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The Monstrous Side of Humanity: A Generic, Narrative, and Audience Reception Analysis of True Blood

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"THE MONSTROUS SIDE OF HUMANITY":

A GENERIC, NARRATIVE, AND AUDIENCE RECEPTION

ANALYSIS OF *TRUE BLOOD*

by

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THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
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DEDICATION

This thesis is lovingly dedicated to my wonderful family:

Mom, Dad, Stephanie, Klayton, and Nathan.

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I can say with complete conviction that this thesis would not have been written without the guidance and help of many people. Therefore, what follows is my humble attempt to communicate my appreciation to those people.

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How lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard. –A.A. Milne

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Adversity tries people and mine has tried you and proved how nice you are.
–Frances Hodgson Burnett

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ABSTRACT

HBO's drama series *True Blood* has been considered a unique and polysemic text since its debut in 2008.This thesis examined the series through the theoretical lenses of genre, narrative, and audience reception. Specifically, this study examined the series' adherence to the gothic vampire subgenre, the way the series functions as an allegorical narrative, and the audience reception principles demonstrated by viewers of the series. Through my analysis of episodes from all four aired seasons, I established the gothic vampire subgenre, a television genre from literary and film genres, and determined that the series adheres to the substantive, stylistic, and situational elements of the genre. I also approached the series as an allegorical narrative and posited that it functions as an allegory for societal opposition and political oppression. Finally, I analyzed online audience responses to the series from the Racialicious website using Hall's encoding-decoding, Fiske's concept of pleasure, and Fisher's narrative paradigm. I determined that oppositional readings are pleasurable for these viewers and that narrative coherence and fidelity are of prime importance to them.

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"*True Blood* is about the undeniable humanity of monsters and the monstrous side of humanity." ~ Lily Sparks

CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2008, amidst a volatile nationwide political debate about civil

liberties and a soon-to-be historic presidential election, Home Box Office (HBO)

premiered a new television series, which met with mixed reviews. Considered by many to

be yet another voice in the same-sex marriage debate, the initial reviews for *True Blood*

were somewhat mixed; *The New York Times* declared it "creepy, steamy, and funny at

times" and *The Washington Post* asserted that it was "a romp and a wallow--and a bloody

good one" (Stanley, 2008; Shales, 2008). Despite inconsistent early reviews, audiences

soon flocked to the series, with later seasons of *True Blood* earning record-breaking

ratings and much critical acclaim (Seidman, 2010). With four seasons already aired in the

United States and a fifth season slated to start airing in the summer of 2012, *True Blood*

established itself as a unique show with a loyal fan base that is a relevant area of study,

especially considering the glut of other television programs and films that are similar in

subject matter, such as *The Vampire Diaries, The Twilight Saga*, and the *Underworld*

films.

Featuring storylines that serve as social and cultural commentaries about racial,

ethnic, sexual, religious, and class issues, *True Blood* addresses current issues that are

relevant for audience members (Stuever, 2010, para. 3; Hardy, 2011). *True Blood* was

initially pitched to HBO by series creator Alan Ball as being "popcorn television for

smart people," and it was quickly picked up by the channel (Associated Press, 2008;

Rolling Stone, 2008, as cited in Hardy, 2011; Levine, 2009). As part of a surge in

vampire popularity, *True Blood* appeals to an audience that is vastly different in

composition from other vampire programs marketed to adolescents (for example, *Twilight* and *The Vampire Diaries*). In addition to being an easy sell to HBO, it also was an easy sell to audiences. The program creator's aspiration to be a show for "smart people" was achieved since the majority of the series' audience is comprised of college-educated and upscale females (Hardy, 2011). Furthermore, critics laud the show as being specifically suited to adults, asserting that "*True Blood* is everything grown-ups want from their cable box" (Stuever, 2010). Additionally, the series has warranted its own edition in the Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture book series, entitled *True Blood and Philosophy: We Wanna Think Bad Things with You* (Dunn & Housel, 2010). In their introduction for the book, Dunn and Housel (2010) call the series a "blend of smarts and sensuality" (p. 1).

   True Blood is known for blending intelligence with sexuality, elements expected from programs about vampires, as well as for putting a "fresh spin on the vampire genre" (Dunn and Housel, 2010, p. 3; Heldreth, 1999). This fresh spin on an established genre is of interest for the current study and a closer examination of the situational, substantive, and stylistic elements of the series will illuminate what makes the series a unique addition to the gothic vampire subgenre (Campbell& Jamieson, 1978). As vampire stories emerged from the gothic tradition, the genre under study will hereafter be referred to as gothic vampire subgenre so as not to confuse vampire stories with those of the horror genre (the difference between gothic and horror will be examined in detail in chapter 2) (Stevens, 2000).

   Because genres provide frameworks for the structure of narratives and narratives influence how genres are interpreted, it is important to analyze both the genre and

narrative of *True Blood* to gain a deeper understanding of the series' structure,

uniqueness, and impact (Fisher, 1985). The primary elements of narratives are story, plot,

and narration, with other key elements being event, character, and dialogue (Porter

Abbott, 2007; Bal, 1985; Berger, 1997). Frequently the series' use of narrative elements,

including story, events, and characters, elicits comparisons between the series and real

social and cultural issues, positioning the series as an allegorical narrative (e.g. the debate

over same-sex marriage masked in the first season as the debate over vampire rights)

(Tyree, 2009). These comparisons, however, are interpretations made by the audience;

the writers for *True Blood* do not inform viewers how they should interpret the series.

Therefore, *True Blood* is a polysemic text, or one that features multiple possible

interpretations (Hall, 1980). As the series can be considered polysemic, unique audience

interpretations about the series are expected to exist. An analysis of these narrative

elements in *True Blood* will explain how the show has evolved as a unique and intelligent

series, as well as how it serves as a polysemic stimulus for online audience response.

    Because the series' creator positions the program as one that uniquely speaks to

highly educated adults, he indirectly asserts that the series' content is intelligent and well-

crafted. This claim to quality is enhanced by the fact that the series airs on HBO, a

subscription cable channel that positions itself as superior to other television channels by

using the slogan "It's not TV—it's HBO" (Levine, 2009). Since *True Blood* debuted, the

series has been consistently reviewed, dissected, and critiqued on the Internet by

journalists and viewers ("True Blood," 2011). Because the show was created for "smart

people," the online responses by audience members are a useful tool for gaining insight

into how the content of the series is interpreted by audiences.

While this study recognizes that the generic conventions and narrative features of the series have a part in the audience reception of the series, it also conceptualizes audiences as active in their interpretation of media texts (Croteau & Hoynes, 1997). How audiences respond to *True Blood* will largely be informed by Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding, which allows for audiences to reject, accept, or negotiate a text's preferred meaning. This process of decoding is especially relevant for the current study, because *True Blood* already invites multiple interpretations to be made by audience members and polysemy is a part of Hall's (1980) theory. How audiences decode *True Blood* will be explored through blog posts on the Racialicious website and articles by Racialicious bloggers, all of which explore the narrative of *True Blood* in detail.

Decoding audience responses with Hall's (1980) theory of encoding/decoding allows for an exploration of the preferred meanings embedded within the series by producers, as well as the audience responses that can take multiple forms. According to Hall (1980), audiences can derive three types of readings from a media text: dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings. Dominant readings occur when audiences agree with the narrative of the show and think that the most apparent meaning is what the series is about. Negotiated readings occur when audiences agree with part of the preferred meaning, but alter it to fit their own perspectives. Finally, oppositional readings occur when audiences completely reject the preferred meaning communicated by the series. An examination of these audience readings is necessary to learn about the evaluative beliefs of the audience and how a particular audience makes interpretations about *True Blood* (Foss, 2004).

Therefore, the goal of this thesis is to explore how the generic and allegorical narrative progressions of *True Blood* have evolved over the course of four seasons and how these progressions have elicited audience responses. Specifically, this study examines how the series adheres to the conventions of the gothic vampire subgenre, what the narrative of the series is and how it has changed over four seasons, and how the preferred meanings of the narrative of the series inspire audience responses that challenge, conform to, or negotiate the preferred meaning. The processes of audience meaning-making and interpretation are examined through online blog posts and articles written by viewers of the series.

In addition to providing an introduction, this chapter provides an overview of the study designed to accomplish the aforementioned goals. The following sections explain the assumptions that underlie the study, the rationale for the study, the guiding research questions, and the key constructs and concepts involved with the study.

Assumptions

Since this study explores the generic and narrative progression of HBO's *True Blood*, as well as the online audience responses to the series, several assumptions about genre, narrative, audience reception, television viewing, and HBO inform this study. The first assumption is that genres are categorizing systems that audiences are socialized to understand and therefore know what to expect from texts that adhere to certain genres (Neale, 2008b; Altman, 1999). Simply by knowing the genre of a film, television series, or book, audiences are informed about how the narrative of the story will progress and likely have expectations for the how the story will end.

A second assumption underlying this study is that humans are naturally story-telling creatures (Fisher, 1989; Fisher, 1984; Herman, 2007). It is expected that viewers of a narrative will compare the story to their own experiences (narrative fidelity) and desire the story to be coherent (narrative probability) (Fisher, 1984; Fisher, 1985). This assumption explains the expectation that humans will respond to narratives by recalling familiar narratives as they try to make sense of the story that is before them.

A third assumption is that audiences are active in their choice, use, and interpretation of media texts (Croteau & Hoynes, 1997; Halloran, 2000; McQuail, Blumer, & Brown, 1972). This does not mean that audiences can interpret anything from a media text and that decoding will serve as a correctional device for an unsatisfactory film, television series, or book (Morley, 1993). Rather, this means that audiences have the freedom to decode a media text in multiple ways because of their own experiences and interpretations, as well as because many texts provide multiple interpretations that are available to audiences, usually based on their own experiences, interests, and needs (Hall, 1980; Fiske, 1986; Swanson, 1992).

A fourth assumption that is related to audience reception is the idea that reality is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). There is no fixed reality that all humans experience. Rather, "the role of humans in actively using symbolic resources to objectify, circulate, and interpret the meaningfulness of their environments and their existence" is at the heart of constructionism (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010, p. 45). As Lindlof and Taylor (2010) also explain, constructions made by individuals are tested by group interaction to see how relevant and helpful they are in explaining the world. This is

important for audience reception research, since audience responses usually occur within groups (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010; Tyler, 2010).

A fifth assumption is that interpretation of media texts is a process and an activity people do together, rather than separately. According to Tyler (2010), "Interpretation is conceived not as an automatic reflex or an individual act of decoding but as an ongoing social activity, embedded in material practices of cultural and historical significance" (p. 396). This corresponds with the idea in social constructionism that posits individuals test their constructions with other people. This assumption accounts for why I decided to use group responses as reception data for this study.

A sixth assumption is that television is a prolific and pervasive medium that holds a unique position of importance in the lives of U.S. Americans (Gerbner, 1990). The average American now spends approximately five hours a day (20% of their day) watching television (Nielson, 2011). The process of viewing television consists of making meanings and receiving pleasure from the programs and this viewing is a type of cultural commodity that gives audiences a sense of agency as producers of meaning rather than simply viewers of television (Fiske, 1989). This idea corresponds with the assumption about the audience being active, rather than passive consumers.

A final assumption recognizes the elite situation of HBO in U.S. American culture. HBO promotes itself as a channel for elite audiences, which often results in well-educated audiences indicating that HBO subscribers can be expected to be aware of current events and salient cultural and social issues. As a premium subscription cable channel, HBO reaches select audiences through its presence in 30% of homes in the U.S. (Seidman, 2010). Subscribers are expected to have enough disposable income in order to

afford the subscriber fee, especially considering the recent recession (HBO, 2011).

Rationale

Several reasons justify this study. The first reason is that the popularity of *True Blood* as a series created for adults positions it as a unique communication phenomenon unlike other past and present vampire-themed films and television series. As the series is part of a greater vampire trend in the media, *True Blood*'s critical acclaim and popularity with educated adults distinguishes it from *Twilight*, *The Vampire Diaries*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Hardy, 2011; Stuever, 2010; Owen, 1999). A thorough examination of the series is necessary in order to understand why this show is so popular with adults, as well as to learn what generic and narrative elements distinguish it from other similar television series and films.

The second reason is that the content of *True Blood* is unique in comparison with other films and television series about vampires. Unlike *Twilight* and *The Vampire Diaries*, which feature vampires existing in secret, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which represents vampires as villains, *True Blood*'s vampires are legally recognized beings that have agency and fight for their rights, though to what extent they have agency and rights is constantly negotiated in the series (Blayde & Dunn, 2010; Burke, 1945). These negotiations are often compared to actual social and cultural issues in U.S. American culture and studying the representations of these issues will illuminate how the series positions itself as a social commentator (Martin, 2008; Shen, 2009).

The third reason is that the reception theory that explores how audiences make sense of mediated messages is underdeveloped and does not expound on the interpretive processes utilized by audience members (Swanson, 1992). Even though audience

reception research acknowledges that audiences are active, this active position needs to be explored further (Schroder, 2009). Interpretive research methods are necessary for exploring the complex and dynamic process of audience media use and interpretation in their everyday lives (Moores, 1993, 2000). More research is needed to explore the processes that audiences actively go through when interpreting media texts and the current study will contribute to this area of research by exploring how online audiences critique, discuss, and negotiate the meanings of *True Blood* and what processes of interpretation they go through as they make these meanings.

The fourth reason that justifies this study is that the audience reception under exploration is unique because of the audience's focus on critique. The online blog discussion participants do not proclaim themselves to be fans, yet they watch the series to participate in the discussions, which indicates that a unique phenomenon is occurring. This phenomenon is expanded on by Jenkins III (1988) when he writes that the transformation process of "personal reaction into social interaction…one becomes a fan not by being a regular viewer of a particular program but by translating that viewing into some type of cultural activity" (p. 451). Therefore, this study explores how these personal and social processes influence audiences and their perspectives on media interpretations, as well as contributes to the literature about how audiences position themselves as viewers, critics, fans, et cetera.

The fifth and final reason that justifies this study is that analyses of television genres show that the medium is unique because they show that the transferring of genres from film to television without revising them is generally not successful (Mittell, 2001). Mittell (2001) explains that "genre analysis does not work as well as a paradigm for

television as it has for film or literature" (p. 4). Therefore, the current study contributes to the television genre literature, as Mittell (2001) suggests, by approaching genre as a component of the text under study, rather than just a category. This looks beyond "the text as the locus for genre and instead locate genres within the complex interrelations among texts, industries, audiences, and historical contexts" (Mittell, 2001, p. 7). Analyzing *True Blood*'s generic elements and adherence within the larger context of other media, the narrative of the series, and audience's responses to it hopefully will contribute to the literature on television genres.

Research Questions

The goal of this thesis is to utilize rhetorical criticism to explore the generic adherence and conventions of *True Blood*, as well as the allegorical narrative features and progression of the series. As the series serves as the stimulus for audiences responses, these analyses explore what elicits audience reception in consistent online blogs and articles about the series. Therefore, the following four research questions guide the study of message content of the series and its audience reception:

RQ1: How does *True Blood* adhere to generic conventions of the gothic vampire subgenre?

RQ2: What are the allegorical narrative features that adhere in *True Blood*?

RQ3: How does the narrative of *True Blood* evolve over the course of four seasons?

RQ4: How do audiences of *True Blood* demonstrate the various principles of audience reception?

Key Explanations

The following sections provide detailed explanations of the texts under study as well as the key construct of audiences to provide parameters for this study. The first section explores HBO and its situation as a premium entertainment provider. The second section explains the narrative of *True Blood* to provide context for the current study. The third section provides a brief history of vampires in cinema and on television. The fourth section explains the Racialicious blog. Finally, the remaining section will define audiences as a key construct.

Home Box Office (HBO)

Following the well-trodden path established by such past hit series as *The Sopranos*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Six Feet Under*, and *Sex and the City*, *True Blood* takes advantage of the creative freedom granted to HBO, which lacks FCC regulations that control regular network content. This freedom has earned HBO programming the reputation for being edgy, explicit, and entertaining (Levine, 2009). The subscription service's marketing slogan—"It's not TV, it's HBO"—indicates that the channel considers its programming to be so far superior to other programming as not to be similar enough for comparison. In addition to this clever marketing slogan, HBO utilizes a programming strategy that is "brazen, not broad," and that highlights creative expression and uniqueness rather than conventionality and universality (Levine, 2009, p. 30).

By attempting to appeal to narrow audiences and precise demographics, HBO's programming appeals to specific audiences and grants freedom to writers and creators. In this way, "HBO can go for niche and risky programming that generates heat and finds passionate viewers," and it can do this without sacrificing quality for mass audience

appeal (Levine, 2009, p. 30). This freedom from risk is what allows *True Blood* to explore issues of oppression with open-mindedness, and to do so with such unconventional content as explicit sexual scenarios and intense violence. Furthermore, HBO does not adhere to the standard airing schedule that often governs the major networks. Whereas most networks fit programming to a schedule, HBO fits schedules to when producers want programs to air (Levine, 2009). This scheduling benefited *True Blood,* which, after its initial season's fall 2008 debut, scheduled a twelve-episode season that aired on Sunday nights during each subsequent summer.

Clever marketing slogans and programming strategies employed by HBO combined with the channel's selection of shows creates an aura of highbrow entertainment that appeals to narrow audiences. This aura is also known as "quality entertainment," a concept associated with the ascension of HBO in the 1980s as a desirable provider of entertainment. Imre (2009) explored this concept and the criteria for "quality television," concluding that these criteria included "its address to elite audiences, its reliance on an ensemble cast, its deployment of multiple overlapping plot lines, its social and cultural commentary, and its combination of old genres to create new ones" (Thompson, 1996 as cited in Imre, 2009). This reputation as a provider of highbrow entertainment corresponds with *True Blood*'s appeal to educated audiences, showing that quality television "is assumed to connote educational attainment, critical standards, sensitivity of judgement [*sic*], effort and creativity" (McQuail, Blumler, & Brown, 1972).

The entertainment elements that make HBO so popular are not all that distinguish the channel as being a prominent presence in North American culture. As the number one domestic premium pay television service in 2010, HBO has approximately 40 million

subscribers in the United States, as well as 42 million subscribers overseas, with the channel being available in 50 countries and the content licensed to 150 countries across the globe (Silverstein, 2010, para. 2; Highlights, 2011, para. 9; Schuker, 2011, para. 9). Unlike regular television networks, which must maintain ratings for revenue, HBO earns revenue from subscription holder fees, regardless of how many episodes the subscription holders watch. Charging approximately $15 a month for access to the premium channel (a cost which gives audiences content without advertising), HBO earns a significant portion of the overall profits of its parent company, Time Warner (HBO, 2011). Without having to rely directly on ratings for profit, HBO utilizes critical acclaim to generate interest in their properties (Levine, 2009). This critical acclaim includes 25 primetime Emmy awards in 2010, the most awards for any network for the eighth year in a row, and four Golden Globe awards in 2011, again the most awards for any network for the fourth year in a row (Highlights, 2011, para. 2 & 3).

Although access to HBO programming is available through this television outlet, several other media options are now available to viewers interested in viewing HBO's original series, documentaries, and specials. Original programming is also available online for subscription holders through the website HBO GO, as well as for purchase through such online distributors such as Amazon and Apple, Inc. (Highlights, 2011). Additionally, a majority of HBO's original programs are available for purchase on DVD, including the first four seasons of *True Blood.* Sales of original program DVDs provide a significant portion of HBO's revenue, with just the first season of *True Blood* bringing in $61 million in 2009, the most for any TV-on-DVD title for that year (Top-Selling, 2011).

True Blood

The elements of quality entertainment that are considered hallmarks of HBO original programming apply to *True Blood.* The show's appeal to educated audiences fulfills the criterion for "elite audiences," as college-educated individuals comprise a majority of the series' audience and only slightly over a quarter of the American population has a Bachelor's degree or higher (Census, 2011). Additionally, the series has an ensemble cast that has grown over the course of the past four seasons. This cast has their own primary and supporting storylines that overlap with one another and continue from one season to the next. Finally, and most importantly, the series features all manner of social and cultural commentary so that the series is known for being "built by and for the culture wars, offering comment on racial, ethnic, sexual, religious and class divisions" (Stuever, 2010, para. 3; Hardy, 2011). Therefore, with its multiplicity of plotlines and ideological issues, *True Blood* utilizes a polysemic text, one with multiple meanings interpreted by the viewers, depending on their respective perspectives (Fiske, 1986).

