like the other vampires in the movie, *Blade* creates a bloodbath when he enters the nightclub at the beginning of the movie; the difference is that his victims are

vampires and that he stops once he realizes that the only survivor left is human. Like a true film noir anti-hero, Blade minimizes contact with both vampires and humans and remains largely secluded, his only company being his mentor Whistler. As the movie's lone wolf, he expands upon previous cultural signs of the monster and the PI and invites further inquiry into the moral grayness of his character. While he polices humans and vampires within their categories, he himself exists in-between and it is within that space that Blade polices himself.

Much of *Blade* is stylized via film noir tropes, such as “low-key lighting, claustrophobic framing, shadows and/or reflections, unbalanced compositions, and great depth of field” as well as “urban landscapes, costuming, particularly trench coats, garments with padded shoulders, and spiked heels, and most often rain-soaked environments” (Doll and Faller, 91). Wesley Snipes's Blade dons a black leather trench coat with padded shoulders, and much of the film takes place within a dark, dingy urban setting.

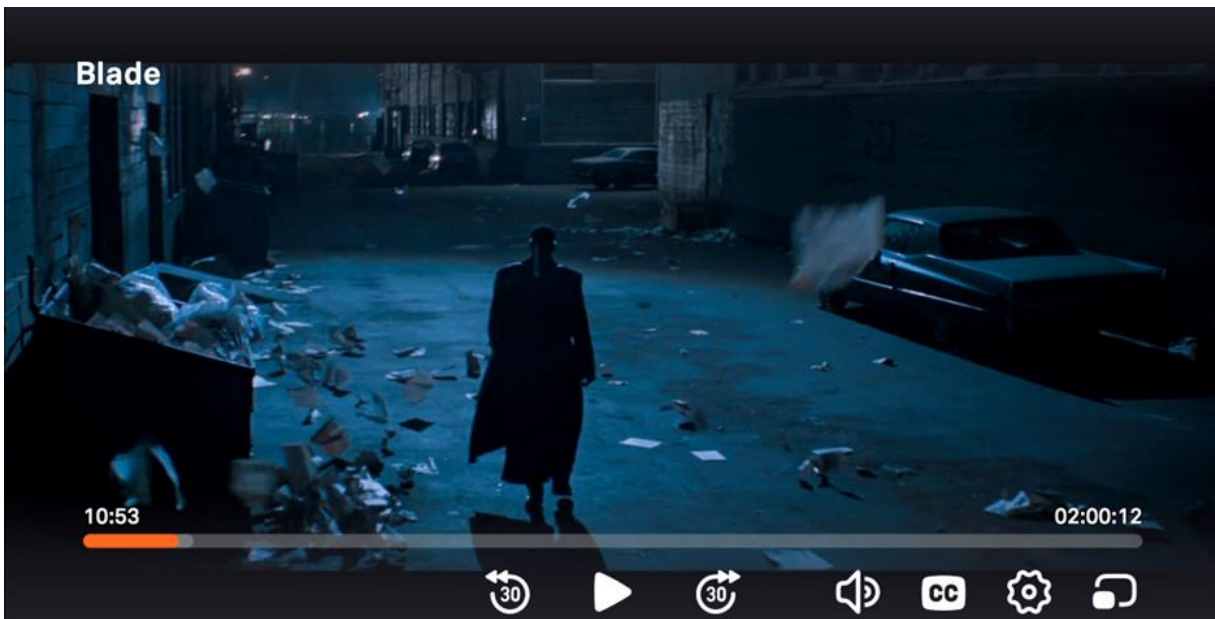


Figure 1. Still from Norrington, Blade (0:10:53).

As he walks away from the Blood Bath, for example, we see his dark silhouette, with his trench coat billowing in the wind, as he walks away from the crime, or the vigilante justice

rather, through a littered back alley; a vintage car is parked at the edge of the frame, while tall buildings cast shadows in the night (0:10:53). The mise-en-scene and costumes in this early scene clearly evokes the film noir genre with its long shadows, high buildings, dark streets, the 50s oldsmobile flair, and the lonesome hero walking by himself.

Further, Blade fulfills the role of the “investigator” through his role as monster-as-slayer who investigates vampire sightings, while the vampires and cops’ alliance in the film serves as the “corrupt authority” to which Blade responds by hunting vampires and reinstating the borders of the possible (Cohen 12-16). Whistler explains to Karen how they hunt the vampires, “moving from one city to the next tracking their migrations” (0:27:58-0:28:01), and it’s “a war going on out there. Blade, myself [Whistler], a few others... tried to keep it from spilling over onto the streets” (0:29:11-19). With Whistler and Blade on the job, we may interpret Karen as the “redeemer” who provides Blade the opportunity to integrate with society (Doll and Faller 91), and one may locate the femme fatale character in Blade’s mother. Usually put in opposition of the investigator, here the femme fatale role exists separately and creates complexity by being attached non-romantically to the investigator.

But *Blade* is also clearly grounded in the horror genre as the narrative centers around vampires threatening the human way of life. Frost, as the movie’s villain, exhibits the closest kinship with horror. He is a monster who relishes the debauchery of being a vampire: he has multiple (implied) sexual relationships, looks to expand his territory and control, and will sacrifice others to get what he wants. In this way, Frost is much like Dracula, with his concubines, his learning of new London culture, and the mayhem and dead bodies he leaves behind in his quest to conquer England. Both Dracula and Frost evoke a sense of horror because they show a complete disregard for human life and will shed an indiscriminate amount of blood

to get what they want. Unlike these older models of the vampire, Blade challenges what the vampire is and could be through his own performance.

Importantly, *Blade's* ending does not harken back to old Hollywood monsters: the vampire is not slain, order has not been restored, and it is not only humans who are left standing. Rather, we are presented with a highly ambiguous and entirely unexpected finale in which Blade is given the choice to become human or remain vampire. Karen, having developed a cure for vampirism, offers these options to Blade. Our hero must choose to become human and leave behind his vampirism and life of vampire-hunting. Only he does not. Although he initially hesitates, Blade ultimately decides to continue his half-vampire existence, entreating Karen to instead create a new serum for him to stabilize his border status (1:52:32-1:53:50). By choosing to remain a half-vampire, Blade also resolves to continue his quest to kill vampires vigilante style, in the shadows and outside the law. *Blade* reaches its audience in an active revision of the horror genre in that Blade is allowed to resist the cliché monster ending and chooses neither death nor restoration.

The introduction of film noir convention complicates and subverts the horror genre. One of the aspects of the film noir genre is the premise that film noir movies follow a “type of investigation... [where] the investigator [...] attempts to survive in an amoral and unstable society” (Doll and Faller, 91). Susan Doll and Greg Faller furthermore note how the “site of morality” is located in the protagonist, the lone detective who represents the last vestiges of morality in a “decaying society” (95). Blade reinforces the boundary between human and vampire because he hunts down corrupt vampires preying on unsuspecting humans. Blade also fits this profile and contributes to the contemplation of the “dark side of life” as he seeks to avenge his mother. Although it is alluded to throughout the film, Frost openly mocks Blade when

he taunts “You [Blade] spend your whole life looking for the vampire who bit your mother. Well, here I am. Who would ever guess you’d survive your mother’s death? But you did. And here we are—one big happy fuckin’ family” (1:26:54-1:27:12). The implication here is clear: because he sired Blade’s mother with Blade in embryo, Frost assumes a sort of corrupted fatherhood over Blade. It is his blood that half-turned the baby; his blood that led to Blade’s unique abilities. Blade fiercely rejects this notion. In my reading, Blade’s vengeance is indicative of a type of hyper morality because he polices the border even against the corruption of his own family line; and while he himself may cross the border of the possible, his engagement in the “war” against vampires aligns him with Whistler and his own human half, even as he clings to his vampiric nature. Blade’s impossible task throughout the film is to patrol the border when both his quarries and he himself create a category crisis (Cohen 6-7).

Like other films of the 1990s its time, *Blade* continues the 1990s trend of blending film noir and science fiction. In their article, “Blade Runner and Genre: Film Noir and Science Fiction,” Doll and Faller argue how *Blade Runner* uses visual motifs of the film noir combined with hallmarks of the science fiction genre to add complexity to the reading of the film (94-6). *Blade* achieves a similar genre-mixing in its introduction of Karen Jensen, the resident hematologist. Although Whistler and Blade already possess multiple new technologies that combine science fiction and horror, like silver stakes, hollow-point silver bullets stuffed with garlic, and large UV flashlights, Karen further adds to their arsenal through her expertise in biochemistry. Indeed, Karen offers a solution that circumvents old lore weapons (stakes, garlic, and sun) and draws on science and modern medicine instead. She creates a serum that reacts aggressively with specific components in vampire blood and effectively causes vampires to explode from the inside out. The inclusion of Karen also provides an opportunity to explore the

scientization of vampirism through Blade's experience with half-vampirism. There are many times where Blade is featured using advanced weaponry, which begins to show his cyborgization on screen, including the use of his favorite booby-trapped sword.

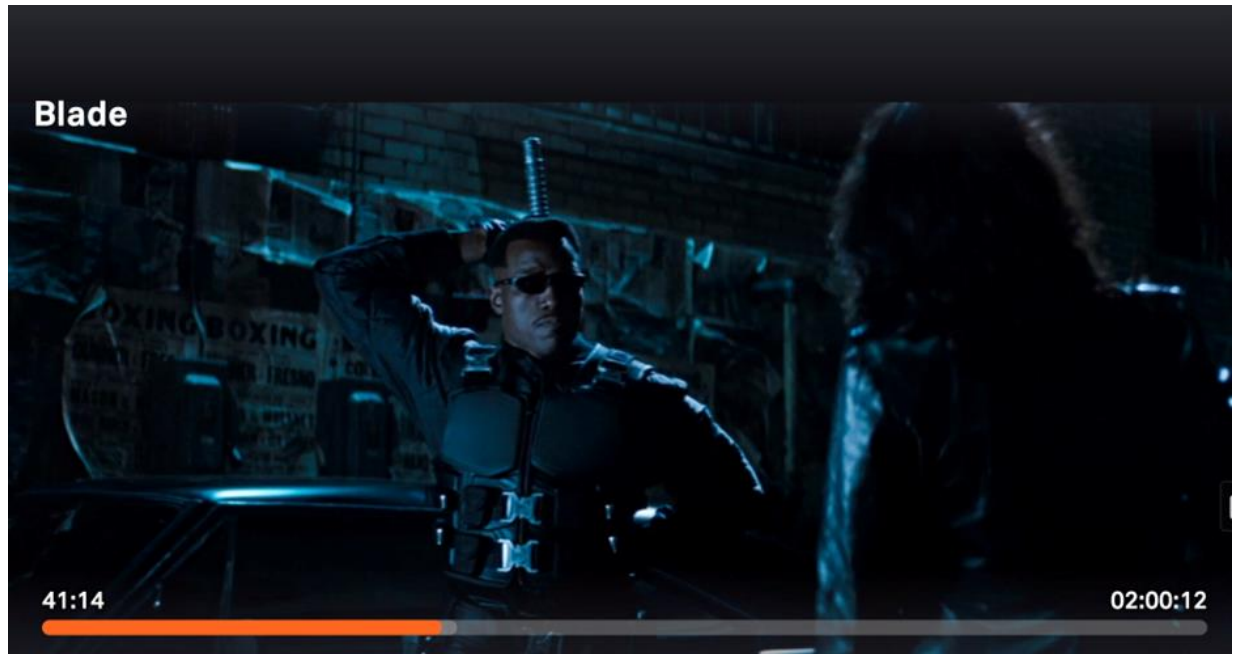


Figure 2. Still from Norrington, Blade (0:41:14).