True Blood's complexity is cleverly marketed to audiences through a broad campaign that utilized a wide range of media. Hardy (2011) explored the cross-media promotion and intertexuality of *True Blood* and found that several methods of advertisement promote the series, including trailers, mock news programs, cross promotional webisodes on Yahoo! and Facebook, and extensive print and audiovisual marketing strategies, and mock websites for the fictional organizations featured in the show (e.g. the American Vampire League). One especially clever print ad featured a white coffee pot full of blood with the top of the poster emblazoned with the slogan, "Nothing like a good cup of Joe." Additionally, an actual carbonated Tru Blood beverage

(blood orange flavored) was developed and sold online, with posters for the beverage featuring such sayings as, "Friends don't let friends drink friends," "All flavor. No bite," and "Real blood is for suckers" ("True Blood Poster/Print," 2011).

The popularity and success experienced by HBO is mirrored in the success of *True Blood*. A consistent fan favorite, *True Blood* has earned high ratings in past seasons, with the most recent season finale viewed by over five million people, a sizable sum for the premium channel (Seidman, 2010, para. 2; Hibberd, 2011, para. 2). In addition to consistent critical acclaim from the news media, the series garnered several award nominations, most notably an Emmy award nomination for Outstanding Drama Series in 2010 and a Golden Globe nomination for Best Television Series—Drama in 2010. The uniqueness of the series also resulted in unusual awards, including the 2010 Holy Sh*t! Scene of the Year at the Scream Awards (an award the third season of the show won for an explicit sex scene in which a character's head is twisted 180 degrees during intercourse) (Aemac, 2010).

Based on Charlaine Harris's novels *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* and created by HBO veteran Alan Ball, *True Blood* follows the unconventional lives and antics of a burgeoning cast of humans, vampires, witches, and faeries. Located in the fictional town of Bon Temps, Louisiana, and set some time in the near future, *True Blood* creates a time and place in which vampires reveal their immortal existence to humans (or "come out of the coffin") and prove they are not a threat to humans due to the availability of Tru Blood, a synthetic blood developed by the Japanese. This revelation, however, is met with trepidation from most of the human population. People in this setting offer a litany of reasons for explaining why associating with vampires is dangerous and why

recognizing them as citizens is unnecessary. Many of these reasons resemble those used to enforce segregation and the denial of marriage rights to same-sex couples. These themes of intolerance and oppression cause both critics and audiences to make comparisons between the show's plot lines and the debate surrounding same-sex marriage (Shen, 2009). Creator Alan Ball denies these assertions by labeling them "lazy," and claiming that the show can be interpreted as representing any marginalized group (Martin, 2008). Author Charlaine Harris states that she had the debate about same-sex marriage in mind while writing about the plight of the Bon Temps vampires (Shen, 2009). This plight is presented during the first season of the show, which uses consistent references to the possible ratification of the Vampire Rights Amendment, an action that would grant vampires all the rights currently enjoyed by breathing humans.

Bon Temps, a seemingly vampire-free town at the beginning of the first season, changes when a 173-year-old vampire named Bill Compton (who, while still human, served as a soldier during the Civil War before his transformation) walks into Merlotte's, the town watering hole and place of employment for the show's protagonist, Sookie Stackhouse. Young, perky, and ceaselessly polite, Sookie (Anna Paquin) demonstrates the perfect combination of charm, virtue, spunk, and honor expected of any stereotypical Southern belle (Hall, 2008). Contrary to the intolerant conservatism expected from Southern belles and demonstrated by the rest of the bar patrons, Sookie expresses interest when she discovers that Bill (Stephen Moyer) is a vampire and she is the only waitress willing to wait his table. Indicative of future plot twists, Sookie can hear the thoughts of every person she has ever encountered—except vampire Bill. Tired of the gift she has labeled her disability, Sookie quickly becomes intrigued with Bill and ultimately risks her

life to save him from a pair of drainers (people who drain vampires and then sell the blood on the black market).

Celluloid Vampires

The shift in perspective on vampires featured in *True Blood*—from antagonist to protagonist—contributes to the wave of popular vampire media representations released in the past few years, as well as to the history of vampire films in American cinema. Vampire emerged as popular celluloid villains in *Nosferatu* in 1922 and within a decade became the stereotypical, aristocratic terrors of the night, most often demonstrated through the character of Dracula (Heldreth, 1999; Beck, 2011; Leeder, 2009). This standard representation of vampires as evil creatures was reworked in later decades in films, such as *Interview with a Vampire* and *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. These films represented vampires as sympathetic characters who were not necessarily evil (Keyworth, 2002).

Television's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) portrayed vampires as mystical and often grotesque villains who were also "hip, campy, and cartoonish" (Owen, 1999, p. 28). The overwhelmingly popular *Twilight* film and book series centers on a humane vampire who falls in love with a female human, a storyline that is similar to that of television's *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-present). The program also mirrors the former films in its younger target audience. Examining a brief history of vampires in cinema and on television demonstrates the importance of studying a show like *True Blood* because it breaks with the standard vampire convention of portraying vampires as evil villains.

Racialicious

Media texts like *True Blood,* that consistently address forms of oppression in

North American society, frequently serve as the impetus for online audience responses. One outlet for these responses is the website Racialicious. Founded in 2004, Racialicious is an award-winning blog which provides social commentary on issues of race in popular culture. Owned and edited by journalist Latoya Peterson and featuring commentaries from a variety of experienced editors and correspondents, Racialicious hosts current blogs that feature a "no-holds-barred critique of questionable media representations" (About, 2011). Biographies of the staff of editors and correspondents are available on the website, helping to establish the credibility the commentaries. These commentaries are lauded as valuable sources of information on issues of race in our culture, with leading anti-racist educator Tim Wise calling the blog "one of only a few places I turn to for cutting-edge and up-to-date info on race trends" (Conversation, 2011).

Non-professionals are encouraged to submit commentaries to the website and individuals interested in submitting a piece are encouraged not only to focus on race, but also to have "a working understanding of other types of oppression, like homo/transphobia, heteronormativity, sexism, ableism or classism" (Submissions, 2011). This intersectionality is explored in-depth in the roundtable discussions about *True Blood*. These discussions have been a key feature of Racialicious since the third season of *True Blood* began in the summer of 2010. Before that, blogs and articles by guest contributors and the editor of Racialicious commented upon and analyzed the series.

Currently, the roundtable discussions are formatted as follows: each episode has been viewed, discussed, and analyzed by a group of at least three regular contributors, and the transcripts of these discussions are posted to the website within days of the episode's air date, with video clips and photos from the episodes. No information

regarding the production of these discussions is available on the website, meaning that readers do not know if the commentators viewed the episode together or separately, synchronously or asynchronously. As the form and function of the blog is not of interest for the current study, these pieces of information are not necessary to analyze the blog's content. Finally, readers are allowed to comment on the discussion postings, thus furthering the conversations surrounding *True Blood*.

Audiences

My use of the term *audience* must be explained and defined, especially as the audiences that are being studied are television audiences. The terms *audience*, *reader*, and *viewer* are often used synonymously (Staiger, 2005). According to Fiske (1987), the term *audience* is misleading because it implies that there is one homogenous and united audience that does not account for differences. Fiske (1987) also adds the term *audiences* to this list, stating that the plural of the word indicates there are differences between audiences of media texts that allow for heterogeneity. The terms *reader* and *viewer* have minor differences, but are often used interchangeably by Fiske (1987).

For the purposes of this study, the term *audience* is used to refer to the participants in the Racialicious roundtable discussions because they constitute an HBO audience with similar perspectives. Additionally, the term *audience* is applied to them because they are select group that is joined by invitation only. Though the term is considered problematic because of its implication that there is one audience as a whole, the current study examines one audience segment from online discussions and articles about *True Blood*, thus not requiring terms that account for multiple types of audiences (though the study does recognize that there is no universal audience).

Overview

This study utilizes qualitative data collection and analysis methods to examine *True Blood*'s generic adherence and narrative, as well as the audience responses to and about the series. Because the goal of this study is to understand the elements of the series that elicit audience reception, I use a multi-layered rhetorical analysis to learn how genre and narrative influence audience reception. Additionally, this study is contributes to the audience reception literature and furthering understanding about how audiences use media texts and how they make meaning and construct interpretations from and about television series.

This chapter provides an introduction to *True Blood* as a popular and unique television series. It also provides background for this study through an explanation of assumptions and rationale for the study, the research questions that focus the study, explanations of HBO, *True Blood* and other vampire-themed films and television series, Racialicious, and the audience as a key construct for the study. The following chapters extend the background and design of the study, as well as present the findings from my analyses. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature about genre, narrative, and audience reception. Chapter 3 explains the methods for data collection and analysis. Chapter 4 presents the findings from my analysis of *True Blood*'s generic adherence. Chapter 5 presents the findings from my analysis of the series as an allegorical narrative. Chapter 6 presents the findings from my analysis of the multiple audience reception theories utilized by audience members to make interpretations of the television series. Chapter 7, the conclusion, summarizes this study and its findings, as well as explains its theoretical contributions and explores areas for future research.

CHAPTER TWO:

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review of literature is an examination of three broad areas of communication research: genre, narrative, and audience reception. These three theoretical areas are necessary components for the execution of this research study and a comprehensive review of the literature about them is presented in order to provide a clear outline of key points of analysis for this study. The relevant literature reviewed about genre theory traces the evolution of the theory across media, including literary, film, and television. Research on narrative explores the underlying paradigm and theory, as well as the common narrative elements that are featured in stories across media. Audience reception literature explores the transition from viewing the audience as passive to active and explores some of the gaps in this area of research that this study hopes to fill.

Genre

Before a thorough examination of genre can occur, one must understand a few key aspects of genre. Genre theory is an extensive area of research with multiple perspectives as to how generic criticism should be executed (Rowland, 1991; Harrell & Linkugel, 1978) and what constitutes genre analysis (Downey, 1993). The understanding of what a genre is has been contested through the years, though Downey (1993) explains that genres result from comparisons to other discourses and are "a product of both ontology and interpretation" (p. 44). Campbell and Jamieson (1978) provide a concise definition of a genre by stating that a genre is "a constellation of recognizable forms bound together by an internal dynamic" (p. 21). With this information in mind, I adopt Benoit's (2000) explanation that the medium largely influences genre and a need exists

for comprehensive exploration of genre that must include a cross-media examination. Therefore, the following section explores the evolving nature of genre analysis, genres across literary, film, and television media, and the existence of the vampire subgenre across media.

Genre theory research and generic criticism have been sites of interest since Aristotle's development of deliberative, forensic, and epideitic genres in his *Rhetoric* (Benoit, 2000; Downey, 1993). Based on Black's (1965) approach to generic criticism, Benoit (2000) describes traditional genre theory as "distinctive, recurrent situations in which discourse occurs, and he analyzes past (historical) texts, inductively describing the rhetorical practice (common features) inherent in that situation" (p. 179). Much of the work done on genre in rhetorical criticism is founded on Burke's (1945) dramatistic pentad, which examines five areas of social life that are intended to help understand behavior and how people discuss behavior (Miller, 2005). According to Burke (1945), these five areas are

Act, Scene, Agent, Agency, and Purpose. In a rounded statement about motives, you must have some word that names the act (names what took place, in thought or deed), and another that names the scene (the background of the act, the situation in which it occurred); also, you must indicate what person or kind of person (agent) performed that act, what means or instruments he used (agency), and the purpose (p. x).

As this pentad suggests, the purpose, situation, rhetor, and method all influence rhetorical action. Drawing from this seminal work, genre theory is an expansive area of research that draws upon many of the key concepts mentioned in these sources. Benoit's

examination of genre theory utilizes Burke's (1945) pentad to expand upon the former's definition of genre theory and to approach the following keys aspects: situation, purpose, rhetor, and agency (Benoit, 2000).

The first, and most apparent of these concepts, is the importance of situation in the production of discourse (Benoit, 2000). This point is supported by Campbell and Jamieson (1978), who propose that the creation of genres is attributable to rhetorical forms that are "stylistic and substantive responses to perceived situational demands" (p. 19). The second aspect, purpose, focuses on how purpose shapes discourse and is often considered to be the defining feature of a genre (Benoit, 2000; Downey, 1993). The third key aspect posits that "the rhetor's nature influences the discourse produced by that rhetor," and these influencing factors can include race, ethnicity, gender, and political ideology (Benoit, 2000, p. 181; Campbell, 1986; Clark, 1979). Agency is the fourth and final aspect that is considered a key instrument in constructing genre as it focuses on the methods and medium a rhetor uses in dialogue. Benoit (2000) explains this Burkean concept by stating that "the nature of the medium influences the nature of the discourse" (p. 181). These aspects can be related to generic form as they help provide the formulaic structure that contextualizes the content of the discourse.

Expanding on a key component of genre—form—are Blankenship and Sweeney (1988) who explain that forms exist in a symbiotic relationship with content. They clarify that whereas content is meaning, thought, and matter, form is manner, shape of thought, and organization of material (p. 173). They assert that forms should not be seen as "a containing principle but as a shaping one" (Blankenship & Sweeney, 1988, p. 174). That is, forms do not contain content; rather, they shape it by providing context for presenting

and making sense of the content. This point is explicated by Burke (1968) when he writes that "a work has form in so far as one part of it leads a reader to anticipate another part, to be gratified by the sequence" (p. 124). Blankenship and Sweeney (1988) make several key assumptions about form, including the fact that it is active, that reciprocity exists between form and content, and that form is dialogic in nature (p. 176). Rowland (1991) further explains the relationship between form and content by stating that the function of a genre is to be a "force that unifies [its] form and content" (p. 131).

This concept of forms existing within genres is furthered by Black (1978) with the explication that "the genre of a thing is its class—a statement of its relationship to all other commensurable things. The form of that thing is its inherent structure—a statement of its constituents and their relationships to one another" (p. 76). Wallace (1970) asserts that "form is the shape of meaning" (p. 91) and the ways that these formulaic structures shape meanings are developed by Burke (1968) and further explained by Blankenship, Murphy, and Rosenwasser (1974). Burke (1968) categorizes five kinds of form: "Syllogistic progression, qualitative progression, repetitive form, conventional form, and minor or incidental form" (Blankenship et al, 1974, p. 14). These specific forms can be envisaged on a spectrum of ease of audience discernment, meaning that the easiest form for audiences to understand (conventional) is balanced by the most difficult, which is the qualitative progression of a form through a genre.

Blankenship and Sweeney (1988) provide a clear and concise description of each Burkean form, starting with conventional. This form is considered to be the least active and can be understood as an organizational pattern that people are used to, such as beginnings serving as the start of something and endings acting as the conclusion (p.

177). Minor or incidental form tends to be similar to conventional form and "minor form includes such well-known schema as metaphor, series, paradox, and the like" (p. 179). The third Burkean form is repetitive, which according to Burke (1968) is "the restatement of the same things in different ways" (p. 125). Examples of repetitive form include alliteration, parallelism, and repetition of key words or phrases (Blankenship & Sweeney, 1988, p. 180). The repetitive form is especially useful for assisting the audience in knowing what to expect. The last two forms—qualitative and syllogistic—are aspects of progressive and they are both considered to be "highly active and make significant dialogic demands" (Blankenship & Sweeney, 1988, p. 181). Qualitative progression requires extensive data to interpret, whereas syllogistic progression is the most active of the forms. Blankenship and Sweeney (1988) explain that "in the qualitative process the whole makes the starting point obvious, whereas in the syllogistic process the starting point makes the whole obvious" (p. 181). This explication of form provides patterns of thinking and according to Gronbeck (1978), uses "culturally imposed criteria for thinking" (p. 141).

The function of a genre is necessary to understand form. According to Downey (1993), "determining the function of a genre is an important critical endeavor, then, because it explains the fusion of forms that makes rhetorical genres recognizable, and because it provides the basis for evaluating the genre's efficacy as well as its endurance or evolution" (p. 43). The emphasis placed on the evolution of form is a defining feature of generic criticism (Downey, 1993; Campbell & Jamieson, 1978).

Consisting of a combination of "substantive, situational, and stylistic elements," genres are established by recurring similarities that form a recognizable whole and are

significant because of the meaning created by the combination of these elements

(Campbell & Jamieson, 1978). These forms of genre are rhetorical and are necessary for

the study of genre because, as Gronbeck (1978) notes, they force us "to search out

systems of cues or structures for guiding meaningfulness, and…[are] socially learned and

hence represents conventionalized patterns-for-thought" (p. 141). These forms are

learned and are tools for understanding, processing, and evaluating information

(Gronbeck, 1978), and consistent forms allow audiences to associate them with certain

genres. Because the criteria of genre listed by Campbell and Jamieson (1978)—

substantive, situational, and stylistic—must occur together in order to be considered

genre, it is necessary to explore each of these criteria in turn.

Substantive elements recur consistently within genres. These repetitive elements

are the specific content of a text, including lines of arguments presented, issues

addressed, and primary themes (Downey, 1993). Simons and Aghazarian (1986) also add

the following to this list: "modes of proof, canons of logic, topoi motivational appeals"

(p. 18). Substantive elements establish what counts for substance in a text. An exemplar

of substantive content is Bakhtin's idea of speech genres. Bakhtin (1986) explains speech

genres in the following way: "Each separate utterance is individual, of course, but each

sphere in which language is used develops its own *relatively stable types* of utterances.

These we may call *speech genres*" (p. 60, original emphasis). Utterances, then, are

different depending on a person's culture and these utterances are guided by three

specific restrictions that form Bakhtin's premise of speech genres. According to Holquist

(1990), these restrictions are "the immanent semantic exhaustiveness of the utterance's

theme,…the speech plan of the speaker,…and the typical generic forms of finalization"
(p. 64).

Baktin's philosophy explores how humans interact and behave through the use of
language (Holquist, 1990). Utterances are active, performed, and fulfill a purpose, as well
as dialogic because communicative interactions are continuously influenced by the
relationship between the speaker's intent to share meaning and the rules that govern
"language as a generalizing system" (Holquist, 1990). These rules are ever-present and
help direct communication, usually between individuals, because utterances are always in
response to something, an answer to someone, and a response to surrounding factors (at
whom the response is directed and the need of the speaker to communicate a specific
idea). They also rely on the societal norms that influence behavior and interactions; these
norms are not innate but are learned and are often unique to specific groups of people
(Holquist, 1990). Holquist (1990) also notes that intonation indicates a lot about what you
are communicating and with whom you are communicating (p. 61) and factors that
comprise the *extraverbal context* (p. 63).

Situational elements in genres are recurrent situations that outline issues or
problems that must be addressed and resolved by discourse (Downey, 1993). Harrell and
Linkugel (1978) explain that recurring situations feature organizational principles that
lead to genre formation because of the "discourse characterized by a family of *common
factors*" (p. 264, original emphasis). Bitzer (1968) emphasizes the importance of situation
in eliciting a certain rhetorical response. Campbell and Jamieson (1978) further this idea
by stating that forms created by substantive and stylistic elements are "responses to
perceived situational demands" (p. 19). Examples of situational demands include

speeches of apologia (Downey, 1993; Ware & Linkugel, 1973), inaugural addresses (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978), and historical speeches (Measell, 1978).

Stylistic elements are the recurrent structural elements dictated by a genre. This stylistic structure provides organization for content (Downey, 1993), as well as "patterns of personal display,…[and] figures of speech" (Simons & Aghazarian, 1986, p. 7). Two key examples of stylistic elements come from Burke and Bakhtin. The former will be addressed first so as to help inform the work of the latter. Burke's (1945) four master tropes—metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony—are his way of investigating truth. They function as dialogic tools, help inform texts, and "provide a conceptual framework for a theory of rhetoric" (D'Angelo, 1992, p. 94). According to Murray (2002), metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche provide epistemological perspectives, whereas irony functions as a dialogical trope that depends on the perspectives of others to exist. D'Angleo (1992) defines the tropes as representing "logical relationships and reasoning processes. Metaphor, for example, deals with resemblances. Metonymy deals with cause and effect relationships. Synecdoche deals with part/whole and genius/species relationships. And irony deals with incongruities, ambiguities, and seeming contradictions" (p. 101). He also explains that the four master tropes "generate strategies of style, memory, and delivery," "generate patterns of arrangement," and are movements of thought and encourage rhetorical invention (D'Angleo, 1992, p. 105).

The second aspect of stylistic elements is Bakhtin's notion of carnival and the carnivalesque. Bakhtin's interest in the carnival as a textualized element of popular history resulted in his theory of carnival, which Vice (1997) explains, "can be the subject or the means of representation in a text, or both. The carnivalesque may be detected in

textual images, plot, or language itself" (p. 149). Whatever form in which the carnival appears is considered to be the stage, while the actors are the characters and narrators and the spectators are the readers (Vice, 1997). Bakhtin's interest in the carnival traces from actual Medieval carnivals and to the current carnivals still celebrated, included Mardi Gras (Vice, 1997). Hall (2011) explains that carnivalesque can be defined as "the traditional language and spectacle associated with folk culture within the carnival season, language and images that represent the universal truths of life, death, and renewal through the grotesque body" (p. 70). Central to the current study is Bakhtin's grotesque realism, which is "opposed to all forms of high art and literature. It includes parody and any other form of discourse which 'bring[s] down to earth' anything ineffable or authoritarian, a task achieved principally through mockery" (Vice, 1997, p. 155).