In one scene, he deftly flips his blade before locking it into position behind his back for easy access later (0:41:14). It is here that we can begin to see elements of Blade's cyborgization with how fluidly Blade utilizes his advanced equipment. Jordan notes how "Blade is revealed as the vampire cyborg. His weapons slip so seamlessly into his body armor that it is difficult to discern where the vampire ends and the technology begins," mimicking other posthuman superheroes like the DC superhero Cyborg, for example, or Marvel's Wolverine (11). In quiet conversations between Blade and Whistler, and later Karen and Whistler, it is revealed that Blade balances his half-vampire state by using a serum (12). He thus exhibits both the more classic form of cyborgs and a newer version in the way in which chemical and biochemical sciences help sustain his technologically enhanced body. By the same token, Karen's

introduction into the world of vampires turns the tide for the two lone crusaders in that she actively scientizes blood and offers scientific means to increase their odds in vampire-hunting.

Despite Blade being the monster within the border, Blade also exudes a “cool factor,” much like a superhero. When watching him on screen, one cannot help but root for him. His black trench coat taking the place of a cape, Blade is a somber hero and role model akin to Batman: his stern moral compass and tragic past spurn his need to do good in a corrupt world. Batman has a long legacy in the film noir genre, much of the aesthetic stemming from *Batman: The Animated Series* (Altieri, Kirkland, Paur, Riba, Sebast, Timm, Radomski, Butterworth, 1992-1995), where crowded and rainy urban city is guarded by the ever-vigilant “greatest detective” donning a long black cape (91).³



Figure 3. Still from Norrington, Blade (0:15:31).

³ This comparison alone gives ample room to explore embodiment, performance, and interiority, especially given Kevin Conroy’s autobiography “Finding Batman,” which recounts his experience playing Batman starting with *The Animated Series*.

Blade evokes superheroism within the film noir genre as his trench coat often doubles as a cape, such as when it accentuates his escape from corrupt cops and saves Karen (0:15:31). The visual effect of his coat alone helps to mix genres and add complexity to his character as one minute he is a private investigator cloaked in the night, and the next he is a soaring superhero both with the intent of saving others; the connection with Batman is perhaps most vivid here. His vengeance furthermore taps into Afrofuturism, a critical approach to media that offers alternative imaginings of the future through a race-conscious lens. For example, Alex Zamalin notes how Samuel R. Delany's book *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia* (1976) "pushed the black utopian tradition to consider intersections of race, gender, and sexuality just as it unsettled expectations about them" (114). Blade's hatred of vampires and Frost's desire to subjugate humans are similar in that they both imagine an alternative future. But Frost's objective is inherently dystopian: we identify with those he wishes to control his goal is genocide and his desires emulate white supremacy. In contrast, Blade's mission to kill vampires is intended to free humans, promote inclusivity, and recontextualize expectations about society that allow hybridity and are open to his own potential involvement in society.

As a Black superhero, Blade's character and his identity capitalize on reclamation and the possibility of an inclusive Black future. Unlike Gabriel Van Helsing from the 2004 film *Van Helsing* or Geralt of Rivia from *The Witcher* franchise (Netflix 2019-2023), Blade's race and ethnicity crucially factor into his representation. Anna Beatrice Scott provides some insight into the context of Black superheroes in her article "Superpower vs Supernatural: Black Superheroes and the Quest for a Mutant Reality," where she identifies the difference in treatment and writing of white and Black superheroes. Scott specifically identifies how Black superheroes (often written by white writers), can embody prejudiced ideology and racial stereotypes that become

confusing because they are inherently contradictory as opposed to their white superhero counterparts (299-300). Blade arguably supports and contradicts Scott's findings; his supernaturalism is not based upon his race, but it is imposed onto him by a white vampire—a dynamic alone ripe for analysis. One aspect of this dynamic is that Blade enacts similar violence to Frost, but while Frost's violence is for sport, Blade's violence is aimed at both revenge and the restoration of boundaries.

Means and intention often separate the conventional hero from the antihero, and the pursuit of vengeance is one way in which those two come together and may be analyzed. Comparing two Marvel heroes, Black Panther (T'Challa) and Blade (Eric Brooks), one notices how both center on a stereotype of Black vengeance (307-309), but are at odds when cast against the accusation of vengeance. Blade does not actively oppose the association with vengeance but attempts to temper it with a form of rationale: Blade's vengeance is just; the monsters who attack "innocent" humans (such as Blade's mother) deserve destruction. In the film's resolution, Karen poses a question and offers a choice to Eric: he may remain half-vampire or "return" to a human state. Blade's decision to remain a half-vampire hinges on the fact that full vampires still exist and his objective is clear: he will maintain his hybrid identity and continue to practice his role as a monster-as-slayer as long as there are vampires preying on humans. This framing and the very idea of choice seem to work against prior readings of Black superheroes and help to recontextualize Black bodies as equally human to white ones. In this reading, posthumanism and the "mutant reality" explored by Scott become a choice to consider. Ultimately, Karen's question is not just for Blade, but also for the audience as they see the world through Blade's perspective.