The carnival provides a place for individuals to work out issues and be "counter-posed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of non-carnival life" (Bakhtin, 1963/1984, p. 123). Martin and Renegar (2007) analyze the film *The Big Lebowski* as a site of social critique through carnivalesque and explain that the consistent popularity of the film is connected to the ambivalent political and economic atmosphere that emerged a few years after the release of the film. It is through this film, they posit, that audiences are able to critique the dominant culture. Gencarella Olbrys (2006) examines the carnivalesque performances in skits on *Saturday Night Live* as reinforcing hegemonic structures. Meddaugh (2010) explores how *The Colbert Report* uses carnival laughter to critique the press. Some of the other current research utilizing Bakhtin's carnival theory explores the social and cultural implications of international carnivals (Armstrong, 2010),

carnival imagery in children's literature (Hall, 2011), and carnivalesque in comic books (Zolkover, 2008).

In regard to genre as most people know it, genre is a complex system of classification that allows popular media to be categorized and audiences to be prepared for what to expect from media (Altman, 1999; Neale, 2008b). This system of classification is what allows audiences to deduce if they want to read a classic, thriller, or mystery novel, or see a Western, comedy, or horror film at the cinema. Genres are also "cultural categories that surpass the boundaries of media texts and operate within industry, audience, and cultural practices as well" (Mittell, 2001, p. 3). In regard to television, this system of classification is used by industries to determine what programs to produce, as well as when and where to air them (e.g. determining the appropriate channel and time of day to maximize the viewing audience). Genres also serve as an organizational force in the text for audiences to respond to and participate with certain texts (e.g. visiting certain websites and viewing a text with certain people) (Mittell, 2001).

Though generic conventions often remain consistent over time and across media, genres themselves are not stable and they experience change over time (Stevens, 2000; Altman, 1999). Literary genres, according to Stevens (2000), must be transformed through the pushing of boundaries and reinvention of standard conventions. Film genres are considered to be "a postmodern multi-dimensional phenomenon characterized by mutability, flexibility, and hybridity" (del Rio Alvaro, 2004, p. 61). The examination of genres and generic conventions across media is necessary because the evolution of genres and forms can influence audience reception of a media text.

Literary Genre

Literary genres are largely based on the seminal work of Frye (1973), who identifies four genres—the generic differentiae—which are drama, *epos*, fiction, and lyric. Generic criticism, according to Frye (1973), is "not so much to classify as to clarify such traditions and affinities, thereby bringing out a large number of literary relationships that would not be noticed as long as there were no context established for them" (p. 247-48). Drama is presented with "enactment by hypothetical characters" and can limit the creative style of the writer because of the adaptations the writer must make to the demands of the play (Denham, 1978, p. 99). Frye (1973) calls drama "the rhythm of decorum," and it is mainly dialogic in nature (p. 268). It can also feature several specific forms, which are masque, auto, comedy, irony, and tragedy (Denham, 1978). The next genre is e*pos*, which is poetic, oratorical, episodic, and "the rhythm of recurrence" (Frye, 1973, p. 251). This genre has several thematic conventions, including riddle, comedy, irony, tragedy, charm, inscape, and outscape (Denham, 1978). Fiction is the third genre and its continuous nature stands in contrast to *epos*'s episodic nature. This genre encompasses the expansive print media, though mainly books, and features four forms of prose: novel, romance, anatomy, and confession (Denham, 1978). The final genre, lyric, shares the same thematic conventions as *epos*, but while the latter is an oral address to a group of readers, the former is a hypothetical presentation that pretends there is no audience; in essence, the address simply consists of personal musings (Denham, 1978).

Frye's (1973) work provides the foundation for literary generic criticism and it helps highlight how literary genres are continuously evolving to alter, include, or remove generic conventions (Stevens, 2000). Examples of how genres are altered can be seen in

the genres generally associated with vampires: horror and gothic. Usually portrayed as villains and antagonists, vampires are easily associated with the horror genre as we know it today (Auerbach, 1995). However, further examination of the gothic genre shows that literary vampires more closely adhere to the conventions of the gothic tradition than the horror genre, with the former considered to be "horror's parent genre" (del Rio Alvaro, 2004, p. 64).

Horror and gothic are terms that are often used synonymously. However, though they share similarities, they are not the same. While the horror genre focuses on suspense and criminality, the gothic genre portrays worlds preoccupied with evil (del Rio Alvaro, 2004). Elements of horror can be present in gothic texts, but its presence does not necessarily make a text gothic nor does it have to be present in order for a text to be gothic (Stevens, 2000; Bloom, 1998). Conventions of the gothic genre include fascination with the past, focus on the supernatural and magical, exotic settings, plots within plots, and representations of horror (Stevens, 2000). As horror is just one possible element in the gothic genre, it is safe to assert that the presence or absence of horror does not determine the association of a text within the gothic genre. Examples of gothic novels include Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), whereas horror novels include Stephen King's *Carrie* (1974) and Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist* (1971) (Stevens, 2000).

Because it was developed during the second half of the eighteenth century, a time associated with significant political and social change, the gothic genre is not only considered a vehicle for these changes, but an influencer as well (Stevens, 2000; Brooks, 1991). Brooks (1991) contends that the gothic genre helps situate the altered ethics and

values of the time period. Considering the wide-spread change occurring across Britain

and Europe at the time this genre was developed, it is easy to understand that gothic

stories were used as a way to make sense of the writer's altered realities. Howard (1994)

expands this notion further by explaining that gothic fiction "carries much that is

culturally specific—ideological, aesthetic, and literary norms, which are received and

interpreted or 'rewritten' by readers on the basis of their own interests," which include

cultural and personal history (p. 15).

Howard's (1994) statement coincides with Stevens's (2000) claim that "gothic

forms of expression are inextricably bound up in the nature of what it is that is being

expressed, the purpose of expressing it, the cultural context (including the means of

producing and distributing texts), and the intended readership" (p. 22-23). This concept

of culturally symbiotic expression will be demonstrated further in the discussion of

specific vampire texts. For now, it is important to understand that the gothic genre is a

response to psychological and social anxieties, and is used to represent the political,

cultural, and social situations that are current at the time the genre is employed (Punter,

1996). And not coincidentally, the mid-eighteenth century is the first time that the word

"vampire" is used in the English language (Bartlett & Idriceanu, 2006).

Vampires have been central figures in gothic literature for almost two hundred

years. In the process of the mythical figure's evolution, "the vampire has taken many

shapes, each mirroring the customs, beliefs, and fears of different cultures" (Bartlett &

Idriceanu, 2006, p. 1). Starting with Byron's vampire tale in 1816 and Polidori's *The

Vampyre* in 1819, vampires are presented as dangerous intimates and close friends of

humans (Auerbach, 1995). As Auerbach (1995) notes, "friendship with vampires is

permissible to readers of novels and tales…vampires on the page seduce the reader into sharing their condition" (p. 28). Out of this era also materialized what Bartlett and Idriceanu (2006) call the "Byronic prototype of a vampire": a male vampire who is "aristocratic, haughty, and superior," as well as young, aloof, brilliant, evil, and mesmerizing for the opposite sex (pp. 29-30).

The Byronic prototype continues throughout several more decades of vampire tales, including in Rymer's 1847 serial *Varney the Vampire*. It was at this point in the history of the literary vampire that it becomes associated with greed and capitalism: in his *Capital*, Karl Marx (1867) compares capitalism to a vampire who lives only by sucking labor from others, thus sealing "the vampire's class descent from mobile aristocrat to exploitative employer" (Auerbach, 1995, p. 31). However, the prototype experiences changes in Le Fanu's 1872 novel, *Carmilla*, which challenges the prototype by featuring a beautiful young woman as the antagonistic vampire who preys on other young women. These works are attributed with laying the groundwork for Bram Stoker's vampire to enter the literary world just before the start of the twentieth century (Auerbach, 1995; Bartlett & Idriceanu, 2006). Published in 1897, *Dracula* is one of the most well-known gothic novels of all time. Never having been out of print, *Dracula* is the primary model for the gothic vampire subgenre as we know it today (Auerbach, 1995). Bartlett & Idriceanu's (2006) definition of the Byronic prototype for literary vampires is considered to be an accurate representation of Dracula.

Current popular vampire literature, however, does not fit the Dracula/Byronic prototype. Romance novels that feature vampires as heroes utilize appropriated conventions to fit the fantasies of readers (Bailie, 2011). According to Bailie (2011), the

drinking of blood—both human and vampire—is no longer an act of violence, but is a positive reciprocal process that "enhance[s], consolidate[s], and secure[s] the couple's romantic relationship" (p. 141). This development is supported by Gordon (1998), whose ideas are utilized by Bailie (2011). In novels that favor romance over terror, including *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* series and *The Twilight Saga*, Gordon (1998) proposes the idea of a "sympathetic vampire" who "retains its strength, but loses its terror" (p. 230). Sympathetic vampires are ones who do not fit the terrible figure of evil featured in many gothic and horror novels, but rather are survivors of hardships "who must live in harmony with their world, be flexible, adaptable, and possess stamina" (Gordon, 1998, p. 230).

This shift in the representation of vampires as sympathetic characters (though still dangerous and possibly perverse characters) is largely attributed to Anne Rice's *Interview with a Vampire*, in which Rice's "modern" vampires "are portrayed as charismatic, erotic, and sympathetic characters with a conscience" (Keyworth, 2002, p. 355). Additionally, Rice's novel (and later the film adaptation) likely is responsible for developing the immense popularity of vampires as pop icons in our culture (Ramsland, 1989, as cited in Rout, 2003). And much like later human-friendly vampires—a la *Twilight*'s unique Cullen family and *True Blood*'s Bill Compton—many of Rice's vampires have moral codes: they experience moral ambivalence about destroying human life for the sake of devouring their blood, as well as decide to protect innocent human beings from evildoers (which include both evil vampires and evil humans) (Rout, 2003).

Film Genre

Because vampires are used as vehicles to examine a culture's current state of

affairs, it is no surprise that "with the birth of film, they migrated to America in time for the American century" and ultimately experienced changes that would reshape how vampires would come to be known in ensuing decades (Auerbach, 1995, p. 6). However, the changes in the vampire genre did not happen in a vacuum; film genres have evolved from literary genres into a distinct area of study. Sanders (2009) notes that "just as literary genres have mutated, so film genre structures have been challenged; time, production, criticism, and taste have dictated this" (p. 7). And though Altman (1999) explains that the study of film genre is simply "an extension of literary genre study," it is also now "an intellectual space in which film scholars and critics now respond primarily to each other rather that to the literary critics who provided the backdrop for previous generic speculation" (p. 13). This intellectual space provides film genre scholars the opportunity to examine and interpret this flexible and evolving area of study (Sanders, 2009; Altman, 1999). In regard to film, then, genres can be defined as "patterns/forms/styles/structures which transcend individual films, and which supervise both their construction by the filmmaker, and their reading by the audience" (Neale, 1980, p. 7).

In cinema, vampires are closely associated with the horror genre. The horror story, according to Sanders (2009), "is the story of the great outsider, the other, whom society must destroy in order to feel safe again and to assuage its own bad conscience" (p. 203). Ursini (2000) explains that the "Other" featured in horror films is familiar in some way to viewers and the fear of the "Other" is "rooted in our psyche, in our fears, and obsessions" (p. 4). Kristeva (1982) explains that a feature of horror is abjection, with forces that are unpleasant, repressed, and that cannot be reckoned with as they are

distinctly separate from, but simultaneously like, the viewers. Vampirism, as a category

of horror, used to adhere more closely to vampire canon in horror films (e.g. garlic,

coffins with native soil, silver, et cetera) (Everson, 1954/2000). However, while the

"otherness" and ambivalence in horror films involving vampires has remained, many of

the generic conventions once associated with horror have not.

Since the inception of silent movies in the beginning of the 20th century, vampires

have been a constant presence on the silver screen, providing the classic antagonistic

tensions and threats that have propelled the most visible figure of this horror subgenre,

Count Dracula, to become one of the most portrayed fictional characters of all time

(Leeder, 2009; Melton, 1999). This most famous vampire is considered a Marxist

metaphor for capitalism (Godfrey, Jack, & Jones, 2004), a product and victim of extreme

conservatism (Tyree, 2009), and a tragic Byronic anti-hero (Fry & Craig, 2002). Rarely

have there been extended lulls in the production and release of vampire-themed films in

Hollywood, and fans and scholars alike often note that countless vampire characters are

at least partially—if not completely—inspired by Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (Melton, 1999).

Though many film adaptations of vampire stories have featured varied types of

vampires and often still feature a sense of underlying conservatism often associated with

vampires (Tyree, 2009), the standard Stoker conventions commonly used for vampire

films include solitariness, conflict between vampires and vampire hunters, and vampires

serving as strictly predatory beings (Benefiel, 2004). These elements, while still present

in current vampire-themed films, have been altered enough that many updated vampires

no longer demand or inspire comparisons to Stoker's famous villain. This divergence

between Stoker's *Dracula* and current celluloid vampires forms the new type of vampire

featured in today's media: successors who still feature a dark combination of wanderlust, overt sexuality, and opulence, but who now also are viewed as human-friendly protagonists, which imbibe an alternative diet of non-human blood and are frequently shown to be scrupulous heroes (Heldreth, 1999; Tyree, 2009).

Vampires featured in current popular films, such as *Underworld* and *Twilight*, are presented in such a way that grants audience access to them and allows audiences entrance into their inner circles. These updated vampires still reflect the vampire archetype that is considered "as readily identifiable as the cowboy and the gangster" (Heldreth, 1999, p. 2), but are now also sympathetic characters as mentioned in regard to literary vampires. This point is expanded by Kane (2006). He posits three cycles of vampire texts: the malignant cycle that spanned from 1931 to 1948; the erotic cycle, which occurred from 1957-1985; and the sympathetic cycle that started in 1987 and is still currently going on. The latter cycle is marked by a departure "from the aristocratic realm, and place[s] the vampire within the context of everyday life," as well as "the vampire assuming hero status" (Kane, 2006, p. 88).

Through a semantic-syntactic analysis, Kane (2006) identifies "seven areas of interest that evolve through the corpus of vampire films" (p. 19). Kane (2006) explains the seven areas. The first is the look, which is considered to be "the hypnotic stare the vampire uses to control his victims" (p. 19); the second is the bite, which encompasses how vampires attack their victims and how the victims react to being bitten; the third is the infection, which examines how vampires deal with their vampirism; the fourth and fifth are the expert and the vampire, which address how a non-vampire deals with a vampire and how a vampire deals with an expert adversary; the sixth is the cross, which

is considered the most common way to repel vampires; the seventh and final area is the destruction, which deals with how vampires are ultimately destroyed.

Television Genre

As stated earlier, vampires have been a common feature in films for decades. However, within the past two decades, vampires have become a common presence on the small screen as well. This presence is demonstrated by the popularity of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003, The WB and UPN), *True Blood* (2008-present, HBO), and *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-present, The CW). The present study focuses on this phenomenon in regard to HBO's *True Blood*, an examination of television genres, and a review of other television vampire properties that inform this study. While definitions of television genres often encompass literature and films as well (Lacey, 2000), television genres tend to be more ambiguous, largely due to hybridity, which combines elements of two or more genres to form a genre that suitably describes a text (Neale, 2008a). This hybridity results in television genres that share common elements from multiple genres (e.g. docudramas and biopics).

Television genres are distinct entities separate from films. However, despite the differences in the means of production and distribution between films and television shows, some of the same genre conventions featured in films routinely appear in television shows (Stokes, 2003). Additionally, a clear separation needs to exist between literary and television genres because attempting to analyze television with literary standards is ineffective because the characteristics that make the visual and oral medium unique are distinct from those of the written medium (Fiske & Hartley, 1978). Despite the problematic nature of using the same genres across media, insufficient research has been

conducted to fully develop television genre theory with its own theoretical basis separate from literary and film genre theories (Mittell, 2001).

In his essay on the importance of expanding television genre theory, Mittell (2001) states that "importing genre theories into television studies without significant revision creates many difficulties when accounting for the specifics of the medium" (p. 3). The idea that television is a special medium is not new; Gerbner (1990) recognized this fact when developing his theory of cultivation, noting that television is a unique medium that requires special approaches in order to study it. Texts "come together only through cultural practices such as production and reception" (Mittell, 2001, p. 6), meaning that audiences connect certain programs as being part of the same genre based on how similar they are to each other. In other words, an efficient way to locate a genre is to examine the narrative structure of the show and the audience reception of the show.

One component of vampires on television (and sometimes in films, as well) is the sympathetic cycle explored by Kane (2006). Television series like *True Blood, Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* and *The Vampire Diaries* feature vampire protagonists (incidentally mostly male vampires) who often follow one of two tracks (Kane, 2006). The first track features a human who is victimized and becomes a vampire, struggling with his/her vampirism (Bill's storyline in *True Blood* loosely follows this track, as do plots in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*) or a vampire whose vampirism is a curse (seen in some *True Blood* storylines with secondary characters, such as good-natured Eddie in the first season).

Of interest for the current study are gothic and dramatic/melodramatic television genres. Gothic television often utilizes conventional hallmarks of literary gothic, but does so in a way that makes a text polysemic and difficult to define and understand (Ledwon,

1993). A prime example of this is the television series *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991, ABC), with its use of such gothic conventions as "incest, the grotesque, repetition, interpolated narration, haunted settings, mirrors, doubles, and supernatural occurrences" (Lewdon, 1993, p. 260). These conventions are expanded by Lewdon (1993) as centered upon the threat of something horrid, the presence of double entities (twins, look-a-likes, et cetera), and the destruction of domesticity. Also central to the current study is Lewdon's (1993) application of Kaminsky's (1974) branches of horror films to *Twin Peaks*. According to Kaminsky (1974), the seven branches of horror are threatening animal instincts, immortal parasites, witches, resurrected or possessed dead beings, madmen, mad scientists and their monsters, and creatures from other planets (p. 152-53).

Television dramas use representational aspects to create an external world that is similar to the reality of most audience members' lives, as well as imagination elements that create a fictional space that is internalized within the fictional representational world (Kjelstrup, 2007). Elsaesser (2002) explains that popular television often uses melodrama to address social issues, but does so in contextually private and emotional ways, thus doing a disservice to the issues at hand. Furthermore, Engelstad (2008) posits that "melodrama is, no doubt, the dominating mode of popular television shows," and that popular drama features narratives that mainly focus on character development through actions (p. 310). Exploring the television drama series *The West Wing* (1999-2006, NBC), Engelstad (2008) studies how the melodramatic narrative portrays political issues accurately and how the personal character storylines enhance the political content.

Genre theory is an extensive area of study that explores the internal dynamic of literary, film, and television texts to determine the consistent structures that are

recognizable to audiences. Widely varying between media, genres are the understandable categories of organization that shape narratives and inform audience members what they can expect from the text. Due to the extensive differences between media, genres cannot be applied from one media to another, but rather must be created for a specific media

Narrative

The exploration of genre is necessary for understanding narrative because, as has been previously examined, genres provide situational and substantive structure for the way stories can be told. Since narratives are stories and discourses within generic frameworks, it follows that Fisher (1985) asserts that the narrative paradigm directly influences how genres are interpreted and assessed. Genres provide frameworks for narratives, "thus, one may adhere to the narrative paradigm and approach a text respecting its genre and conduct the analysis in a variety of ways" (Fisher, 1985, p. 357). Narrative also serves as "a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change" (Herman, 2007, p. 3).

Narratology, defined as the science of narratives, studies aspects of narratives featured in "both literary and non-literary genres and discourses which need not be defined as strictly narrative, such as lyrical poems, film, drama, history, and advertisements" (Onega & Garcia Landa, 1996, p. 2). It also proposes that narrative explains how people understand communication acts and artifacts as stories (Herman, 2007). Therefore, the following section addresses the narrative paradigm, components of narrative, and narratives across media.