Humans, Posthumans, and Genre Tropes

Alongside Blade, Karen and Whistler are also affected by the mixing of genre tropes that reinvent how humans interact with the nonhuman. Instead of the “mad scientist” character that is typical for both science fiction and early horror narratives (i.e., *Frankenstein*), in *Blade* two “mad scientists” exist, both of whom undergo change and develop into sensible mentors who guide our vengeance-hungry crusader. Reading Van Helsing as a legacy from *Dracula*, let’s look at Abraham Whistler first. Along with sharing a name, both characters are older men that mentor their younger counterparts through experience, offering them sage advice and wacky doodads to support their hunt for vampires. Conventions of the sidekick and mad scientist from science fiction and horror genres would suggest Whistler to be silly, impulsive, single-minded, and potentially malicious or at least indifferent to consequences in his pursuit of scientific advancement. But Whistler is nothing like that. In the beginning, Whistler mentions how Karen might be of use to them given her knowledge and discoveries as a hematologist, noting “I must be getting soft in my old age, letting you bring home a stray like that... Might’ve lucked out, though... It turns out she’s a hematologist. She might be useful to us... She’s onto something” (0:25:25-58). Near his end, Whistler tries to warn Blade about Frost, advising him that he “can’t go after him. If Frost gets his hands on you [Blade], it’s all over” (1:17:09-16). Despite their rough-edged remarks, Whistler cares for Blade and to make decisions based on the greater good and to help in their “war.” Grounded by additional conventions from both the film noir and the superhero genre, Whistler’s character is reminiscent of Marvel’s Professor X perhaps, in that his mad scientist role is augmented by his need to cultivate a support network and provide moral mentorship to our emerging half-vampire superhero.

Karen Jensen, our second scientist, parallels Mina Harker as the “redeemer;” both are capable women who help to redeem the main character’s humanity through their intelligence and stern moral compass. The two redeemer women diverge in the mixing of genres; where horror-centric Mina is weak and simpering, Karen takes to gun-toting and monster-slaying as a femme-fatale, final-girl, and sidekick like a duck to water. Although they are not themselves monstrous, Abraham Whistler and Karen Jensen aid Blade in the policing of category boundaries and the safeguarding of humans. In addition, Karen provides a generic spin on the mad scientist trope by developing a biochemical weapon in support of Blade and Whistler’s ongoing war against vampires. The portrayals of Karen and Whistler draw on aspects from the same four genres that also contribute to Blade’s own characterization: film noir, science fiction, horror, and superhero movies. Collectively, they present us with a posthuman future based on collaboration and ingenuity.

The stylization and presentation of the monster-as-slayer in *Blade* thus relies on a system of signs taken from multiple genres that, when examined together, contextualize the cultural body of the monster and its function as a sign in film. The main internal conflict of the film revolves around Blade’s identity as a half-vampire: he is half-human and half-monster in a world where humans and monsters stand in direct conflict with each other due to their conflicting goals. Blade grapples with the complexity of his identity within this conflict. Due to his physical mutation, he identifies with other monsters who are outcast, such as Frankenstein and Dracula and perhaps doubly resonates with Doll and Faller’s comparison of “man-made creatures” and Frankenstein (96-97). When presenting as human, both Blade and the classical monsters are accepted by other humans; when presenting as monstrous, they are ousted and their attempt to integrate is undercut by their monstrosity, as they are “forced to acknowledge their miserable

existence” (Doll and Faller 97). Blade shows awareness of his dual identity, or rather his two half-identities, through his embodiment of intersectionality on screen: as a Black half-human, half-vampire monster-as-slayer, Blade is depicted as a reclusive hunter and investigator who is only helped by others on the fringe because he prevents vampires from border-crossing and accepts the humans’ boundary as a limitation to his own existence. We only see him walking the bustling streets of the city or occupying public areas when he is hunting, thus performing his boundary-policing, or when he is with Karen, who is a representative for the humans he serves and protects.

On the surface, Blade may be mis-categorized as a human with a flair for the gothic or as a vampire flashing his fanged smile, but the film resists that simple categorization through its genre-blending. The monster-as-slayer thus creates a new locus of visual signs to create a character that has all the mystery of the investigator, the advanced technology of the posthuman cyborg, and the heroic veneer of the superhero while subsisting on the, albeit modified, glossy corn-syrup blood of horror. These facets bring complexity to Blade’s character that make him a mutable symbol and relatable to a wide audience. In that sense, Blade brings pieces of all four genres into one body, and thus signifies identity formation through a posthuman lens. The embodied identity Blade presents is visible through a coalition of visual signs. Blade exhibits horror through his vampire fangs and reflexes, film noir with his full-leather getup (including the signature trench coat), science fiction in all the weapons strapped to him and his serum injections, and superheroism by his superhuman abilities and by continuously sacrificing his own life and existence to protect humans (with his trench coat as his metaphorical cape).

My reading of Blade as an example of the monster-as-slayer trope sews together aspects of identity to create a posthuman Frankenstein cyborg that pushes beyond the stereotypical mold

of a superhero. Blade's mutability encourages empathy in audiences by giving them an empathetic hero who continuously engages in an exploration of his identity and his moral objectives. Despite the fact that Blade's body is a site of horror, mystery, and science, he decides to maintain his hybridity, even as he must carefully control that body through supplements that keep the vampire aspects from overriding his humanity. Advanced technology thus augments his reality and his mutated blood becomes a body mod that needs maintenance; or, approaching the serum from the film noir end of the discussion: Blade needs the blood to maintain his humanity so that, in turn, he may maintain his position at the fringe, which his sense of duty compels him to police as the boundary between human and monster, a border he himself inhabits and embodies.