The importance of narrative in communication studies is largely based in Fisher's (1984) seminal work with narrative paradigm theory. The theory "celebrates human

beings, and it does this by reaffirming their nature as storytellers," as well as assumes that essentially all forms of human communication can be seen as stories that interpret elements of the world (Fisher, 1989, p. 56). Fisher's (1984) narrative paradigm is grounded in ontology and explores human communication by combining the rhetorical themes of persuasion and literary aesthetics in order to understand how reason and rationality inform all kinds of communication. It is based on five presuppositions:

> (1) humans are essentially storytellers; (2) the paradigmatic mode of human decision-making and communication is 'good reasons' which vary in form among communication situations, genres, and media; (3) the production and practice of good reasons is ruled by matters of history, biography, culture…; (4) rationality is determined by the nature of persons as narrative beings…; and (5) the world is a set of stories which must be chosen among to live the good life in a process of continual recreation (Fisher, 1984, p. 7-8).

Included in these presuppositions are the concepts of narrative fidelity, which is a test audiences use to determine whether or not stories are similar or "ring true" to them; and narrative probability, which explores the coherence of a story. Both of these features pertain to audience reception theories.

Humans are socialized into a world of written and oral narratives and this socialization occurs across cultures, time, and place, and causes us to think of the world and our lives through narratives (Fisher, 1984). Narrative rationality is an ability that humans have to make sense of narratives through identification and provides explanations for others' choices and thoughts (Fisher, 1984). Narrative is also a mode of discourse because narratives represent multiple facets of the real world, including facts,

values, emotion, reason, and intellect; humans are culturally socialized into an inherent understanding of narrative probability and fidelity, meaning that these elements are not strictly the terrain of elite, educated individuals; and lastly, narratives differ from argument because of structural elements, rather than those that are substantive, indicating the influence of genre on narrative form (Fisher, 1984). Finally, narratives can be metaphorical when their philosophical themes are embedded with allegorical meanings (Berger, 2012). According to Nellen (2012),

> Allegory is a form of extended metaphor, in which objects [settings], persons, and actions in a narrative, are equated with the meanings that lie outside the narrative itself. The underlying meaning has moral, social, religious, or political significance, and characters are often personifications of abstract ideas as charity, greed, or envy.

This comprehensive definition also indicates that allegorical meanings stimulate multiple levels of meaning, including literal and symbolic, and these meanings enhance the polysemic nature of a media text. According to Berger (2012), *The Prisoner*, a television series about a person imprisoned on an island managed by a mysterious regime, "can be seen as an allegory of the triumph of the human spirit and democratic individualism over the forces of a totalitarian bureaucracy and adversity in general" (p. 232). While the literal meaning of *The Prisoner* is easily understood (for example, imprisonment), the symbolic meaning is abstract and extensive, as well as communicated through multiple elements within the series, including setting, characters, and plot.

Narratives are comprised of multiple elements, though three of the most important are story, plot, and narration, what Porter Abbott (2007) refers to as "the three principal

components" of narrative (p. 40). Story features action and characters, progresses forward through time (Porter Abbott, 2007), and relies on a *fabula*, which consist of "a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors" (Bal, 1985, p. 5). Bal (1985) notes that the actors causing events do not have to be human. Plot is defined in three different ways, with the first being that plot is a type of story that provides a framework for the story (Porter Abbott, 2007; Frye, 1973; Propp, 1968). Plot is also the structure of events that make stories complete and authentic (Porter Abbott, 2007). According to Ricoeur (1981), "a story is made out of events to the extent that plot *makes* events *into* a story" (p. 167, original emphasis). The last definition, according to Porter Abbott (2007), contains a plot that serves as a way to alter the standard chronological order of stories, so that "in these terms the emphasis is on plot as the artful *disclosure* of story" (p. 43, original emphasis).

The definition of narration has been contested through the years because it can be applied to the narrative created by a narrator, considered a synonym for narrative, referred to as narrative discourse, and finally restricted to the discourse that is limited to the narrator (e.g. an interior monologue) (Porter Abbott, 2007). Central to the concept of narration is how involved the narrator is with the action of the storyworld, which is defined as the narration and the narrated, the telling and the told about (Margolin, 2007). Genette (1979) explains that homodiegetic narrators are ones who are also participants in the action and are in the storyworld. An example of a homodiegetic narrator would be Bella Swan in the *Twilight* books and films (Meyer, 2005). The story is presented from her point of view and in the films her voice provides narration. Conversely, heterodiegetic narrators are outside of the storyworld and are not participants in the story

(Genette, 1979). The ever-present male narrator of the television series *Pushing Daisies* (2007-2009, ABC) is an example of a heterodiegetic narrator in that he describes, explains, and foreshadows the action from a distant position that is not participative in the story (Jowett, 2011). The role of narrator is ambiguous in *True Blood* because the story is mainly told from Sookie's perspective, yet she does not do voice-over narration. However, in *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* series, Sookie is a homodiegetic narrator.

Other important elements of narrative include event, character, and dialogue. According to Bal (1985), an event can be defined as "the transition from one state to another" (p. 5). Events also lead to the conclusion and usually the resolution of the story (Berger, 1997). Often referred to as actors, characters partake in the actions that push the story to its resolution and are abstract figures that can only be known through a text. Authors ascribe qualities to characters—such as behavioral, mental, physical, and communicative—in order to individuate them (Margolin, 2007). Dialogue in narratives informs readers about characters by displaying their thoughts and personalities through conversations. Dialogue also provides a sense of authenticity to the narrative because the audience is informed about something central to the story by the characters themselves (Berger, 1997; Thomas, 2007).

An informal analysis of *True Blood* shows how the elements of narrative are present in the series. The story of vampires and humans learning to co-exist is structured by a plot that has the events of the series structured in a chronological order that reaches some manner of resolution at the end of each season. The characters in the series drive the action of the story, and they are given distinct personalities with qualities that individuate them from each other. For example, a viewer of the program is not likely to

mistake vampire Bill for vampire Eric for several reasons that are not limited to their markedly different physical characteristics, including their conversational styles, manners of moving, and situations in which the characters are involved.

Narratives are present in essentially every form of media. From comic strips to paintings to movies, narratives in the media tell stories about events or circumstances that happen to someone or something within a certain period of time (Berger, 1997). Narratives are told in certain ways depending on the type of medium that disseminates them. Every medium utilizes specific techniques for telling stories that are appropriate for that medium (Onega & Garcia Landa, 1996). Therefore, this review of narrative literature is not limited to television. An exploration of literary and film narratives is necessary in order to understand how television, as a successive medium, features distinctive narratives. Additionally, because this study is partly centered on online blog roundtable discussions, research on online narratives will also be explored.

Literary and Film Narratives

The study of literary narratives has often centered on the novel as the most popular and most emulated kind of narrative (Scholes & Kellogg, 1966). However, this view was too limiting, and Scholes and Kellogg (1966) proposed that the novelistic approach—with its focus on realism—broadened it. Literary narratives include myths, romances, legends, and more that are not limited to novels. Therefore, in order to do this they explored the features of meaning, character, plot, and point of view that are common in multiple literary narratives. Meaning, they posit, is at the intersection of the world created by the author and the reality of the reader's world; this connection can be representational, where the narrative is a replica of reality, or illustrative, which seeks

merely to suggest some aspect of reality in a largely symbolic way (Scholes & Kellogg, 1966). When meaning in fictitious narratives is tightly controlled by authors, the text usually adheres to one of two didactic forms—allegory or satire (Scholes &Kellogg, 1966). Allegorical stories are usually metaphorical with symbolic significance that conveys a moral and suggests implications beyond storytelling (Berger, 1997). Satire compares idealistic versions of reality to actual versions of reality and portrays the former as superior to the latter; irony is often implicated in these contrasts in order to enhance the juxtaposition (Scholes & Kellogg, 1966).

Dynamic characters tend to follow developmental or chronological paths; the former features characters whose personalities are simplified in order to demonstrate more clearly their progress on an ethical journey and the latter features a temporal plot that has the characters' traits shift during the story's progress (Scholes & Kellogg, 1966). Exploration of character development is done through the use of narrative interpretation of characters' thoughts and their interior monologues (Scholes & Kellogg, 1966). According to Scholes and Kellogg (1966), plot is the dynamic sequence of events in narratives and "insofar as character, or any other element in narrative, becomes dynamic, it is a part of the plot" (p. 207). Requiring a beginning, middle, and end, plot can follow a historical form, focus on past events, use a biographical form, or retell the life of a person. Finally, point of view continually evolves in literary narratives because authors are always searching for effective ways of presenting their narratives; what holds constant about it, however, is that it influences the reader's perception of the narrative (Scholes & Kellogg, 1966).

The story in a narrative is comprised of events that involve characters. This concept is explored in depth by Chatman (1978). He explains that "the story is the *what* in a narrative that is depicted, discourse the *how* (p. 19, original emphasis). While the discourse is the form and "the means by which the content is communicated," the content itself (the story) is broken down into many parts (Chatman, 1978, p. 207). The story features events, which are actions and happenings, and existents, which are characters and setting; the story itself becomes a plot when there is causation linking the event with a stimulus (Chatman, 1978). Chatman (1978) explores narrative as a structure with three signifieds—event, character, and setting—and the signifiers that represent one of the signifieds, such as action, people, and place. These events are either considered major and integral to the narrative (kernels) or minor and not necessary for the narrative to make sense or continue (satellites). Literary narratives have temporal freedom to feature these events in great detail, with little explanation, or as though they occurred in the past (Mittell, 2007).

Film narratives, however, contrast with literary narratives when it comes to the importance of character. According to Chatman (1978), seminal works on literary narrative view character development as important only so far as it furthers the plot. Conversely, Chatman (1978) argues that plot and character are of equal importance in modern narratives. Furthermore, film narratives rely on established visualization to guide viewers' perspectives; unlike literary narratives, where readers are often granted freedom to visualize elements of narrative in their own way, film narratives provide viewers with "camera angles and movement, editing, music, and unusual tricks like the shift to color

[that] all function to guide viewer comprehension and emotional response to the story represented on screen" (Mittell, 2007, p. 160).

These elements mentioned by Mittell (2007) present a tacit description of characters, events, and story that result in narratives that are visually rich yet verbally poor (Chatman, 1990). Tacit description in film contrasts with explicit description in literary narratives, which provide great detail about the plot, characters, and setting in the narrative (Chatman, 1990). Additionally, Chatman (1990) distinguishes the differences between literary narration and cinematic narration, noting that "by its nature, cinema resists traditional language-centered notions of the narrator" (p. 124). In other words, despite the form of literary narration, literary narratives are generally *told* to readers, whereas film narratives are *shown* to readers or viewers. This influences the point of view of literary and film narratives, as well. Whereas film narratives present a story within strict confines of the literal camera framing of the story, literary narratives present stories with "figurative and elastic" frames that do not necessarily limit readers' interpretation and imagination (Chatman, 1990, p. 156).

Film narratives can often be categorized into one of three models. According to Keating (2006), three models of film narratives are: the classical model, which focuses on causality, consequences, character development; the alternation model, which proposes that the dominant narrative negotiates with other dominant systems (usually to appeal to the broadest audience possible); and the affective model, which posits that the linearity of the narrative is not as important as the narrative's pathos. Research about complex narratives in films is a central area of study that explores how films utilize these types of models in storytelling (Simons, 2008).

Film and television narratives share similar visual and aural forms and can easily be interpreted as the same. However, Mittell (2007) explains that "the two media diverge in crucial ways, with sufficiently different structures that we cannot analyze film and television narratives identically" (p. 156). Therefore, the following section explores the elements that make television narrative a unique area of study.

Television Narrative

Television narratives are unique and distinct from film narratives in several ways, starting with the serialized nature of television. Porter, Larson, Harthcock, and Berg Nellis (2002) explain that the two defining features of television narratives are on-going storylines and character development. Whereas most films are stand-alone properties that do not depend on other films for narrative coherence, television programming is usually episodic or serial in structure because it "offers ongoing storyworlds, presenting specific opportunities and limitations for creating compelling narratives" (Mittell, 2007, p. 163). Episodic television narratives are common in primetime television and are easily recognized by the resolution that occurs at the end of each episode; examples of this type of television series are *House, M.D.* (2004-2012, FOX) and *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* (1999-present), NBC. The events that occur in each episode are independent and rarely carry over to subsequent episodes even though the characters and setting are the same across episodes (Mittell, 2007). Conversely, the serial structure of television narratives features ongoing storylines that remain across multiple episodes or even entire seasons, as well as the refusal to have storylines resolved at the end of each episode or season (Mittell, 2007). *True Blood* is a prime example of serial structure: each episode ends with a cliffhanger and picks up where the previous episode ended, making the

narrative hard to follow if one has not seen all episodes of the season (Mittell, 2007).

Lastly, television narratives often feature arcs, or "multi-episode plotlines that run across

a series, but eventually are resolved" (Mittell, 2007, p. 165). *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is

a television series known for its use of season- and episode-long story arcs about villains

threatening the fictional town of Sunnydale (Mittell, 2007; Cover, 2005).

Stories on television are often told with the temporal pattern of story-time or

discourse-time. Story-time is the chronological, linear movement of the story, whereas

discourse-time is "the duration of the story as told within a given narrative," which uses

time manipulations such as flashbacks, flashforwards, and retellings of events (usually

from multiple perspectives) to demonstrate the passing of time (Mittell, 2007, p. 161;

Drangsholt, 2009). The television series *Lost* (2004-2010, ABC), studied for its nonlinear

structure and use of intertextuality, shows how to destabilize the narrative and highlight

the series' complexity (Drangsholt, 2009; Scolari, 2009). The temporal pattern of *True

Blood* utilizes flashbacks, as well as chronological progression, thus making it a unique

aspect of the show to study.

Another unique element of television narratives is the time constraint placed on

television programs (most programs are either 30 or 60 minutes), and commercial

television programming is structured according to commercial breaks, often using the

breaks for narrative suspense (Mittell, 2007). These structural and temporal restrictions

on a television series, however, also allow the narratives to be developed more

extensively than film narratives because the overall amount of time utilized is greater for

television series' (Wilcox & Lavery, 2002). Porter et al. (2002) posit that this extended

amount of time in television narratives allows for greater character development than in

film narratives. Television series are also required to adapt to unforeseen situations that can alter the narrative, such as the death of an actor (such as John Spencer's death during the original run of *The West Wing*), positive or negative audience response to a character or storyline (such as the Rachel-Joey romantic relationship on *Friends* [1994-2004, NBC]), or network mandates that order changes to a script or the entire series (as occurred with the series *Veronica Mars* [2004-2007, UPN, The CW] that was changed in order to avoid cancellation) (Mittell, 2007; Sibielski, 2010).

Intertextuality is an important concept that is not limited to the asynchronous narratives seen in popular television shows, but is a concept that has its roots in Bakhtin's *dialogism* (Kjelstrup, 2007). Part of the significance of *True Blood*'s social and cultural commentary seems to come from the series' use of intertextuality, which is "essentially a 'code of connotation' that 'depends on the readers' knowledge' of the 'historical elements' of the text for reading or sense making" (Barthes, 1977, p. 28, as cited in Soukup, 2010, p. 81). This means that a text relies on audience awareness of certain issues for the series' content and references to have significance (Collins, 1992). Additionally, texts that either directly or indirectly refer to or reflect other texts are intertextual, and intertexuality often informs audience reception because of how it influences meaning making and interpretation (Kjelstrup, 2007; Scolari, 2009). Intertextuality is important for the study of *True Blood* because the series uses it to address societal anxieties.

When societal security is deemed precarious (as it has been post-9/11), television narratives reflect this uncertainty and viewers tend to see anyone who remotely seems to fit the category of "other" with trepidation (Butler, 2004; Hearn, 2008). This concept of

"other" and difference is often addressed in popular television, with the television series

Will & Grace (1998-2006, NBC) being a prime site of power negotiation and

contradiction (Mitchell, 2005). This concept of difference also is important for the study

of *True Blood* since the vampires in the show are generally considered to be metaphors

for marginalized groups that are often synonymous with the concept of "other" (Tyree,

2009).

With all of this information in mind, it becomes clear that television narratives are

not simply facsimiles of literary or film narratives. Rather, they are distinct and evolving

forms of storytelling, many of which are lauded for their emphasis on narrative

complexity (Mittell, 2006). Series that are aired on HBO, such as *True Blood*, are often

considered to be superior to other television shows (and advertised as being such)

because of their complexity (Mittell, 2006). This complexity is largely attributed to

creative freedom allowed television producers and "is a redefinition of episodic forms

under the influence of serial narration…[it] foregrounds ongoing stories across a range of

genres" (p. 32). Television series, like *The X-Files* (1993-2002, FOX) and *Buffy the*

Vampire Slayer are prime examples of complex narratives, and these types of narratives

reject common notions of continuity, resolution, and parallel stories (Mittell, 2006;

Smith, 2011).

Other recent research on television narrative focused on the "hegemonic feminist

narrative" of the popular television series *Sex and the City* (1998-2004, HBO) by

emphasizing issues such as gender, race, and sexual orientation (Brasfield, 2007, p. 130).

Another television series that received much academic attention is *Ally McBeal* (1997-

2002, FOX), which was praised for its use of conflicting tragic and comic storylines to

create a juxtaposed narrative that challenges heteronormative ideology (Cooper & Pease, 2002). Cooper (2001) explained how *Ally McBeal* provides a space for viewers to reject patriarchy because of the pro-feminist narratives found in the series. *Designing Women* (1986-1993, CBS) is examined because of its use of feminine discourse to explore narratives about women's issues, patriarchy, and hegemony (Dow, 1992). Other television narratives about music artists perpetuate the belief in American meritocracy through the myth that self-discipline and tenacity are the most important traits artists can have and that they justify any means to arrive at the desired end (Barton & Turman, 2009).

Online Narrative

Popular television narratives tend to inspire fan dedication and participation that often result in online activity about the show (Knaggs, 2011). Jenkins (1992) notes that activity in the online environment "makes it possible to trace the process by which television meanings are socially produced, circulated and revised" (p. 118). The internet has enabled narratives to be created and communicated in ways that are distinct from the media previously addressed. Blogs are a form of this type of cyber communication, and they often combine multiple ways of communicating narratives including text, photos and videos, and links to other websites (Bazzanella, 2010). The type of blog under examination in the current study is called personal journal, which is similar to a diary in that the blog posts feature the thoughts and experiences of the blogger (Herring et al., 2004). Criteria for blogs include having a purpose, theme, form, and composition (Eisenlauer & Hoffmann, 2010). Ochs and Capps (2001) articulate a continuum of possible narratives, with the sociolinguistic approach and the conversational approach

anchoring this continuum.

The conversational approach is of interest for the current study because it is considered a hypernarrative: multiple voices discuss something that is contextually embedded in a multi-linear composition with a fluid moral stance. Racialicious, the blog under study, is an example of a hypernarrative since it features multiple narrators discussing how *True Blood* relates to social and cultural issues, and the narrators' perspectives on how the show represents these issues. Readers of blogs can also be contributors and in this way they can influence the narrative (Bazzanella, 2010). The role of reader involvement in narrative blog construction is termed interactivity (Eisenlauer & Hoffmann, 2010), and this interactivity is found in Racialicious when readers comment on the blogs posted and can also contribute their own written pieces to the blog for possible future publication on the site (About, 2011).

Audience Reception Theories

Audience reception relates to narrative analysis because of shifting perspectives of the role of readers and their processes of active interpretation and understanding of texts (Onega & Garcia Landa, 1996). Reception theorists Onega and Garcia Landa (1996) contend "that the ideology or significance of a text is not a structure, but a process, the result of the interaction of text and reader" (p. 30). Additionally, Chatman (1978) posits that the experience of narrative requires audiences' responses and interpretations because "they cannot avoid participating in the transaction" (p. 28). Finally, Mittell (2007) argues that highly complex television narratives "counter the stereotype of the television audience as passive couch potatoes. Instead, such narratives help create highly engaged, participatory viewers" (p. 171). This section explains how audiences become participants

in media interpretation.

Audience reception research explores how audiences derive meanings from and make sense of media messages. Audiences bring their own experiences, knowledge bases, and identities that are separate from the media to their consumption and utilize these factors in the generation of meaning (Williams, 2010). The meanings that audiences generate are often found to "be quite pertinent to their behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs," and are also related to the positions that audience members hold at multiple levels, including individual, social and political (Staiger, 2005, p. 2; Williams, 2010; Brunsdon & Morley, 1978).

This approach to audience research in cultural studies diverges from past research by assuming that audiences are active in their media use, rather than passive consumers and by assuming that this "understanding of those messages is unproblematic" (Schroder, 2009). Contrary to other media effects (Gerbner, 1990; McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and uses and gratifications research (Blumler & Katz, 1974), audience research from cultural studies emphasizes the importance of gaining insight about viewers' perspectives. Schroder, Drotner, Kline, and Murray (2003) explain that the objective of this perspective is

> to explore what people do with the media…in a manner that emphasized the
> signifying processes surrounding the nexus of media and everyday life, and that
> related these meanings closely to the historical, political, and social context in
> which media consumption takes place (p. 42).