The combination of genres also creates a space to ask questions about identity, specifically intersectional identity. Because Blade is both a half-vampire and African American, he faces two similar forms of rejection from both communities based on his identity. When Frost entreats Blade to join him (1:10:13-1:11:30), the contingency for joining hinges on Blade's disavowal of his humanity and on stepping beyond the boundary to become a vampire. On the flip side, to be accepted by human society, Blade would need to use Karen's serum to become human. Blade rejects both solutions that would force him to choose a category. This could be used as a metaphor for the African American existence, where white and Black-passing may lead to being rejected by both communities, depending on whether the community deems them to be "too much" of one or the other, thus forcing people into social borderlands, or the space in between categories and outside of belonging. Considering Karen's deliberate choice to cure herself of vampirism and reclaim her humanity, what social commentary might be garnered from Blade's contrasting choice to remain a half-vampire? How might this conversation correlate to

conversations of intersectional identity? These are questions that an audience might pose when watching and rewatching *Blade*. Employing multiple genres entreats viewers to consider to “fill in the blank” or consider the gaps and spaces left in between identity formation and genre conventions.

CHAPTER 3. THE MEDICALIZATION OF BLOOD IN A POSTHUMAN FUTURE

In texts prior to 1998 there is a clear delineation between vampire and human, and in texts after 1998 there is a clear identification of posthuman vampires. *Blade* introduces the half-vampire, Blade, as a point of transition by showing how he and the supporting characters grapple with vampirism and identity. Graham identifies that in posthumanism “[t]he contours of human bodies are redrawn: they no longer end at the skin” (4); this distinction is reiterated in works like Halberstam’s *Skin Shows*. Important for my argument here is how Blade reconstructs the vampire through posthumanism and how his transformation occurs outside, at, and under the skin. Often in posthumanism, monsters and cyborgs are considered separately, but the half-vampire Blade functions, in essence, like a rhetorical posthuman cyborg in that he projects beyond current ontological concepts of blood purity and/or hygiene. Unlike other science fiction movies or new-age superheroes, Blade’s cyborgization is present yet largely unseen since it happens under his skin through chemical modification and maintenance that regulates his half-vampire self. Blade’s cyborgization happens in increments, such as his daywalking ability or the instances where he self-medicates to maintain his hybridity. Unlike the ever-present visual sign of Blade’s dark attire to evoke film noir aesthetic and its concomitant conventions, Blade’s active traversing of boundaries thus creates traces on screen through his embodiment of his hybrid identity. Blood contributes to Blade’s category-crossing identity and signifies a body modification while also gesturing toward a disability. In *Blade*, humans and vampires are separated by their abilities and disabilities, but Blade-the-monster-as-slayer traverses this boundary.

Blade's Disability, or the Cyborg as Daywalker

Despite his ability to exist in sunlight, Blade's vampirism threatens to overtake his humanity, and he constantly fights against his lust for blood to police his own monstrosity. At the same time, it is important to note that it is his choice to remain under this constant threat. And in that active choice to rely on a serum that regulates his half-vampire state, the movie *Blade* comments on disability as audiences may critique Blade's character and assume an ableist point of view that favors "healing" Blade. Can we read Blade as heroic or brave for continuing to face his own disability? Or does the coding of Blade's vampirism as "evil" forego such an interpretation? Are we to connect his ability and disability to a sense of martyrdom, and how does this potential connection influence how we reflect on grounded examples of disability? The film provides an opportunity to explore these questions by scientizing vampirism and by having a posthuman biochemical cyborg character refuse treatment on screen. Blade's intersectional identity thus creates new ways to consider disability and reinforces how Blade embodies and incorporates what we repress. Even as he grapples with the "in between" identity categories that he inhabits, Blade's on screen persona neither embraces nor rejects one or the other. The complexity of his character is achieved through signs and an amalgamation of different genres and social contexts that prompt considerations of intersectionality and identity within the film's universe.

Blade's disability is difficult to correlate with practical examples of disability. What can be understood is that Blade perceives his own condition as a disability and medicates himself so that he can participate at the fringes of society, like the monster he sees himself as, so he can continue to protect those who cannot protect themselves. When initiating Karen, Blade chides her, "[t]he world you [Karen] live in is just a sugar-coated topping. There's another world

beneath it—the real world. And if you want to survive in it, you better learn to pull the trigger” (0:38:46-57). As she adapts to this “real world,” Karen later confronts Frost by noting “[v]ampires like you [Frost] aren’t a species. You’re just... infected, a virus... a sexually transmitted disease” (0:36:49-0:37:00). In both these instances there is an essence of taboo in the world of vampires; Blade understands that his world is nothing like the day-to-day lives of humans, and Karen likens vampirism to a stigmatized disease. Peter Conrad and Kristin K. Barker locate similar constructs of identity in disability when they discuss the delineation between the diagnosis of medical aspects and the social impact of diagnoses (68-70). They note how social construction “foregrounds how illness is shaped by social interactions, shared cultural traditions, shifting frameworks of knowledge, and relations of power” (69). Unlike Whistler who is depicted as physically disabled, Blade performs daring flips and kicks in his rampage against the vampire empire. Unlike other vampires he can experience a day of full sun, and unlike humans he can withstand being tossed around like a rag doll. Blade’s habits are indicative of how he sees himself: a monster outside of all categories and norms. His self-perception is reflected in his performance of ethnicity and disability. In both identity categories, Blade demonstrates an understanding that he does not fit within the community; to him, it is his monstrosity that marginalizes him and that is despite the fact that the framing of the film funnels the audience towards the conclusion that Blade the half-vampire is the paragon of the vampire/human world. Vampires covet Blade’s powers because he is a “daywalker,” or a half-vampire who can survive and exist comfortably within sunlight. Humans (in the universe or the ones watching) covet his super strength, agility, lightning-fast reflexes, and regenerative healing. But as a character Blade sees himself as neither human nor vampire, even as he takes on the boons and the troubles of both worlds and identities.

The disparity in contextualizing and perceiving vampirism is built into several plot points, including Karen's introduction and investment in the narrative. Karen is originally taken in by Blade because she reminds him of his mother, another African-American woman who suffered vampiric violence and who, he thinks, died by that violence. In a bid to save Karen from the same fate, he takes her to Whistler for treatment. Given a fifty-fifty chance at best, she seemingly recovers while her true transformation progresses invisibly and inevitably inside of her body (1:08:23-31). Her partial transformation evokes images of Lucy Westenra as the Bloofer Lady (196-97) and of Dracula's brides (38-41), putting her, Whistler, and the audience on edge. Instead of succumbing to her urges, however, Karen turns her sight on science and on engineering a serum to reverse her vampiric state. By not going into exact detail of how her research works, the audience's disbelief is suspended and the supernatural origins of vampirism are preserved. What's moved into the focus instead is Karen's unwillingness to succumb to her illness, her fight against it, and the nature of her resistance: her weapon is science, modern medicine, and her professional training as a hematologist. The subtext of the (in)effectiveness of blood transfusions in *Dracula*, which help restore Lucy, but only temporarily so, inform Blade's posthuman revision. Karen discovers how to reverse vampirism via scientific means and based on the finding that vampirism is not so much a blood pollution than a mutation prompted by the vampiric bite. Her discovery creates a technological advantage for humans. Through her sustained focus on external human abilities and despite her gradual internal change from human to monster, she can disrupt and revert her transition and, ultimately, safely return to the human side of the human-monster dichotomy.

Taking us straight from the rave and Blade's first takedown into the lab, the movie *Blade* introduces us to new scientific discoveries and provides visible, analyzable, scientific evidence

of vampirism's inhuman blood values through Karen. When analyzing vampire blood she notes how "[h]is [Quinn's] blood sugar's three times the norm. Phosphorus and uric acid are off the charts... The red blood cells are biconvex, which is impossible... [and] the polys, they're binucleated" (0:11:36-56). She also notes how "[vampirism is] a genetic defect... That means we have to treat it with gene therapy... They've been using it on sickle cell anemia" (1:12:45-56). In both instances, Karen actively medicalizes vampirism and recontextualizes it as a genetic condition. The character of Karen Jensen acts as a bridge between the classical dichotomy of monster/human and the new nonbinary option, the half-monster Blade. Her character and function within the plot shows an optimistic and potentially utopian future where there is agency and respect for one's personal identification and presentation. By the end of the film, she is still a hematologist but she is no longer a vampire; instead, she is the first human returned from vampirism and joins Blade's fight against vampires by upgrading his arsenal with biochemical warfare. Both Karen and Blade actively choose and create their own identities: Karen engineers a cure to chemically revert vampirism, and Blade uses a serum to modulate and balance his vampiric tendencies and balance his monstrosity.

Karen's medical discoveries about vampirism furthermore bridge the supernatural and the scientific by diagnosing the seemingly supernatural affliction as a genetic mutation. This introduction of scientific rhetoric and the recategorization of vampirism creates a foundation for treating (and curing) vampirism with medicine. Other characters' discoveries also feed into this transition from folklore to reality. What Karen, as medical professional, observes as a medical abnormality, something that "doesn't make any sense," and that is "impossible" to exist within a human (0:11:54-55), Dracula lore of old used to read as a contamination or pollution of the blood, something that was unclean and needed to be flushed out. It is this advancement in

understanding what constitutes vampirism, i.e. the distinct components that make up vampiric blood, that will ultimately lead to the film's conflict resolution and Karen's discovery of a human medicine that reacts with and ignites vampire blood, causing the monsters into whose bloodstream the medicine is introduced to explode from within. She also achieves the reverse by finding a potential cure for Blade's half-vampirism that would make him human thus opening up a plethora of possibilities, not the least of which being giving characters agency over their identity.

Karen's scientific discovery shifts the audience's perception of vampire lore and encourages a suspension of disbelief. Before being attacked, Karen was able to observe several things about the vampire she was analyzing, such as how the blood is physically different from humans, including the shape of the cells and their chemical composition (0:11:36-11:56), and how traditional muscular structures mark the vampire's face, presumably to accommodate their fangs, saying "[t]he maxilla looks a little deformed... There's some odd muscle structure around the canines" of Quinn's charred body (0:12:40-46). What was originally just going to be a confounding medical anomaly for Karen turns into a folklore spook running amok in "the real world" when she herself is bitten and her blood starts to mutate. More importantly, her impending transformation causes Karen to reevaluate her priorities and forces her to consider how her theoretical knowledge of vampire blood can be applied to developing a practical cure for vampirism. While Blade has thus resigned himself to patrolling the boundaries between human and vampire, Karen's efforts are aimed at re-establishing those borders scientifically, effectively separating the vampiric from the human.

Above all, we may argue, the recognition and respect for said boundaries defines the psychology of the characters that inhabit the film. Those who succeed in this world transgress

binaries, but they do so with the full knowledge that upholding the borders is key to the species' survival. Blade may be a daywalker but his excursions into either world are temporary and his return to the space in between inevitable. By contrast, Dragonetti and Frost are outdone by their own physical limitations, whether that be the sun or their blood. The only human who survives is Karen, who chooses to stay human, but deftly engineers a means for humans to slip across the categories of vampire and human through her advancement in biochemical technologies. Whistler dies as a result of his disability, as he is unable to outrun the vampire and flee to safety. Only the characters who fully adapt and integrate with the posthuman reality survive. While Blade exists within the boundary, the other vampires in the film are forced to remain in one category and die when they attempt to trespass into the other.