In regard to the current study about *True Blood*, I further the objective of Schroder et al. (2003) by analyzing the interpretations made by the audience members who partake in

online discussions about the television series.

Television and Literary Audiences

Audience reception research posits that viewing television is an active process, contrary to what was once the standard viewpoint for television audience studies. The process of viewing television, once thought to be a passive act that resulted from daily ritual, contained little to no selectivity in program choice. When viewed consistently for a long period of time, this viewing process resulted in a worldview that more closely resembled the television version of reality rather than the actual version of reality (Gerbner, 1990). However, audience reception research extends this viewpoint by asserting that the backgrounds and experiences of the audiences are necessary areas for study. In addition to the content of the media text, they feature influential factors in audience interpretations (Brunsdon & Morley, 1978; Williams, 2010). The beginning of this approach to audience research, attributed to Stuart Hall's (1980) theory, utilizes encoding and decoding to show audiences as discriminating viewers rather than passive consumers of media messages.

In his seminal piece on audience reception, *Encoding/Decoding*, Stuart Hall (1980) theorizes about how audiences make sense of television messages. Hall posits that the mere distribution of a media text does not indicate that the text will have any effect on audiences. Rather, audiences must translate the text into some form of practice. He claims that "if no 'meaning' is taken, there can be no 'consumption'" (p. 164). Audiences must derive some form of meaning from a text in order for this circuit of communication to be complete. To solidify the importance of this encoding/decoding approach, Hall (1980) states that a preferred meaning is encoded into a text and that this meaning sets limits for

the decoding process and the types of meanings that audiences can derive from the text. Therefore, Hall's (1980) theory emphasizes examining the communicative process as a whole, "with the moment of programme [*sic*] making at one end and the moment of audience perception at the other" (Moores, 1993, p. 16-17). The moment of audience perception results from audience readings, which are the meanings that they derive from the text. The current study utilizes this approach by analyzing both the television series and the audience responses to the series.

The meanings audiences derive from texts are referred to as *readings*, and these readings result from three types of decoding positions: dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings. The first type of reading proposes that audiences adhere to the preferred meaning encoded by the creators of the text and take away from it what the creators wanted readers to perceive, interpret, or believe. An example of this would be if a viewer of the film *Twilight* agreed with the sentiment of the protagonist vampire Edward that remaining chaste until marriage was important. The second type of decoding position that audiences can use a text is the negotiated reading. This type of reading recognizes the hegemonic structures that the dominant readings promote, yet features contradictions in beliefs that do not fully accept dominant readings. A negotiated reading of the aforementioned film would be agreement with Edward's belief in chastity, yet also acknowledging reasons why individuals may not remain chaste until marriage. Finally, the third type of reading is oppositional, which rejects the underlying ideological position of the preferred meaning. For example, a viewer of *Twilight* rejects the notion of chastity and disregards it as a viable decision. Viewers get to decide how to read texts and their readings are based on their life circumstances.

Hall's theory of encoding and decoding is furthered through more research on language and audiences, including Volosinov's theory of social semiotics, which argues that meanings in language are continually changing because of the social interaction of language (Volosinov, 1973). Furthermore, Brunsdon and Morley's (1978) study of the British television program *Nationwide* utilizes Hall's (1980) theory in order to ascertain how audiences interpreted the ideological themes within the program and discern whether they accepted or rejected the show's preferred meanings. Finding that viewer readings are largely determined by factors such as age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and political affiliation, Morley states that research in this area should examine how interpretations are influenced by viewers' personal and socio-economic positions (Brooker & Jermyn, 2003; Staiger, 2005). This finding is important because it demonstrates that social class simply does not fully address the audience's constructs for decoding media messages and that multiple factors should be taken into account when analyzing the interpretations of *True Blood* viewers.

An underlying concept in Hall's theory is that multiple possible meanings exist in media texts and the discretion of each viewer determines how the text is read. These texts, ones with a multiplicity of interpretations available to viewers, are polysemic. This concept is similar to Bakhtin's concept of multivocality (or polyphony), which consists of the interaction between multiple consciousnesses rather than a single consciousness (1963/1984). As previously mentioned, the preferred meaning of a text provides parameters for decoded readings of a text, thereby demonstrating that polysemic texts are not without structure (Hall, 1980; Fiske, 1987). This structure, however, is not completely open to any and all audience interpretations. Hall (1980) stresses that just

because polysemic texts feature multiple meanings does not indicate that these meanings

are equal, because the possible interpretations are going to reflect "the dominant cultural

order" as this order promotes the preferred reading (p. 169). Therefore, the parameters

that are determined by the creators of a text are utilized to promote a preferred meaning,

as well as appeal to a variety of audiences. In terms of audience responses to *True Blood*,

the significance of their readings can only be determined after an analysis of the series

reveals what preferred meanings are encoded in the text.

Though polysemic texts do feature the parameters of the preferred meaning,

audiences still have the ability to interpret the texts in their own way. The intentions of

text creators (or authors) are not necessarily reflected in the interpretations of audiences

(Hobson, 1982) because according to Hall (1980), audiences decode the text with an

oppositional reading (or, in some cases, a negotiated reading). Although audiences with

different backgrounds often interpret different meanings in texts, they are similar (for

instance, women with the same socioeconomic status) because they are just as likely to

decode a text in ways that differ from each other as they are to decode texts in ways that

are similar to audience members who are not like them (Liebes & Katz, 1990; Morley,

1980). In her study of *Dallas,* Ang (1985) asserts that the ideological uncertainty found

in the television program allows audiences to construct their own meanings. By allowing

for a multitude of decoding opportunities, television texts can appeal to a wide variety of

viewers.

Although research on this concept often focuses largely on television, research

emphasizing polysemic meaning is not limited to this medium. Research studies about

other forms of media demonstrate the pervasive nature of polysemy, as well as the

extensive abilities audiences use in interpreting these meanings. Radway (1984) explores how women make sense of romance novels and posits that the act of reading is more important to the understanding of their interpretations, rather than the actual construction of the novel as a text (Williams, 2010). By asserting that reading is an active process, Radway (1984) explains that readers of romance novels have the ability to resist, reject, and reappropriate [*sic*] what they read in order to fit with the meanings that they want to find. Readers of the *True Blood* television series have abilities similar to those of readers of novels.

It is important to note that in addition to having the ability to decode a text in multiple ways, audience members also occupy a variety of positions in society, thus making it necessary to have a text be encoded with multiple meanings in order to appeal to multiple groups of audience members (Fiske, 1987). Furthermore, these parameters often reflect societal factors that influence how audiences make sense of texts and ultimately their own lives. Important societal factors influence the audience's interpretation process of polysemic texts because of how these factors influence and constrict audience interpretations. Condit (1989) argues that these factors include how much access audience members have to oppositional texts, their access to texts, how much work is involved with decoding the text, "and the historical occasion, especially with regard to the text's positioning of the pleasures of dominant and marginal audiences" (p. 104). These elements are necessary in determining how certain media texts are decoded by certain audiences, as well as why these audience members interpret them the way they do. By examining online discussions about *True Blood*, the current study can analyze how viewers decode meanings in the program and explore the potential

factors that influenced the decoding.

While the concept of polysemy assumes that audiences are indeed active in their interpretation of media texts, it also assumes the importance of pleasure in the interpretive process. This type of pleasure, Ang (1985) posits, is the ability to construct subversive from messages that challenge hegemonic ideologies in the media (primarily patriarchy in the case of the *Dallas* study). Because audiences can decode multiple meanings within the parameters established by the text's creators, audiences are also able to experience multiple types of pleasures from media texts (Condit, 1989). Both Ang (1985) and Hobson (1982) assert that the "emotional realism" of television shows provides audiences with viewing pleasure. Radway (1984) also reports that female readers of romance novels experience pleasure from reading them because the women are, in a sense, demonstrating matriarchal control over romantic stories. Additionally, Fiske (1987) explains that "the pleasure and power of making meanings, of participating in the mode of representation, of playing with the semiotic process—these are some of the most significant and empowering pleasures that television has to offer" (p. 239). Another final point from Fiske (1987) is that audiences derive pleasure from making their own meanings because of the sense of power they feel as they subvert meanings from the dominant culture. Having the power to possibly displace the power structure of media messages, this subversion provides audiences with the ability to resist and challenge dominant ideologies through the process of their own interpretations. Because *True Blood* is a program known for its unique and startling content, the commentaries encoded in the series can potentially inspire interpretations that challenge both the viewpoints of the television series and the issues the series is addressing or critiquing.
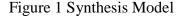
Narrative paradigm theory informs audience reception by explicating narrative fidelity and narrative probability, as well as narrative coherence. According to Fisher (1984), narrative fidelity is the degree to which narratives are similar to those experienced by audience members. Audiences compare their own life stories to those they are viewing or witnessing, and the stories are found to have fidelity if they "ring true" with the experiences of the audience members. Substantive features of narrative fidelity are corroboration and social convergence and, "these concepts concern how people come to adhere to particular stories" (Fisher, 1984, p. 16). It also addresses the trustworthiness of a story, as well as the soundness of its logic and reasoning (Fisher, 1985).

Narrative probability is the coherence of a story and audiences are inherently aware of it; formal features of narrative probability include "consistency of characters and actions, the accommodation of auditors, and so on" (Fisher, 1984, p. 16). These formal features recognize contradictions in a story and sequences of thoughts and actions in discourse (Fisher, 1985). Additionally, the narrative paradigm addresses audiences by seeking, "to account for *how* people come to adopt stories that guide behavior" (Fisher, 1985, p. 348, original emphasis). The use of narrative rationality (which is composed of probability and fidelity) assists audiences in judging the merits of stories, determining whether or not to accept a story as reliable, and using it "engenders critical self-awareness and conscious choice" (Fisher, 1985, p. 349). Lastly, narrative coherence requires that existents (characters and setting) "must remain the same from one event to the next. If they do not, some explanation (covert or overt) must occur" (Chatman, 1978, p. 30). This means that if the causal link between events is not clear to audiences, they

will draw narrative inferences and fill in details to make sense of the story in terms of their own experiences.

This review of genre, narrative, and audience reception theories illuminates key areas of analysis for the study of *True Blood*. As genre tends to shape narratives, it is salient to examine how the television series adheres to the generic conventions of gothic vampire texts, as well as the structures and elements of television narrative. Finally, the examination of audience reception research highlights the importance of examining audience responses and interpretations within the larger situational context of their lives, as well as the types of meanings that they derive from the television series.

Synthesis Model

This project posits that genre provides the overall framework that contributes to the structure of mediated narratives. Since genres establish standard and expected conventions, narratives are largely influenced and shaped by genre for their form. These narratives are then received by audiences and serve as stimuli for reception and response. As such, the following model demonstrates this relationship.

Figure 1 Synthesis Model

CHAPTER THREE:

METHODS

This study is a multi-layered analysis of the television series *True Blood* and the online responses to the series. Analyzing the media text as a stimulus for audience response gives greater insight into the meaning-making and interpretation processes that are integral to audience reception research. This chapter describes the four aired seasons of *True Blood*, describes the blogs and articles that comprise my data, explains the process of data collection, re-states the research questions, and explains the proposed methods of analysis for this study.

True Blood

In its first season, *True Blood* emphasizes the struggles of difference and intolerance that marginalized groups experience at local and national levels. Because vampires have only recently exposed their existence to the rest of the world, citizens of Bon Temps and the rest of country are often hostile towards vampires, eliciting comparisons of the storyline to the civil rights era. An example of this intolerance is seen in the Fellowship of the Sun church, a fundamentalist anti-vampire organization. Sookie starts a romantic relationship with Bill, much to the chagrin of her family and friends. Other vampires in Bill's acquaintance do not accept their relationship and attempt to break them up. The appearance of vampires in town also triggers a serial killer to murder any woman who has associated with a vampire, causing Sookie to almost be killed in the season finale.

The second season of the series has two main story arcs, with the first one involving Sookie and Bill being recruited to help Eric find the ancient vampire Godric.

Since Godric is Eric's maker, Eric is ruthless in his search for him. The other storyline involves a newcomer to Bon Temps named Mary Ann, a maenad who wreaks havoc on the town's residents by controlling their minds. The season ends with her plans being foiled and her being destroyed. Also included in this season's narrative is the carry-over story arc of the Fellowship of the Sun church from the first season. The church recruits Jason, Sookie's brother and it is later exposed that the church was involved in the abduction of Godric. Bill proposes to Sookie, but is abducted before she has a chance to accept his offer.

The third season features Sookie panicking about Bill's disappearance. In order to find him, she enlists the help of werewolves, a new mystical group added to the series' mythology. The structure of the bureaucratic vampire authority is also explored in more detail, as the Vampire King of Mississippi is discovered to be behind Bill's abduction. The narrative reveals that Sookie has faery blood and that Bill has been secretly investigating her, showing that their meeting was not as fortuitous as she once thought. They officially end their relationship and the season ends with her disappearing from a cemetery.

The fourth season begins with Sookie in the land of the faeries, puzzling over her status as part faery. Realizing that this land is not safe for her, she escapes and returns to Bon Temps, only to learn that she has been away for one year and that her brother sold her house. Added to the series' mythology is a coven of witches that establishes itself in Bon Temps. Bill (now Vampire King of Louisiana) learns that the leader is a necromancer and is proficient at controlling the dead. This is unnerving news for the walking dead and Bill sends Eric to get rid of the coven. However, the leader of the

coven casts a spell on Eric, causing him to lose his memory. Sookie finds Eric wandering

alongside the road and agrees to take care of him until the spell is reversed. As the coven

intends to cast a spell that would force all vampires across the globe to walk out into the

sunlight, Sookie and the other vampires prepare for a battle with the coven. The witch's

plans are thwarted and she is ultimately destroyed.

<div align="center">**Racialicious**</div>

The Racialicious blog provides a critical perspective on representations of race,

gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic status in the media (Submissions, 2011). Its editors

and contributors frequently comment upon and critique how music videos, films, events,

and television shows challenge or reinforce negative stereotypes about marginalized

groups. The blog has featured pieces about *True Blood* since the series started in

September, 2008. For the series' first season, guest contributors and the owner of the

blog, Latoya Peterson, wrote blogs about the series. Blogs about the second season were

difficult to locate; however, articles about *True Blood* written by and inspired by Ms.

Peterson were available on other websites from the time period of the second season. The

third season of the series provided the weekly Racialicious roundtable discussion blogs

about each current episode of *True Blood*. From that point on (including the fourth

season), four to five participants took part in a roundtable discussion about the current

episode of the series and Ms. Peterson or another contributor would post the blog within a

few days of the episode airing.

Of the many types of blogs, Racialicious fits in the category of personal journal,

which is a type of blog that features the personal thoughts and feelings of the writers

(Herring, Kouper, Scheidt, & Wright, 2004). All Racialicious blogs are about a current

media event or text, and readers can comment on and post reactions about each blog. Racialicious is also what Ochs and Capps (2001) call a hypernarrative, which features a conversational approach and adheres to five criteria for narrative dimension: tellership, tellability, embeddedness, linearity, and moral stance. These criteria hold that blogs must feature multiple voices all commenting on a text or event that is contextually embedded within the culture. They also hold that the blogs can be read in multi-linear ways by readers and that each blogger's perspective (or moral stance) is highlighted in the blog. A brief review of the Racialicious roundtable discussions analyzed in this study shows that the blog fits the criteria for narrative dimension. The discussions have multiple voices commenting on the same *True Blood* episode and explaining their perspectives on the episodes. The commentators also often reference other related media texts (frequently *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*), which shows the embeddedness of the blog within U.S. American culture, and the discussions can be read in multiple ways by readers due to the reverse-chronological order of the overall blog and the intertextuality of the *True Blood* roundtable discussions (e.g. the pictures and YouTube videos embedded in the blogs).

<div align="center">**Data Collection**</div>

Episodes from *True Blood* are the first set of data for this study. In order to analyze how the show fits within the gothic vampire subgenre, how the series' allegorical narrative adheres to the conventions of this genre, and how the narrative evolves over the course of four seasons, this study examined eight episodes of *True Blood* (two episodes from each season). Examining episodes that span the current number of produced seasons was necessary in order to learn how the entire series evolved and how the generic conventions and narratives changed.

The sampling of episodes was selected purposively, or with the purpose of selecting episodes with particular salience to this study. The selected episodes adhered to the following criteria: the main storyline of the season had to be the focus of the episode, rather than a tangential secondary storyline; the primary characters of the season had to be involved with the main storyline more so than secondary characters; and the episodes had to provide more than one relevant example of generic convention or narrative progression. For the purposes of this study, the primary characters of the series are Sookie, Bill, and Eric. Secondary characters constitute all other characters in the show who are listed in the opening credits. The main storyline has to involve one or more of the primary characters and a tangential storyline is considered to be secondary if it only involves secondary characters. This structuring of primary and secondary characters and storylines was necessary because the plethora of storylines that occur in each season of *True Blood* would provide an overwhelming pool of data if all were treated with equal importance. Also, many of the secondary storylines do not further the progression of the overall narrative and thus would not provide an accurate representation of the entire series' narrative.

A final criterion involved with this selection included the examination of the blogs and articles to ensure that the episodes selected actually elicited adequate audience response, meaning that blogs that were unusually short (under five typed, double-spaced pages; average blog length is 10 to 15 pages) or mentioned that the episode was thin on plot development caused an episode not to be selected for analysis. This criterion was found to be necessary as several episodes of *True Blood* failed to garner much response

on the Racialicious blog, thus failing to provide an adequate range of perspectives on the episodes and series in general.

After viewing all 48 episodes of *True Blood* and reading through all of the Racialicious blogs and articles that could potentially have been selected for analysis, the following episodes were selected for this study: from the first season, "Strange Love" (episode one) and "You'll Be the Death of Me" (episode twelve); from the second season, "Scratches" (episode three) and "Release Me" (episode seven); and from the third season, "Beautifully Broken" (episode two) and "Evil is Going On" (episode twelve); and from the fourth season, "I'm Alive and On Fire" (episode four) and "And When I Die" (episode twelve). These episodes provided a comprehensive examination of the series' narrative progression and its adherence to generic conventions, as well as yielded significant audience responses for the reception aspect of this study.

Posts on the Racialicious blog and online articles by the blog's writers constitute the second set of data for this study. As the online data are responses to the series, complimentary blogs and articles were selected to correspond with the *True Blood* episodes selected for analysis (as previously mentioned). I found the roundtable discussion blogs for episodes from the third and fourth seasons by searching the Racialicious website. Over the course of the series' four seasons, those posting the Racialicious blogs used a variety of keywords to label the blogs about *True Blood*. This caused some difficulty in locating blogs older than the last three blogs about the fourth season. A Google search was conducted by typing the name of the blog, the season number, and the episode number for episodes from the third and fourth seasons. This

search resulted in blogs that were listed under different keywords on Racialicious that had limited the results from initial searches of the blog.

Blogs for the first and second seasons were also slightly difficult to locate. As previously mentioned, the roundtable discussions about *True Blood* did not became a weekly feature of the blog until the start of the third season. Therefore, blogs about the first season were posted by guest contributors and the blog's owner. Unfortunately, blogs about second season episodes were not located, despite an extensive search of the blog and several Google searches. However, the series did garner attention in its second season and an article was written about it by Latoya Peterson for Double X, a section of the Slate website. In addition to Double X, Slate features the following sections: News & Politics, Technology, Business, Arts, Life, Health & Science, Sports, Podcasts, and Video (www.slate.com). The site is published by the Slate Group, which is a division of the Washington Post Company.

The Double X section of the Slate website has its own sections, as well, which include Briefing, News & Politics, Arts, Life, Business & Tech, Science, Podcasts & Video, and Blogs (www.doublex.com). Peterson's (2009) article for Double X was featured in the Arts section and examines the negative representations of women in *True Blood* and other vampire films and television series, and the messages these texts communicate to viewers about ideal femininity. The article was selected for analysis because of its critical perspective on the series and that it was authored by the editor and owner of Racialicious. Though authorship was not a criterion for the selection of blogs or articles about the series, maintaining consistency in the types of blogs and articles

analyzed was deemed important so as to prevent any extreme dissenting opinions that did not contribute to the study but simply presented outlying ideas.