As mentioned earlier, the movie's engagement with multiple genres and genre conventions creates empathy for Blade's strife and casts him as exhibiting "the best" of both the monster and the hero in his identity. Although Blade is a monster willing to participate in his own blood baths, uses crass language and has a standoffish persona, underneath he shows a deep caring for the humans around him. From something as simple as a camaraderie with a shopkeeper who tells Blade to "take care" (0:23:38-40), to his grief with his mentor's passing (1:18:37), his anguish when forced to face his turned mother and to "release [her]" (1:45:15-16), or his continued efforts to protect Karen, Blade's redeeming human qualities balance and, indeed, outweigh his monstrosity. Most notable, we see this when he finds himself unable to walk away from Whistler, knowing it will be the last time he sees his mentor alive.

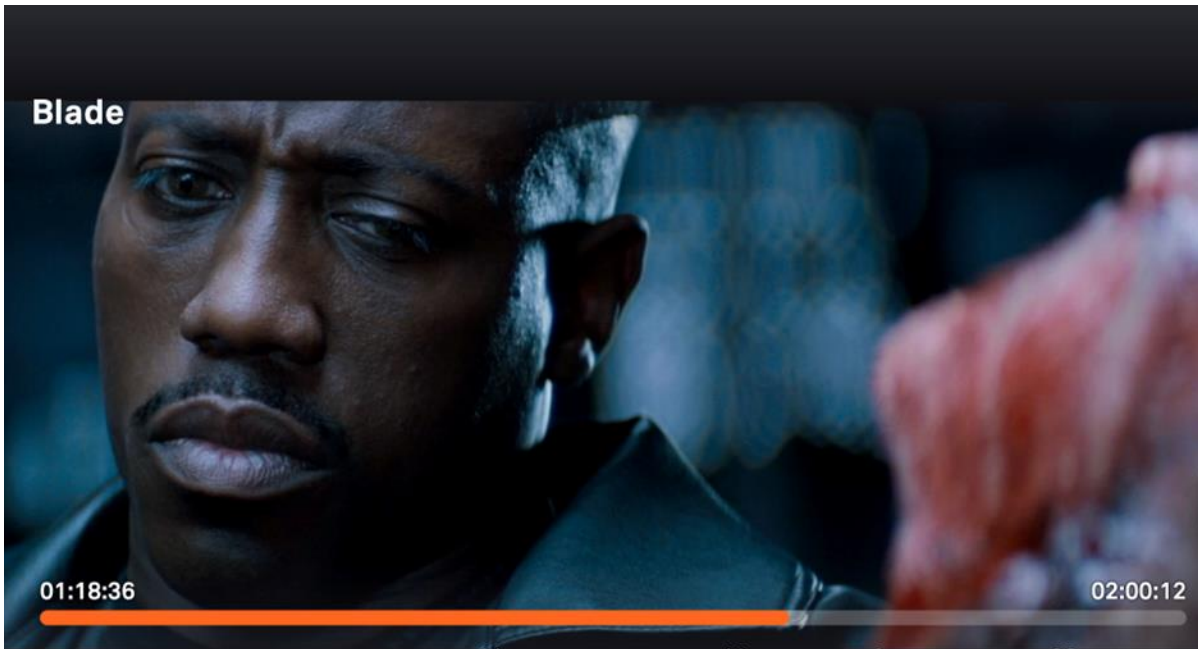


Figure 4. Still from Norrington, Blade (1:18:36).

Pain knots his eyebrows, his eyes unable to meet Whistler's marred face as the music swells emotionally before it cuts away to him leaving; with his hunter persona back in place, a stone-cold face now hides his pain (1:18:32-44). The audience can readily empathize with Blade's roller-coaster ride of emotions as he fights against his nemesis Frost and tries to protect the humans around him.

In this depiction, Blade's experience as a half-vampire illustrates how posthumanism challenges the boundaries of "humanness" and presents it in a way for audiences to consider this threshold abstractly. Blade's experience with regulation and self-medication could be related to other instances of humans who augment and regulate their body, and how this affects their perception of self, whether this be diabetes treatment, HIV/AIDS treatment, or hormone replacement therapy, gesturing back perhaps to those implicit depictions of disability through a posthuman lens mentioned earlier. Importantly, cyborgization no longer stops at hardware attached to human flesh, but reaches beneath the skin and includes chemical modifications to

augment the body. As explored by John Jordan in his article, “Vampire Cyborgs and Scientific Imperialism: A Reading of the Science-Mysticism Polemic in *Blade*,” both the film and the character Blade create multiple understandings of the cyborg – first by combining human and monster into one body, and second by augmenting his body through medicine and technologically advanced weaponry to maintain his new posthuman state (12-13). In *Blade*, one direct example of monster and cyborg meeting is through the serum injections Whistler provides.