The second article related to the second season was published shortly after Peterson's (2009) article was published on Double X. Author James Brady Ryan (2009) cites and contradicts parts of Peterson's (2009) article in his article on the website Nerve (www.nerve.com). Nerve is a blog website similar to Double X and features the following sections: News, Love & Sex, Advice, Movies, Music, TV, Web, and Dating Confessions. The website explains that it is "a love, sex, and culture website that caters to a young, educated readership of over a million people" ("Get Published on Nerve," 2011). And much like Racialicious, Nerve encourages and accepts submissions from readers.

Ryan (2009) explores what *True Blood* communicates about women and sex and asserts that the representations of female sexuality are not as damaging as Peterson (2009) states. Ryan's (2009) rationale for his viewpoint lies in the narrative of *True Blood*, stating that the heart and humanity of the characters prevents the show from being completely profane. He also offers a comparison to *Twilight*, which is cited frequently in the roundtable discussions about *True Blood* and helps provide the contextually embedded criterion for a blog to be a hypernarrative. Though neither article is a blog, they provide parallel discussions to the Racialicious blogs, thus making them relevant data for this study.

Research Questions

Four research questions guide this study of the generic and narrative progression of *True Blood* and the audience reception of the series:

RQ1: How does *True Blood* adhere to generic conventions of the gothic vampire

subgenre?

RQ2: What are the allegorical narrative features that adhere in *True Blood*?

RQ3: How does the narrative of *True Blood* evolve over the course of four

seasons?

RQ4: How do audiences of *True Blood* demonstrate the various principles of

audience reception?

Methods

Interpretive and critical approaches provide the methodological perspective for

this study. These two approaches provide valuable frames that inform the study of media

texts and audience responses. The interpretive approach allows for the study of media

texts and the generic conventions and narrative features embedded therein because the

approach encourages deep understanding of a phenomenon. Since the goals of this study

are to gain insight and understanding, I present a thick description and interpretation of

True Blood's genre and allegorical narrative (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The critical

approach utilized for this study is informed by cultural studies and rhetoric, which view

media texts as "complex (and contested) artifacts of ideologies that operate to shape their

symbolic form and content" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 66). This highlights one of the

relevant key contributions cultural studies makes to media studies research, which is the

emphasis on including the thoughts and perspectives of audience members (Lindlof &

Taylor, 2011). According to Lindlof (2009), media texts are embedded with multiple

ideologies, thus causing them to be polysemic. Audiences are free to interpret multiple

meanings from these texts and the interpretations are not always the producers' intended

interpretations, rather they are sometimes oppositional or negotiated (Hall, 1980).

      This multi-layered analysis of *True Blood* and audience reception adheres to the

method of rhetorical criticism. According to Foss (2004), rhetorical criticism is "designed

for the systematic investigation and explanation of symbolic acts and artifacts for the

purpose of understanding rhetorical processes" (p. 6). This method allows for three types

of analysis: a generic criticism to examine how the generic conventions in *True Blood*

have adhered to other similar vampire texts and changed over time; a narrative analysis of

the series' allegorical meanings and how the series' narrative has evolved across four

seasons; and finally an audience reception analysis to explore how audiences, through

blogs and articles written about the narrative, decode the polysemic series. The following

sections explain the methods of analysis for this study. The first section explains the

process of generic criticism, the second section explains the process of narrative analysis,

and the third section explains the process of audience reception analysis.

Genre Analysis

      In order to study the generic adherence of *True Blood,* a precise definition of

genre must underpin the method. According to Campbell and Jamieson (1978), a genre is

"a constellation of recognizable forms bound together by an internal dynamic" (p. 21).

Additionally, Altman (1999) and Neale (2008b) explain that genre is a complex system of

classification that allows popular media to be categorized and audiences to be prepared

for what to expect from media. Therefore, the following definition that provides the basis

for this analysis is informed by these scholars: genre is system of recognizable forms that

are unified by a consistent dynamic that is understood by audiences to contain certain stylistic, substantive, and situational elements.

The first method used for this multi-layered rhetorical criticism is generic criticism. This analysis is a deductive inquiry into *True Blood*'s adherence to the gothic vampire subgenre. According to Foss (2004), there are three types of generic criticism: generic description, generic participation, and generic application. The latter type will be the one employed for the current study because it allows for the media text under analysis to be one "that you want to asses in terms of how well it conforms to the genre of which it is a part" (Foss, 2004, p. 196). Generic application is important for this study because of how it is informed by the role of audience members: the purpose of conducting this type of criticism is to deduce if the media text fulfills the generic expectations held by audience members (Foss, 2004).

Since *True Blood* is the media text under analysis for the current study, I analyze to determine how well it conforms to or diverges from the gothic vampire subgenre. In order to accomplish this, substantive, situational, and stylistic elements of eight episodes of *True Blood* will be coded in the following ways: situational elements will be coded according to the conditions that cause the series to be assumed to be a part of the gothic vampire subgenre; substantive elements will be coded for emergent recurring themes and issues addressed in the episodes; stylistic elements will be coded for the dialogic patterns used in the episodes. After these elements are coded, they will be compared to the elements associated with the gothic vampire subgenre. This comparison will help show whether or not *True Blood* is successful in fulfilling the expectations for and elements of

the gothic vampire genre. The following table presents the coding elements for this

analysis.

Table 1 Gothic Vampire Subgenre

Gothic Vampire Subgenre	
Elements	**Definitions**

Situational Elements (Context)
• Social
   ○ Situated altered ethics & values
   ○ Customs, beliefs, & fears of culture
   ○ Fear of "Other"
• Political
   ○ Psychological and social anxieties in response to political upheaval
	Vampires represent new ethics/values
	Vampires embody culture
	Vampires are unfamiliar "Other"
	
	Vampires serve as a way to deal with anxieties in society

Stylistic Elements (Rhetorical Patterns) • Vampire-human interactions • Human-human interactions • Vampire-vampire interactions	Use of the dialogic pattern politeness/intensity/vulgarity in these interactions

Substantive Elements (Content)
• Issues
   ○ Good versus evil
• Themes About Vampires
   ○ Fascination with the past
   ○ Moral ambivalence
   ○ Dangerous intimates
   ○ Close friends of humans
   ○ Superior to humans
   ○ Supernatural
   ○ Mesmerizing for opposite sex
   ○ Heroism
   ○ Sympathetic vampires
   ○ Survivors
   ○ Erotic/sexual
   ○ Common conventions
   ○ Victim of vampirism vs. cursed with vampirism
	Vampires are assumed to be evil
	
	Origin, heritage, past experiences
	Negotiation of good/evil impulses
	Relationships with vampires are dangerous
	Vampires are good friends to humans
	Vampires are aristocratic & wealthy
	Vampires have supernatural abilities
	Vampires easily attract opposite sex
	Vampires save humans
	Vampires are not inherently evil
	Vampires have survived hardships
	Vampires are overtly sexual
	Hypnotic stare, bite, infection, expert and vampire, cross, and destruction
	Vampirism is an assailant or a curse

Narrative Analysis

The second method to be used is narrative analysis focusing on the series as allegory with two parts. Much like the generic criticism, this analysis is also a deductive inquiry that is examining the entirety of the series in order to develop specific conclusions about how the series has progressed and changed. A complex analysis of the series will entail examining the allegorical meanings of the series' title and the episode titles, as well as the setting(s), characters, and plot. These elements all work together to reinforce the series' allegorical meaning and this analysis is intended to uncover that meaning. Specifically, this analysis will highlight social and political commentaries that are allegorized in the series, as well as identifiy whether or not the individual episodes feature allegories that vary from the overall allegorical meaning of the series.

The second level of analysis is audience-centered and adheres to Fisher's (1984) narrative paradigm. Of particular interest for this study are Fisher's (1984, 1985) concepts of narrative probability, narrative fidelity, and narrative coherence. As previously mentioned, narrative probability is the coherence of a story which audiences are inherently aware of; formal features of narrative probability include "consistency of characters and actions, the accommodation of auditors, and so on" (Fisher, 1984, p. 16). This element explores how audiences select stories as influences on their behavior (Fisher, 1985). Narrative fidelity is the degree to which narratives are similar to those experienced by audience members and the degree to which they "ring true" with the audience members' life experiences (Fisher, 1984). Finally, narrative coherence involves the narrative inferences that audience members make if the causal links between events in a narrative do not make sense (Chatman, 1978). This analysis connects the generic and

allegorical narrative analyses to the interpretations of the audience members, and is

featured in the audience analysis chapter. The following table provides the coding

elements for these analyses.

Table 3 Narrative Analysis and Audience Reception

Narrative Analysis	
Elements	**Definitions**
Film/Television Narrative • Setting • Characters • Plot	Geographical location and time era of story People in stories whose actions lead to the story's resolution A series of events that transition the story from state to another

Audience Reception
• Narrative Probability
• Narrative Fidelity
• Narrative Coherence
    ○ Characters
    ○ Setting
    ○ Event
	Audiences find story to be coherent
	Audiences find story to "ring true"
	Audiences find story to have logical causal patterns
	Characters must remain consistent
	Setting must remain consistent
	Events must feature consistent with characters and setting

Audience Reception Analysis

       The third method to be used in this study is an analysis of the various principles of

audience reception used by the Racialicious bloggers. Since the Racialicious blogs

provide the bulk of the audience reception data and feature a group of individuals all

commenting on the same episodes of *True Blood*, this study shows how the Racialicious

roundtable discussion participants interpret the meanings of the series. Therefore, the

blogs and articles will be coded for the following interpretive strategies: encoding-

decoding, pleasure, and narrative paradigm. Specifically, the preferred meaning of the

series will be established in the allegorical narrative analysis and used to identify

examples of the viewers' dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings. The data will also be coded for expressions of pleasure that the bloggers experience as they subvert the meanings of the series. Finally, audience interpretations that utilize narrative probability, narrative fidelity, and narrative coherence will be identified.

CHAPTER FOUR:

GENRE ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the findings from my analysis of generic features of *True Blood*. Guided by rhetorical criticism, my analysis charts the generic adherence and conventions of the series. *True Blood* is a unique text for study because of its innovative plot that explores the dynamics between humans and vampires as they learn how to co-exist. Due to the innovation of synthetic blood, vampires exist openly among humans, fighting for equal rights and acceptance in society. Centered on the life of protagonist Sookie Stackhouse, the series highlights her relationships with vampires, humans, and other supernatural beings, and emphasizes the pressures to conform that are placed on individuals who stray from societal norms.

Generic Criticism

I use generic criticism to identify *True Blood*'s adherence to the gothic vampire subgenre as a generic application, which determines how well a media text conforms to a genre (Foss, 2004). This method is important because it analyzes the series' adherence to the gothic vampire subgenre and therefore answers the following research question: How does *True Blood* adhere to generic conventions of the gothic vampire subgenre?

Since genre is a system of recognizable forms unified by a consistent dynamic that audiences understand and that contains certain substantive, stylistic, and situational elements, my analysis identifies representations of these features that are consistent with the gothic vampire subgenre. The data for this analysis consists of two episodes from each of the four seasons of *True Blood* for a total of eight episodes. I selected these

episodes for their consistent representation of the generic conventions that the producers utilize throughout the series.

Substantive Elements

Substantive elements are the content of a media text that consists of themes and issues. The majority of my analysis focuses on the extensive range of themes about vampires that are associated with other films and television representations. Also analyzed in conjunction with these themes is a common issue that is significant to the gothic vampire subgenre and ultimately to the series itself. The following section features my analysis of *True Blood*'s themes, including those that are present in and absent from the data.

Themes. Several themes permeate media texts in the gothic vampire subgenre, including a fascination with the past, moral ambivalence, dangerous intimacy, close friendships with vampires, superiority over humans, and supernatural abilities. Other important themes include representations of vampires as being mesmerizing, heroes, sympathetic, survivors, and sexual. The two final themes I examine are the common conventions used in vampire texts, such as the vampire bite and hypnotic stare, and the comparison between the perspectives of the vampire as victim of vampirism or cursed with vampirism. The following analysis identifies these themes in detail, starting with a fascination for examining a vampire's past.

Focusing on the past involves exploring the origins and heritage of vampires, including their home countries, upbringings, and former societal statuses, as well as their makers, transformations, and subsequent experiences as undead beings. The producers of *True Blood* emphasize the origins and past experiences of Bill and Eric, two vampires

central to the series' storyline. As a Southern gentleman and Civil War veteran, Sookie's grandmother embraced Bill for his knowledge of that era and his memories of the war, even eliciting an invitation for him to speak to a group of Civil War descendants who were eager to hear first-hand accounts of the war (Ball & Ball, 2008). Producers reveal Bill's origin as a vampire with flashbacks showing him and his maker Lorena spending decades together and ultimately parting ways in the 1930s (Tucker & Ruscio, 2009). Flashbacks are time manipulation devices that show characters' experiences that occurred before the series began (Mittell, 2007; Drangsholt, 2009). This device allows producers to divulge the characters' pasts as the story progresses rather than strictly show their lives in chronological order. Eric, who is centuries older than Bill, was a Swedish Viking at the time of his transformation into a vampire. Frequent references and flashbacks to his heritage, including his time spent in the German army during World War II, emphasize his age and breadth of past experiences (Oliver & Lehmann, 2011; Tucker & Winant, 2010).

Another prevalent theme is moral ambivalence. *True Blood*'s vampires consistently negotiate their good and evil impulses, often trying to find a careful balance between the two. A prime example is the constant desire of the vampires to drink human blood. TruBlood, the synthetic blood that producers market as a satisfactory alternative to human blood, is not a failsafe mechanism to keep vampires from feeding on humans. Vampires Eric and Bill both feed on humans, as do their respective progeny, Pam and Jessica. In a flashback to his years spent with his maker Lorena (before the creation of TruBlood), Bill expresses his distaste for drinking and draining humans simply because they can. By doing so, he tells Lorena, they both lose their humanity and become

monsters (Tucker & Ruscio, 2009). His moral ambivalence is clear because he drinks from humans to survive, but by doing so he believes that by destroying their humanity he too has destroyed his. Furthermore, season 4 reveals that Bill allowed Sookie to get assaulted by the Rattrays in the pilot episode so that he could be the one to save and revive her with his blood, thus casting doubt on his morality for the preceding three seasons (Ball & Hemingway, 2010).

Eric, too, negotiates his desire to drink Sookie's blood with his knowledge that she must be kept alive due to her usefulness as a mind reader and as a faery with magical blood (Tucker & Ruscio, 2009; Tucker & Winant, 2010). In this series, the drinking of blood is not limited to human blood; vampire blood is a drug with both healing and hallucinogenic properties. When humans drink from a vampire, they become linked to that vampire, thus allowing the vampire to easily sense, track, and find the human. For example, when Sookie is attacked by a strange creature, Eric wants to give her his blood so that she will heal quickly, but also so that he will be connected to her (Tucker & Ruscio, 2009). His offer of blood is based on both good and selfish impulses. Eric's moral ambivalence is apparent because his desire to have an unnatural connection to Sookie is his ultimate goal; saving her life is simply something he must do in order to solidify this connection. Were Sookie of no possible use to Eric, her life would be easily disposable to him and he likely would not have made the offer of his blood.

A third theme in the gothic vampire subgenre and found consistently in *True Blood* is that vampires are dangerous intimates to humans. The producers represent the relationships between vampires and humans as being unnatural and dangerous to humans and vampires alike. Eric says that Bill's attachment to Sookie is "abnormal," while

Sookie's boss Sam hires her best friend so that she can help keep Sookie away from Bill (Tucker & Winant, 2009; Ball & Ball, 2008). After she is transformed into a vampire, Jessica is no longer allowed to see her family because she poses a threat to their safety. Bill assumes her desire to drink their blood is so great that he enlists Sookie's help to keep Jessica from attempting to visit them (Tucker & Winant, 2009). Later, after she has matured as a vampire, Jessica realizes that her vampire impulses are too strong and impede her in relationships with humans so she breaks her attachment with Hoyt (a human) (Tucker & Winant, 2010). The impetus for her realization is the fact that she was easily provoked by her Hoyt's mother and ultimately bit her, thus proving to herself that she is not fit to be in close proximity to humans on a consistent basis.

Closely tied to the theme of dangerous intimates is the theme that vampires are good friends to humans. Because vampires can easily help humans or provide valuable services to them, they often appear to be viable and desirable friends. An exemplar of this occurs when Jason, a former anti-vampire activist, fondly recalls his friendship with a vampire named Eddie, a relationship that Jason describes in positive terms free of the hateful rhetoric frequently used to describe vampires (Tucker & Ball, 2008; Tucker & Winant, 2009). In addition to her close ties with Bill, Eric, and even Pam, Sookie forges a lasting friendship with Jessica (Tucker & Winant, 2010). And despite not being in an intimate relationship during the later seasons, Bill and Sookie remain friends. Both Bill and Eric frequently attempt to help her and keep her safe although their motives are not always what they appear to be (Ball & Hemingway, 2010; Oliver & Lehmann, 2011).

Being superior to humans is common with vampire-themed media texts. Not only are vampires physically superior to humans (which will be discussed next), but they are

financially and socioeconomically superior as well. Due to their age and the fortunes they amass throughout the decades, many vampires are aristocratic and haughty, demonstrating their wealth with designer clothing (e.g. Pam's wardrobe), renovation projects without cost constraints (e.g. Bill remodeling plans for his plantation-style home), and multiple homes and properties across the globe (e.g. Eric's extensive real estate portfolio) (Tucker & Winant, 2009; Oliver & Lehmann, 2011). Additionally, the hierarchy of vampire authority in *True Blood* is structured in terms of a monarchy, rather than a democracy, thus further enhancing the patrician and traditional appearance of vampires.

This monarchy-style of control is unique in that each state in the United States has a king or queen who rules their respective state and assigns sheriffs to oversee sections of the state. Eric is sheriff of area 5, a vampire district in Louisiana which includes Bon Temps. Vampire royalty introduced throughout the series include King Russell Edgington of Mississippi, Queen Sophie-Anne Leclerq of Louisiana, and King Bill Compton of Louisiana (he dethroned Sophie-Anne at the end of season three) (Ball & Hemingway, 2010). These royal vampires act as authorities over both vampires and humans, as both Sophie-Anne and Russell continually assert dominance over their human companions (Ball & Hemingway, 2010). By positioning themselves as royal figures, these vampires maintain the aura of superiority that surrounds them.

In addition to being financially and socially superior to humans, vampires are also physically superior because of their supernatural abilities. The *True Blood* vampires can move and run exceptionally fast, have effortless herculean strength, can quickly heal and regenerate, and can fly or levitate (Tucker & Winant, 2009; Tucker & Ruscio, 2009;

Oliver & Lehmann, 2011; Ball & Hemingway, 2010). Serving as a unique counterpoint to Sookie's supernatural mind-reading ability, vampire thoughts are either impossible or incredibly difficult for her to hear. Being in close proximity to vampires also serves as a useful device for producers to how Sookie avoids hearing other people's thoughts, since their presence seems to block the flow of thoughts between people and Sookie. This point is stressed from the start of the series, when, in the pilot, Sookie is intrigued by Bill largely because she can't hear him and his presence provides a peaceful respite from the constant buzz of thoughts from everyone near her (Ball & Ball, 2008). Finally, vampires have the ability to heal human maladies by providing their own blood for human consumption. Because vampire blood can save human lives, this ability positions vampires as being both a danger and savior (Tucker & Winant, 2009).

Their supernatural qualities seem to make vampires especially adept at attracting members of the opposite or same sex (though the former is most frequent in *True Blood*). Occurring one season apart, the introductions between Bill and Sookie, and Jessica and Hoyt demonstrate the theme of vampires being mesmerizing to the opposite sex. Both Sookie and Hoyt are immediately interested when they first see Bill and Jessica in Merlotte's (Ball & Ball, 2008; Tucker & Winant, 2009). Though Sookie immediately assumes that Bill is a vampire, Hoyt does not know that Jessica is a vampire until she tells him, thus indicating that simply knowing someone is a vampire is not a prerequisite for attraction.

While *True Blood* features an array of good and evil vampires (much like the array of good and evil humans), the series predominantly focuses on the humanity of vampires and the fact that they are not inherently evil. A prime example of this is the

character of Godric, Eric's maker. Always shown in a white robe with a serene

demeanor, Godric is the voice of peace within the series. Although Godric dies in the

second season, his spirit returns to Eric several times in the third season during the height

of conflict in order to advocate for forgiving others and avoiding hatred (Ball &

Hemingway, 2010). During the period of Eric's memory loss in the fourth season, Eric

becomes morose and Sookie tries to comfort him by telling him that even though he was

a "rascal," he was also a happy vampire (Oliver & Lehmann, 2011). By describing one of

the series' most morally ambiguous characters as simply a "rascal," Sookie is attempting

to highlight Eric's humanity while simultaneously downplaying his past transgressions.

Were he inherently evil and devoid of any humanity, Eric would not be worth her efforts,

nor would he appreciate them (which he indeed does).

  As a blatantly erotic series, *True Blood* frequently exhibits the sexual desires and

habits of vampires. The pilot explains that there is a group of people called "fangbangers"

who enjoy being bitten by vampires during intercourse and that this is also an experience

for which vampires are willing to pay large sums of money (Ball & Ball, 2008).

Throughout the series, Sookie is continually presented as a subject of desire for both Bill

and Eric. Because they are both attracted to her, their overtly sexual natures often result

in comments and behaviors that represent them as irrepressibly erotic. Shortly after Bill

and Sookie's second encounter (in which she saved him from being drained by

criminals), Bill proceeds to make Sookie uncomfortable by discussing his proclivity for

blood from an artery in the groin (Ball & Ball, 2008). His presumed promiscuity is

juxtaposed with her apparent lack of sexual experience when she informs him that she

does not have a sex life. Furthermore, even when faced with the prospect of Sookie dying

from a maenad attack, Eric continues to view her as on object of desire (Tucker & Winant, 2009).

Common conventions that often serve as hallmarks of the gothic vampire subgenre are present in *True Blood*. The conventions most frequently appearing in my data include the hypnotic stare and the bite. Another convention, infection, addresses how vampires deal with vampirism and is explored in the following paragraphs as a comparison between vampires being victims or cursed. The most frequent of these conventions is the hypnotic stare, called "glamoring" in *True Blood*. Vampires "glamor" humans in order to control them. Glamoring serves as a form of brainwashing in that the intense eye contact vampires have with their intended prey causes humans to become sedate, unafraid, and forgetful. In this way, vampires are able to calm their victims so that they do not struggle, and in the case of vampires letting their victims live, glamoring causes the victims to forget their encounters with vampires. As a form of control, glamoring is a dual threat. The first reason is that humans (who are aware of this ability) use it as a reason to avoid vampires and prevent them from being given rights; the second reason is that evil vampires can use it to the detriment of good vampires, as demonstrated by Eric's fear that Russell will try to glamor, and then to kill, Sookie (Ball & Hemingway, 2010).

Another common convention, the bite, represents how vampires attack their victims and victims react to being bitten (Kane, 2006). While often an act of violence and the means to gain sustenance, the vampire bite is frequently treated as an intimate act with sexual connotations. The act of biting and the experience of being bitten are intimate acts that occur between individuals in romantic relationships. The sexual nature of the

bite reached its zenith in the final episode of season 4 when both Eric and Bill fed on

Sookie at the same. Positioned on either side of her, Eric and Bill devour blood from her

wrists while she gasps for breath and groans lightly (Tucker & Winant, 2010).

Furthermore, vampire bite scars are often viewed as symbols of promiscuity. As seen in

the first episode of the series, Jason becomes disgruntled when he notices bite marks on

the inner thigh of his latest paramour and immediately accuses her of being a fangbanger

(Ball & Ball, 2008). Furthermore, preventing bite scars is a consideration of vampires

when they pierce their own flesh to produce blood. Applying their own blood to the bite

heals the puncture, thus eliminating the possibility of any visible signs of the bite. This is

shown in the last episode of season 3 when Bill bites Sookie at her request and then later

heals the puncture of his volition, as well as in the aforementioned season 4 episode when

Eric and Bill heal the bite marks on Sookie's wrists (Ball & Hemingway, 2010).

      The final theme explored in this analysis is the comparison between two

perspectives on vampirism, and those are that vampires are either victimized or cursed by

their new lives as undead beings. As punishment for slaying another vampire, Bill is

forced to transform Jessica, a human, into a vampire. This incident presents both

perspectives in that Jessica is a complete victim and her fate as a vampire is unwanted;

she subsequently rebels against Bill and is antagonistic towards him because he inflicted

vampirism onto her (Tucker & Ball, 2008; Tucker & Winant, 2009). Her unruly behavior

is a nuisance for Bill and even though he abhorred the idea of having to turn her into a

vampire, as her maker he is now forced to watch out for her and train her (Tucker &

Winant, 2009). With this situation, Bill is cursed with vampirism in two respects: he had

to turn Jessica and now live with the consequences, as well as realize that he only had to

do so because of his status as a vampire. Were he not a vampire, Bill would not have had to turn Jessica in the first place. In regard to his own transformation, Bill is also represented as someone victimized and then cursed with vampirism. Lorena turned him against his will (victim) and their subsequent attachment is nearly unbearable for Bill (cursed) (Tucker & Ruscio, 2009). Only after Lorena releases him from their attachment do Bill's existence and deportment improve.

A final example of this comparison occurs in the fourth season when Eric, still experiencing the effects of the memory loss curse, rebels against the constraints placed on vampires, including the necessity for staying inside during daylight hours and resting during the day so as to avoid bleeding out of exhaustion. Having drained a faery (whose blood allows vampires to be in the sun without harm), Eric proceeds to stay outside in the sunshine, frolicking in a river and refusing to go indoors (Oliver & Lehmann, 2011). When the effects of the faery blood begin to wear off, Eric begins to feel the burn from the sun on his skin and unhappily seeks shelter in Sookie's home. Eric states that he does not want to go back to the dark, and once safely inside the house, he expresses his sadness over never getting to see the sun again. As a character who always seems to relish his status as vampire, in this moment Eric demonstrates that the constraints placed on his existence more closely resemble a curse than a blessing.

Themes that are mostly or completely absent from this data include vampires as heroes who save humans and vampires as survivors of hardships. My knowledge of the entire series allows me the advantage of knowing that these themes, though some are missing from this study, they are present in many episodes not analyzed. This absence is particularly interesting considering that three of the eight episodes analyzed are the final

episodes of seasons 1, 3, and 4. That vampires are not ultimately highlighted as heroes in these episodes is surprising because it seems that producers are possibly trying to maintain ambiguity regarding the loyalty and goodness of vampires. This ambiguity is reinforced when vampires are not represented as survivors who deserve compassion and respect, but rather as powerful individuals and predators (as seen when Bill and Eric bury Russell in cement and then Bill betrays and buries Eric as well) (Ball & Hemingway, 2010).

Many of the themes present in my data work together to reinforce the idea that vampires as different beings are inherently evil. The moral ambivalence and emphasis on danger that are present in the encounters between humans and vampires highlight the potential for violence and death to occur, despite the fact that a majority of the series' violence either occurs between vampires or between humans. These themes also represent humans as the baseline for morality and situate vampires as below this baseline, causing them to forever have to prove their worthwhile existence in society. This puts vampires in the position of continuously having to dispute the claim that they are all equally evil, regardless of the fact that, just like humans, vampires range in their levels of immorality. If every theme present in the series showed vampires to be moral, gentle beings, there would be no question as to the evilness of vampires, an issue which is commonplace in all texts—including *True Blood*—dealing with individuals who drink from humans for sustenance.

Issues. The most prominent issue addressed in the gothic vampire subgenre is the claim that vampires are inherently evil. During the first episode, an interview between real-life political commentator Bill Maher and vampire rights activist Nan Flannigan

occurs, during which Maher assumes that vampires always have posed a danger to society because of their bloodlust (Ball & Ball, 2008). When Bill first arrives in Bon Temps and befriends Sookie, her boss informs her that associating with vampires is the same thing as having a death wish, and also her brother warns that vampires are murderers (Ball & Ball, 2008). The Fellowship of the Sun, an anti-vampire fundamentalist church, equates hating and killing vampires with loving goodness because vampires are evil and devoid of humanity (Tucker & Ball, 2008; Tucker & Winant, 2009).

Furthermore, it is not only humans that assume vampires are all evil, but other vampires as well. The fact that Bill does not conform to the audiences' stereotypical image of an evil vampire causes an irreparable rift in his relationship with his maker. Lorena assumes that being evil is an inherent right of all vampires, and Bill's disagreement with this perspective ultimately leads to their separation (Tucker & Ruscio, 2009). In addition to vampires and humans believing that vampires are (or should be) evil, individuals with other varied mystical abilities adopt the same viewpoint. Producers show that Alcide, a werewolf, and Jesus, a brujo, both voice their opinions about vampires. Alcide harshly scrutinizes Sookie's relationship with Eric because Eric is a killer, while Jesus, along with humans Lafayette and Tara, try to convince Marnie, a witch, of the severity of the threat that vampires pose to humans (Oliver & Lehmann, 2011). These judgments against vampires establish them as the most feared supernatural beings in existence and position them as being evil strictly based on their reputation.

These substantive elements provide the overall content of the series and the underlying messages conveyed by the producers. The following two sections, starting

with stylistic elements, explore how the content of the series is given meaning through rhetorical devices, as well as how the series is situated in a specific context in order to enhance the meaning present in the substantive and stylistic sections.

Stylistic Elements

The stylistic elements salient in my data include the interactional style between the characters, as well as the conversational visual and verbal features that reinforce the themes and contribute to how audiences ultimately make sense of the series. While substantive and situational elements function as the deep structure of the series, stylistic elements serve as the surface level embellishments that contribute to the series' meaning. The style of interaction between *True Blood*'s characters is a unique aspect of this series and, I argue, of this subgenre in general. Therefore, the primary element that I analyze here is the dialogic pattern of the interactions that include politeness, vulgarity, and intensity. The tensions present in this pattern reinforce the meanings that the producers embed in the series. The interactions that occur between vampires and humans, vampires and vampires, and humans and humans emphasize the uniqueness of this dialogic pattern.

The three aspects of the analyzed pattern of dialogue—politeness, vulgarity, and intensity—are significant because of the tensions that they create in conjunction with one another. The use of politeness in interactions is guided by "power, distance, and rank of imposition as features of the social situation that govern the appropriate degree of politeness" (Knobloch, Satterlee, & DiDomenico, 2010, p. 306). Furthermore, a large power differential between two individuals and social distance requires that more politeness be used rather than less (Knobloch, Satterlee, & DiDomenico, 2010). Verbal vulgarity, defined as "the many different types of words that are considered objectionable

or offensive by the general public," includes both swear words and sexually profane language (Kaye & Sapolsky, 2004, p. 555). Lastly, for the purposes of this study, the intensity of the characters' interactions includes penetrating eye contact (often very similar in intensity to the hypnotic stare employed by vampires to brainwash their victims), articulation, a slowed speech rate, tone, and type of speech (such as stereotypical speech patterns common to those socialized in masculine and feminine speech communities). In the following subsections, I explore three types of interactions found within the series and analyze them based on the politeness-vulgarity-intensity dialogic pattern, starting with vampire-human interactions.

Vampire-human interactions. Conversations between vampires and humans are structured differently than interactions between two or more vampires, or interactions between two or more humans. When Bill first enters Merlotte's in the pilot episode, he and Sookie stare intently at each other as everything else in the bar either fades to black (as is the case with the setting surrounding Bill) or becomes a blur (as is the case with the setting surrounding Sookie) (Ball & Ball, 2008). After stating how excited she is to have a vampire in the bar, she approaches his table with barely concealed glee:

> Sookie: Hi. What can I get for you tonight?
> Bill: Do you have any of that synthetic bottled blood?
> Sookie: [smiling widely] No, I'm so sorry. Sam got some a year ago, but nobody ever ordered it so it went bad. You're our first…vampire [whispering and laughing nervously].
> Bill: Am I that obvious? [smiling slightly]
> Sookie: I knew the minute you came in. I can't believe no one else around here seems to.
> Bill: He does [eyeing Sam behind the bar].
> Sookie; Oh don't worry about Sam. He's cool. I know for a fact he supports the vampire rights amendment.
> Bill: How progressive of him.
> Sookie: Well, anything else you drink?

> Bill: Actually no. But you can get me a glass of red wine so I have a reason to be here.
> Sookie: Well, whatever the reason, I'm glad you are.

In this exchange, almost all shots of Bill are close up, emphasizing the fact that his eyes are always trained on Sookie. She only looks around the bar as a way of coinciding with her statements regarding Sam or the other bar patrons. While he is laconic, she is rather verbose; most of what she says is irrelevant information, unnecessary for a brief exchange between a customer and waitress. Because she knows he is a vampire, a clear power differential exists between them, which is enhanced by his status as a man and hers as a woman, causing both parties to be excessively polite. Additionally, vulgarity is absent from this interaction, which serves as a clear juxtaposition to the human-human interactions that are featured in the series (discussed below). Another similar exchange between Bill and Sookie occurs at the end of the episode, though the close-up shots are even more extreme, emphasizing the sexual intensity of their interaction.

Later, in season 4, Bill meets the grandmother of Portia, a woman he briefly courts and with whom he spends the evening conversing. His initial meeting with the grandmother is representative of their entire interaction, in which Bill learns that he is distantly related to Portia (Oliver & Lehmann, 2011):

> Portia: Grandmama, this is my friend and client, William Compton.
> Caroline: Caroline Bellefleur.
> Bill: Caroline. Well that was my wife's name. It's an honor and a gift to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Bellefleur.

During their conversation, Bill maintains great civility, verbally and nonverbally engaging with Caroline. Maintaining eye contact and a dignified countenance, as well as behaving with unfailing politeness, Bill reinforces his image as a Southern gentleman.

In interactions with humans, particularly Sookie, vulgarity on the part of vampires is often discouraged. In conversations with both Bill and Eric, Sookie reprimands them for using foul or sexual language. In the pilot episode, Sookie objects to Bill's talk of drinking blood from a groin muscle (Ball & Ball, 2008):

> Bill: There is one in the groin that is a particular favorite of mine—
> Sookie: Hey! You just shut your nasty mouth, mister. You might be a vampire, but when you talk to me you will talk to me like the lady that I am!

Bill does not comment on his impropriety or her reaction it. Rather, he changes the course of the conversation and from then on avoids vulgar remarks that may offend her lady-like sensibility.

Later, in season 3, Eric confronts Sookie about Bill's disappearance and he reasserts his interest in her by making an improper proposition (Tucker & Winant, 2010):

> Sookie: When you said you were risking everything to tell me, what did that mean?
> Eric: The goal tonight was to keep you out of danger, not put you in more of it.
> Sookie: Eric, you can't just say something like that and leave.
> Eric: Oh I'm not leaving. You're going to invite me in. So I can protect you or have passionate, primal sex with you. How about both?
> Sookie: You're not gonna distract me while talkin' nasty.
> Eric: I already have.

By rebuffing Eric's overture, Sookie reinforces the acceptable pattern of communication that one must adopt in order to converse with her. Similar to many encounters between vampires and humans, this particular scene features the extreme close-up shots of the two characters, emphasizing their piercing eye contact and close proximity to one another. The area surrounding Eric and Sookie is blurred, making them the only focus of the shot.

Human-human interactions. Conversations between humans differ from vampire-to-human interactions in that the humans in *True Blood* utilize foul language and colloquialisms more frequently in their conversations with each other. Although their

conversations are often intense, humans tend to be impolite and vulgar with each other, two points that frequently mark them as being lower class than vampires.

When Arlene, a waitress at Merlotte's, wants to talk to Tara in private, they go into the women's restroom and find Lafayette already there, putting on makeup (Tucker & Ruscio, 2009):

> Arlene: Excuse you. It says "Ladies" on that door.
> Lafayette: So what you skank holes doing in here?
> Tara: Watch yourself, bitch.
> Lafayette: I am and I is gorgeous.

The lack of politeness is emphasized by the vulgar language used by both Tara and Lafayette. During this exchange, Lafayette does not look at either Tara or Arlene, but instead continues to look at himself in the mirror. Although Cousins Tara and Lafayette frequently refer to each as "bitch," "whore," and "hooker," presumably out of familial familiarity, their vulgar and impolite dialogic patterns underscore their societal positions as residents in a poor, lower class town.

An episode from season 3 provides a clear juxtaposition between how vampires and humans communicate. While in the Merlotte's parking lot, Tara becomes enraged when two male customers start making jokes about her late boyfriend's death (including one of the men's use of the N-word to describe her deceased boyfriend). Franklin, a vampire, intervenes and physically intimates the humans while still being verbally civil (Tucker & Winant, 2010):

> Tara: Hey! [She punches Man 1]
> Man 2: Shit! It's the freak's girlfriend.
> Tara: His name was Eggs, you racist piece of shit.
> Man 1: Well you're the one that fucked a killer, bitch.
> Franklin: [punches Man 1 and grabs Man 2] Apologize to the lady.
> Man 2: Serial killer not enough for you, you gotta go fuck a goddamn vamper, too? [Tara punches him]

> Franklin: I said, apologize to the lady.
> Man 2: Fuck you.

The men involved in this altercation represent the average customer of the bar (white, male, lower class) and provide a clear distinction between their own status and that of Franklin, a seemingly dignified vampire from England. The vulgarity employed by every human in this interaction sets them apart from the calm and dignified demeanor of the vampire.

Vampire-vampire interactions. Much like the human-to-human exchanges, the dialogic pattern of politeness/vulgarity/intensity is altered in interactions between vampires. Many exchanges that occur between vampires are conversations between a maker and his or her progeny, although it is predominately a male maker and a female progeny. After Sookie is attacked by the maenad, Eric and Bill discuss finding the assailant (Tucker & Winant, 2009):

> Eric: Pam, Chow. I thought in over a thousand years I'd seen everything there was to see. [to Pam and Chow] Search the woods around highway 71.
> Pam: He can do it. I'm wearing my favorite pumps.
> Eric: [speaks in Swedish]. She is extremely lazy, but loyal.

The casual way in which Eric commands his progeny and discusses Sookie's attack with Bill lacks the intensity that vampire-human interactions often have. Eric's tone is mostly monotone and disinterested, which seems to communicate that he is bored with Bill, who is more verbally and physically expressive in this scene (likely owing to his concern for Sookie). While Bill continuously looks at Eric, Eric busies himself with looking at papers on his desk. Later in the same episode, Bill thanks Eric for helping Sookie:

> Bill: I want to thank you for your hospitality. And for saving Sookie's life.
> Eric: I'm sure there's a way she can repay me.

During this brief exchange, Eric has his back turned to Bill and simply turns his head, never making eye contact while either of them speaks. Though Bill looks at and faces Eric during the conversation, Eric maintains physical distance, with close-up shots showing him looking at the floor while talking before briefly looking at Bill and walking away.

Vulgarity is not absent in vampire-vampire interactions. When Nan Flannigan and Bill discuss Eric's disappearance in season 4, their conversation lacks the politeness of many vampire-human interactions (Oliver & Lehmann, 2011):

> Nan: I am trying to salvage the future of equality for vampires in this country after Russell Edgington butchered a man on television. And you send Eric Northman after wiccans? Are you fucking insane?
> Bill: Wiccans working death magic.
> Nan: Some old hippies levitated a dead bird. So what?
> Bill: Necromancy is no joke. Remember the Spanish Massacre?
> […]
> Nan: Remember Salem? We all thought it was such a threat when it was just a bunch of neurotic Puritanettes who needed a good lay.
> […]
> Nan: I really don't know what you expect me to do. I can't take this to the Authority.
> Bill: I don't expect anything; I'm just keeping you informed.
> Nan: Fine. I'm informed. Clean it up. But don't you shed one drop of mortal blood.
> Bill: What if they—
> Nan: No dead humans! Or I will have your ass.

Because Bill is King of Louisiana at the moment of this exchange, he shares a similar status with Nan, thus reducing the power differential between them. Nan's vulgarity occurs in stark contrast to Bill's politeness. The gender dynamics in this interaction are unique in that Nan adopts a more assertive personality than Bill; she interrupts him and is crasser in her choice of language. Furthermore, for the latter part of their transaction (not transcribed here), Bill does not make eye contact with Nan, but rather looks at the floor or

straight in front of him. His body language defuses the intensity of their exchange because he, much like Eric in the aforementioned scene, keeps his body from facing the other vampire involved in the conversation.

In the following, and final, section of this chapter, I explore the situational elements that provide the social and political context for *True Blood*. This context provides the audience with a link to reality by connecting the events in the series to real-life events that are either in the past or presently occurring during the show's filming.

Situational Elements

Situational elements are the social and political context that encapsulates a genre; this context is comprised of the dominant political and social climates of the eras in which a genre is created and transformed. In the case of the gothic vampire subgenre, the contextual elements featured in *True Blood* serve as representations of current social and political changes that coincide with those associated with the origin of the original gothic genre and subsequent vampire subgenre. These situational factors are clarified by conflicts within the series that represent certain points in time when referenced names and events elicit comparisons and memories of social and political issues and changes. In the following sections, I analyze the social and political context of the series, the culture of vampires, and the fear of the "Other," starting with context.