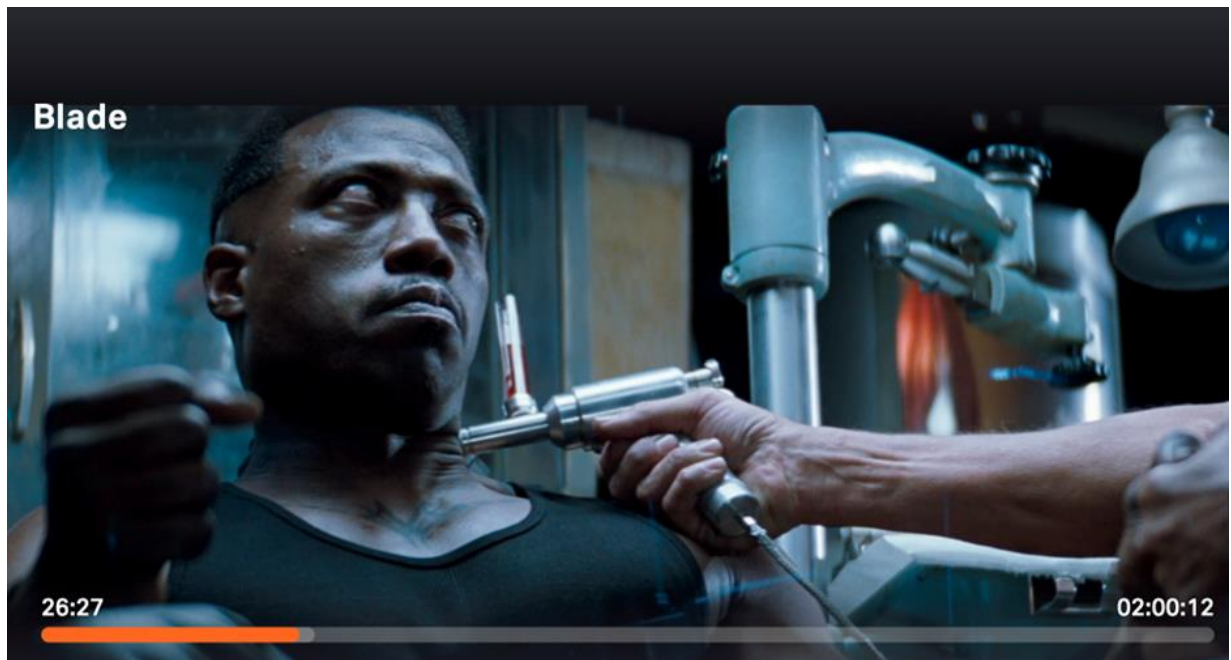


Figure 5. Still from Norrington, *Blade* (0:26:27).

Blade encourages his mentor to treat him despite the risks, and Whistler uses an advanced machine to inject the blood-serum concoction to treat Blade (0:26:01-32). Here there is a visible contact zone between two conventions of the posthuman, the cyborg and the monster, through science-fiction medicine. Karen does not shun Blade for what he is either, instead she tries to understand and reach out to him. This helps provide a bridge of understanding in the way in which Karen begins to model empathy for our caught in-between-categories hero. Despite this usual association, as seen in *Dracula* and *Blood of the Vampire*, Blade actively fights against this

marginalization. He overcomes his standoffish behavior towards Karen and comes to care for her as he continues in his quest to stop vampires from hunting and subjugating humans.

Instead of simply identifying with and reifying assumptions about certain social identities, Blade makes active choices on screen to establish and exhibit his unique interpretation of his intersectional identity. Cohen notes how monsters can represent a form of desire, even through fear (16-20). In a way, Blade can be read as a conduit for desires revolving around acceptance, belonging, and a potential plural utopia. His identity showcases a posthuman look at the future and toward identity politics that is abstract and consumable enough for wide commercial audiences.

CONCLUSION

The film *Blade* adds to the vampire movie catalog by reinterpreting what it means to be a vampire through its protagonist Blade. The characters surrounding Blade are like pieces to the larger puzzle as they represent facets of Blade: Dragonetti and Frost represent the classic literary vampire and its history, Whistler is the nod to the beginnings of posthumanism, and Karen is the continuation of technological advancement. Blade brings all sides together through his half-vampire identity and the monster-as-slayer trope functions as a way to explore the nuances of identity politics. Both sides try to seduce Blade to choose either monstrosity or humanity and embrace them fully: Frost appeals to Blade about treating him with reverence if he joins the vampire supremacy, and Karen offers to cure Blade's vampirism so he can re-enter human society. Despite these pulls Blade remains the monster-as-slayer half-vampire; he chooses that identity.

The vampire's concern with identity is communicated through blood. Blade's identity is shown by how he interacts with blood: he is a vampire who actively chooses not to hunt humans, and he's a human who chooses to self-medicate to maintain his quality of life. This analysis highlights one way Blade can be read. In many ways, Blade's story can be seen as empowering because of how the identity of Blade is handled. He is a monstrous hero who continues to protect others from the shadows. But Blade is also an empathetic character because, when disbelief is suspended, movie goers can see and understand his struggles. The way he grapples with the violence done unto his family, his pursuit of justice through vengeance, and his struggle with maintaining his body and self are relatable on a human and social level. As the half-vampire monster-as-slayer, he is pulled in several directions at once, between maintaining himself on the border, killing vampires (which represent half of him), and protecting humans (his other half).

Whether it has to do with race and ethnicity, disability, gender and sexuality, or other identities, audiences can readily attribute their own struggles to the on-screen representation. Maybe they feel pulled in several directions by the different communities with which they identify, or they feel they cannot fully integrate with any community. *Blade* provides an opportunity for closure and solace in that not only does the monster escape, but the audience *wants* him to escape.

The portrayal of empathetic monster-as-slayers creates new angles from which audiences consider identity from what I would identify as a posthuman perspective. As previously explored, *Blade* offers an intersection of disability and race that is depicted through an allegory of the monster and their new technologies. The monster-as-slayer provides opportunities for artists to create spaces and signs to grapple with the complexities of a growing and changing society. Through this creation of space on the screen, the audience also gets the opportunity to reflect on how they read and engage with film. Our contemporary fixation on monsters asks audiences to consider how might they be like the monsters made on the screen, and how are the monsters like them? It generates questions and considerations of the arbitrariness of the categories by which communities operate and sympathize across the borders through the monster as a conduit. I anticipate that future media will continue in this trend, bringing monster-as-slayers or other monster-centric representation to the forefront to anticipate a shift in societal values.

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