Social and political context. Because the series was filmed in the summer of 2008 and aired later in the fall, it is no surprise that it elicited comparisons to the debate over gay marriage. The storyline surrounding vampire rights centers the first season within the tense political and social climate involving a marginalized group (the LGBT community) fighting for equal rights. Political references within the first season help

situate it within an era of social and political change, starting with an insensitive comment about Hurricane Katrina and Lafayette's reference to George W. Bush in the pilot episode (Ball & Ball, 2008). Only three years after the devastating natural disaster, the producers situate the series within the aftermath of the hurricane by having an incredulous teenager doubt the presence of vampires in Louisiana: "Seriously? I mean New Orleans…even after Katrina? Didn't they all drown?" (Ball & Ball, 2008).

Additionally, Lafayette's reference to "George Motherfucking Bush" later on in the episode undoubtedly elicits negative memories of the way the Bush Administration dealt with the repercussions of the hurricane (Ball & Ball, 2008). Since Bush was president at the time of the first season airing, this comment provides audiences with a link to reality and a reference to the conservatism that the Bush Administration symbolized. Furthermore, in the final episode of the first season, Vermont becomes the first state to legalize marriages between vampires and humans, echoing Vermont's legalization of gay marriage in 2000 (Tucker & Ball, 2008).

This context of change is echoed in season 2 as well, with one of the religious zealots from the Fellowship of the Sun church (FOTSC) recalling her days as a vampire supporter. Before her conversion to fundamentalism, Sarah Newlin (wife of the FOTSC preacher) tells Jason, she marched for vampire rights with her sister, a fellow vampire sympathizer (Tucker & Winant, 2009). However, when her sister started a relationship with a vampire and then later disappeared, Sarah abandoned the cause and joined ranks with anti-vampire fundamentalists. And later in season 3, an episode reveals that the Vampire Rights Amendment has failed to earn enough support in Congress and does not

pass, parodying the on-going legal battle over the sanctity of the marriage act (Ball & Hemingway, 2010).

Vampire culture. In *True Blood*, vampires both embody vampire culture and adopt the dominant human culture, representing their values as a group distinct from humans but also assimilating into the cultural expectations of humans. They embody their own culture by maintaining the behaviors, values, attitudes, and goals that are specific to vampires. Although some vampires rely on the patronage of humans for their income (e.g. Eric's vampire- and human-friendly bar, Fangtasia), associating with humans on a cordial level as friends and acquaintances is uncommon. In this way, vampires tolerate humans and oftentimes exploit them, using willing humans as a source of nourishment. This vampire community accepts their exploitation, as well as the process of glamoring humans who are not as willing as others. After Jason and Jessica begin a sexual relationship, Jessica confides in him that TruBlood does not satisfy her and that she instead wants to glamor humans so that she can feed from them (Tucker & Winant, 2011). The vampire community easily accepts this decision because going without human blood is viewed as an anomalous decision that indicates one's choice to mainstream.

Another element common within the vampire culture is fierce loyalty to one's maker. As demonstrated by both Eric and Pam, being loyal to one's maker is a duty that extends the entire length of one's existence. In the second season, Eric goes to extensive lengths to save Godric, his maker, from abductors from the Fellowship of the Sun church (Tucker & Ruscio, 2009). In the fourth season, a witch curses Eric, and Pam becomes desperate to restore his memory and maintain his safety (Oliver & Lehmann, 2011).

When Bill questions Pam regarding Eric's disappearance, Bill uses her dedication to Eric

as reason to not believe her:

> Bill: Where is Eric?
> Pam: For the last time, I don't know. I have no idea what happened to him.
> Bill: Don't lie to me, Pam. It's treason.
> Pam: Exactly. I wouldn't take the chance. All of your subjects are learning how ruthless you are.
> Bill: I know the depth of your devotion. You would lie and die for your maker.

Pam's dedication to Eric is so commonplace within the vampire community that Bill

assumes that is the only possible reason Pam would risk death by lying to him. This

expected devotion is partly what sets Bill apart from other vampires; his break from

Lorena marks him as a solitary figure, which is an unusual occurrence in the vampire

community and often paramount to one's decision to mainstream.

In contrast to the embodiment of vampiric culture, vampires also adopt

mainstream culture by opting to assimilate into society by frequenting human-run

establishments, living alone or with a partner, and rejecting human blood in favor of

synthetic blood. To mainstream is to make a concerted effort to detach from the vampire

community. When Sookie informs Bill that she does not care what the residents of Bon

Temps think of their relationship, he counters her by explaining his desire to mainstream

(Ball & Ball, 2008):

> Bill: Do you realize that every person in this establishment is staring at us right now?
> Sookie: Oh there just starin' at me 'cause my brother's in some kind of trouble with the police. […]
> Bill: They are staring at us because I am a vampire and you are mortal.
> Sookie: Well, who cares what they think?
> Bill: Well, I want to make this town my home, so I do.

Bill's need to be accepted in Bon Temps separates him from other vampires and

eventually earns him marginal acceptance into society. This is demonstrated when, at the

end of the first season, several townspeople regard him as a friend and Sookie's coworker Arlene becomes excited that Sookie and Bill could legally get married in Vermont (Tucker & Ball, 2008).

The "Other." The fear of the "Other" undergirds the intolerance demonstrated by the townspeople of Bon Temps. The unnerving differences and inherent similarities between vampires and humans combine to foster an innate fear that vampires are a force with whom humans simply cannot reckon. Several factors reinforce the image of vampires as "other," starting with the process of consuming synthetic blood. Ordering TruBlood at a public establishment instantly informs the other patrons that one is a vampire, as shown when Bill orders TruBlood at Merlotte's and is overheard by the Rattrays, when Jessica orders a B-positive TruBlood upon first meeting Hoyt, and when Franklin (a secondary antagonist in the third season) orders a TruBlood from Tara (Ball &Ball, 2008; Tucker & Winant, 2009; Tucker & Winant, 2010). These instances mark the moment when these characters cease to be a part of the masses, but are separated as "other," despite their appearances and mannerisms that are similar to the breathing customers.

Regarding vampires as other is not limited to humans. By season 4, an array of supernatural beings are present in and around Bon Temps, including shape shifters, werewolves, werepanthers, faeries, and witches. Although Sookie (as part faery and part human) is cordial with members from several of these mystical groups, there is little tolerance and goodwill shared by these groups overall. Despite the fact that they all take the human form some or most of the time, members of these groups mark the other groups as too different and abject, and therefore view them as "other." Since the

beginning of the series, Sam (a shape shifter) views vampires as a danger, despite the fact that he is just as different from non-supernatural humans as vampires. When Sookie starts to socialize with Bill, Sam repeatedly asks her if she has "a death wish" and treats her relationship with condescension and sarcasm (Ball & Ball, 2008; Tucker & Ball, 2008).

The substantive, stylistic, and situational elements that I analyze here provide the content and structure for *True Blood*'s use of the gothic vampire subgenre. The significance of the themes is enhanced by the stylistic patterns that demonstrate the differences between vampires and humans. By situating the themes within a specific time period of social and political unrest, the producers give new meaning to the series' themes and enable the characters to communicate this unrest in their behaviors and interactions.

CHAPTER FIVE:

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the findings from my narrative analysis of the features of *True Blood*, shows how these features do or do not adhere to the standard narrative features of other texts in the gothic vampire subgenre, explains how the narrative of the series has evolved over the course of four seasons, and analyzes the social allegory in the series. My analysis is guided by rhetorical criticism and is informed by my generic criticism of *True Blood*'s adherence to the conventions of the gothic vampire subgenre. According to Fisher (1985), genres provide frameworks for narratives and narratives influence how genres are interpreted. Furthermore, narrative provides the connective structure that binds the situational, stylistic, and substantive features of a genre together in a way that makes sense for audiences. This symbiotic relationship accounts for why I identified *True Blood*'s genre as a precursor to explaining the allegorical narrative and the social themes it presents.

The goal of this chapter is to answer two research questions: (1) What are the allegorical narrative features that adhere in *True Blood*? and (2) How does the narrative of *True Blood* evolve over the course of four seasons? My analysis of eight episodes is structured chronologically, starting with the first episode of the first season and ending with the last episode of the fourth season. This sequential pattern allows me to identify the allegorical narrative features in the series, as well as to chart its narrative progression. My analysis of each episode takes place by (1) describing the features of the allegorical narrative in each episode, (2) explaining the setting, characters, and plot of each episode, and (3) showing the narrative progression of the allegory throughout several seasons. The

allegorical narrative created by the producers of the series provides rich layers of meaning that go beyond the surface level meanings that are most apparent to audiences.

Allegorical Narrative

Narratives are stories and discourses created within generic frameworks that serve as a way for humans to make sense of the world. Herman (2007) asserts that narratives are "a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change" (p. 3). Complex narratives generally consist of story (which includes characters and events), plot, and narration (Porter Abbott, 2007). Television narratives are distinct from film narratives because of their serialized nature. Porter, Larson, Harthcock, and Berg Nellis (2002) explain that the two defining features of television narratives are on-going storylines and character development. These features span more than one episode or season because the serial structure of many television series, including *True Blood*, does not require resolution at the end of each episode or season (Mittell, 2007).

Common components of *True Blood*'s narrative include setting, characters, and plot. The setting of a narrative involves the geographic location where the story occurs and time period where the story takes place. The characters are the people (or animals, in some cases) whose actions lead to the story's resolution. Because the cast of primary and secondary characters in *True Blood* is so vast, I only analyze the actions of the characters that are central to the plots of the episodes and the overall allegory of the series. The plot of a narrative includes incidents that transition the story from one state to another or from one level of meaning to another. These elements are significant because they function within an allegorical narrative that serves as social commentary.

True Blood's narrative is considered to be representations for and commentary about current and historical social movements and conflicts. Therefore, the metaphorical nature of the series positions it as an allegorical narrative. Berger (2012) explains that philosophical themes are embedded within allegorical meanings, while Nellen (2012) provides the following comprehensive definition of the term:

> Allegory is a form of extended metaphor, in which objects [settings], persons, and actions in a narrative, are equated with the meanings that lie outside the narrative itself. The underlying meaning has moral, social, religious, or political significance, and characters are often personifications of abstract ideas as charity, greed, or envy.

Allegorical narratives have multiple levels of meaning, including literal and symbolic levels, and enhance the polysemic nature of media texts. Underlying meanings are those that are not blatantly apparent upon first inspection of a text. According to Berger (2012), *The Prisoner*, a television series about a person imprisoned on an island managed by a mysterious regime, "can be seen as an allegory of the triumph of the human spirit and democratic individualism over the forces of a totalitarian bureaucracy and adversity in general" (p. 232). While the literal meaning of *The Prisoner* is easily understood (for example, imprisonment), the symbolic meaning is abstract and extensive, as well as communicated through multiple elements within the series, including setting, characters, and plot.

True Blood's narrative functions as an allegory for the struggle to survive in the face of societal opposition and political oppression, and it does so through its multiple levels of symbolic meaning, including the series and episode titles, the setting, the

characters, and the plot. By naming the series after a consumable product with a misnomer for a name (TruBlood is an artificial blood-like substance, meaning that it is neither true nor blood), the producers establish the serial narrative as television discourse used to negotiate conflicts about authenticity, consumption, and rectitude. It addresses these issues by negotiating what constitutes genuine humanity and the social rules for being considered a part of the norm, showing how rules dictating the act of consumption directly influence how individuals are perceived, and who or what is considered worthy of existence and possible admission into mainstream society.

The episode titles represent the underlying allegorical meanings in each episode and thus contribute to the overall meaning of the series. The settings reinforce this social and political allegory by situating elements of the narrative as "Other;" the geographic and physical locations in the series perpetuate an aura of separateness that keeps the characters out of the mainstream. The characters, in turn, serve as personifications of class, race, and gender issues, with their actions representing destructive dichotomies and relationships, including those of dominance and submission, power and powerlessness, demonic and godly, and spirituality and materiality. The plot provides the framework for the events to occur, which reinforces the series as an allegory for social and political oppression. This allegory connects with the more obvious meanings of the series, including the dangers of intolerance and the fear of difference.

In the following sections, I analyze *True Blood* as a social and political allegory through the aforementioned levels of symbolic meaning. Starting with the pilot episode, my analysis moves chronologically through the series, illuminating the continued use of

allegory by the producers over time, as well as how it has changed over the course of four seasons.

"Strange Love"

The pilot episode of *True Blood* establishes the series as one with an unconventional and allegorical narrative (Ball & Ball, 2008). As the first episode, "Strange Love" introduces and represents a world in which the characters are controlled by their circumstances, and not the other way around. The title of the episode suggests that even the most organic of emotions and experiences—including love—are socially bound and delimited, indicating that the relationship between Bill and Sookie is doomed from the start because it is simply not "normal." Furthermore, the main characters I analyze here, Bill and Sookie, reinforce this allegory of societal control because their situations in life position them as being practically powerless to change anything. The setting in the Deep South helps account for some of their powerlessness, as do the events that transpire throughout the episode. These factors all combine to convey the overall message that societal rules and norms limit individual freedom.

Setting. Set in the not-too-distant future in the fictional town of Bon Temps, Louisiana, *True Blood*'s Deep South locale serves the allegory of societal control by situating the series within a state that is bound by cultural traditions. This setting controls the characters by placing expectations on and parameters around their behaviors. For example, Sookie is expected not to want to associate with Bill because she was born and raised in the town and should therefore know better because her upbringing taught her the "right" way to behave (which, obviously, does not include fraternizing with vampires). Additionally, stereotypical Southern conservatism explains the intolerance shown to Bill

by the townspeople upon his arrival in Bon Temps, demonstrating that the setting

reinforces allegory of societal control and lack of freedom.

The Southern locale of Bon Temps provides an interesting dichotomy: on the one

hand, it makes the town seem separate from the stereotypical idea of mainstream U.S.

society and culture; on the other hand, it simultaneously represents the historically

conservative backbone of the nation. Bon Temps is located in Renard Parish, a fictional

parish akin to a county; real cities that are purported to be within easy driving distance of

the parish include Monroe, Shreveport, and Baton Rouge. Since Louisiana is the only

state in the U.S. which utilizes parishes instead of counties to divide the state, this unique

form of partitioning highlights the state's distinctness from the rest of the nation

(Louisiana, 2012). The town—the name of which translates to "good time" in English—

also positions the series within the mixed race culture of Louisiana, providing logical

explanations for why residents are from diverse racial backgrounds and speak with a

variety of regional accents, including Cajun. Using a French phrase as the name of the

town references the remaining influences of French colonialism upon the state. All of

these elements combine to create socially bound rules for behavior that are imposed on

the characters, thus hindering their freedom to behave as they choose.

Characters. The series' overall allegorical message of societal opposition and

political oppression is reinforced in the lives of two of the main characters in the pilot

episode. Bill and Sookie are both protagonists and, although they live very different lives,

they are both controlled by expectations and rules dictated by society. They also

personify issues of class, race, and gender through their circumstances and behaviors.

Sookie, the primary character in the series, is a Caucasian waitress in her early- to mid-

twenties who works at Merlotte's and harbors the secret of her ability to hear people's thoughts. Although it is never directly stated, Sookie, nor anyone else in town, is college educated. That she drives an old yellow Honda Civic and still lives under her grandmother's roof indicates that she is a member of the lower socioeconomic working class. Her occupation as a waitress is presented as unexceptional and unlikely to change in the future, as well as the unfortunate result of her remaining in Bon Temps as opposed to moving away. This is demonstrated when Sookie overhears the thoughts of one of her customers, a male teenager grudgingly dining at Merlotte's with his parents, and she responds to him out loud:

> Teen: Who are these people? What the hell is this music? I feel like I'm caught in some hillbilly's oxycotton nightmare. Man, I can't wait to get the hell out of this Podunk little town.
> Sookie: Well, make sure you do and before it's too late, because every year you wait you just get more and more stuck here. Believe me, I know.

Her empathy with his discontent is the only indication that another occupational option may exist for her. Overall, however, her being an uneducated waitress is congruent with stereotypical ideas of people—particularly women—in small towns in the South, thus also reinforcing the lower socioeconomic status of the Stackhouse family and the town in general.

Sookie is a naïve and innocent character, contrasting with the sexually experienced and often profane characters of her co-workers and friends. Her refusal to swear (and indignation when others do), gracious manners, and sexual inexperience create a clear distinction between her and the "white trash" stereotype of the South—lazy, promiscuous, and dirty—that fits her co-workers Arlene and Dawn (Cobb, 2008). Furthermore, her naiveté enhances her reputation as someone who needs looking after;

Sam, in his frustration over Sookie's interest in Bill, hires Tara so that they can both keep tabs on her actions and whereabouts. These character traits combined with the fact that she still lives with her grandmother perpetuates a child-like aura around Sookie.

Vampire Bill is a white male who was approximately 40-years-old when he was transformed into a vampire during the Civil War era. As a veteran of that war, Bill maintains the manners expected of a stereotypical Southern gentleman. He returns to Bon Temps to resume his residence in the town, taking over ownership of his original antebellum house upon the death of the last Compton descendent, reinforcing his patriarchal image by establishing him as a wealthy white plantation owner. He is determined to make the town his home once again, and he becomes concerned that his association with Sookie could potentially make the townspeople even more hostile toward him as does the fact that Bill also allows himself to be captured by vampire drainers who want to sell his blood.

Although Bill's character is not developed as much as Sookie's in this episode, they both reinforce the allegory of societal control. Sookie's position as an uneducated waitress is socially dictated in that it is the most that will ever be expected of her, or the best that will ever be available to her while she is in Bon Temps. She is powerless to change her circumstances as long as she stays in town because there are so few resources available. With the exception of her grandmother, all of her friends and family oppose her socializing with Bill based on societal stereotypes about vampires, thus creating immense pressure on Sookie not to associate with him. Furthermore, her ability to read minds is represented as an unwanted curse that plagues her and requires her to exert constant effort to block out. In other words, simply by thinking and being near her, the townspeople have

great control over Sookie because their thoughts dictate her mood, actions, and ability to do her job.

Similarly, Bill is represented as being controlled by society in multiple ways, starting with not gaining acceptance as a vampire. Save for Sookie, Bill is treated with disdain by everyone in Merlotte's and he questions dating her because of the townspeople's responses to him. He is powerless to change this, however, because his status as vampire is permanent, and thus he chooses to ignore his natural instincts and mainstream. He is forced to accept his unwarranted bad reputation and allow his desires to be altered in order to conform to societal ideas for appropriate behavior (this includes drinking synthetic blood). Drinking TruBlood is the only bridge, albeit a tenuous one, between humans feeling safe around vampires and humans accepting vampires, and therefore drinking it means adhering to the rules placed on vampires by humans.

Plot. The conflict in the series is what drives the narrative and reinforces the allegorical meaning of the series by emphasizing the lack of control the characters, vampires included, have over their own lives. The fact that vampires have "come out of the coffin" is emphasized throughout the episode, indicating that vampires have somehow escaped and are now free of the confines of bondage. However, this is somewhat ironic considering that the pressure to conform to societal norms is so great that mainstreaming is required, yet doing so does not earn one a place of acceptance in society. Rather, following the dictates of society proves to be more constricting to vampires because their known existence marks them as predators, no matter their proclivity for human blood, and segregates them from the rest of society. Bill experiences this upon entering Merlotte's and immediately being treated like a crime suspect by the rest of the patrons.

Also, because society dictates that only drinking TruBlood is acceptable, bar and restaurant owners can exert power over vampires by not stocking and serving synthetic blood, as seen when Bill tries to order a bottle from Sookie but she informs him that Sam has not restocked TruBlood in a few years. Bill's presence in the bar and grill disrupts the status quo, largely because of the unknown conditions that accompany his presence; his abilities, resources, and beliefs pose potential threats to the patrons and townspeople in general because of their indeterminate nature.

"You'll be the Death of Me"

The final episode of the first season, "You'll be the Death of Me," continues with the allegory of oppression by negotiating the dangers of consumerism, consumption, and commodification. It does so by establishing some characters as consumers and others as consumable, while also emphasizing how the giving and taking of blood has commodified life (Tucker & Ball, 2008). The title indicates that these issues—and the people that embody them—will inevitably lead to death. Whereas "Strange Love" emphasizes the individual's subordination to society, this episode inverts this meaning and demonstrates the harmful power that individuals can have on society, thus maintaining the overall allegory of oppression. In the following sections, I analyze how the setting, characters, and plot reinforce the episode's allegorical meaning.

Setting. Two primary settings in this episode allegorize consumerism and establish it as being dangerous to both the individual and society. Sookie's house and Maryann's mansion provide a juxtaposition that highlights the low-income status of the town's residents. The palatial mansion occupied by Maryann and her associates is a luxurious departure from the worn and antiquated houses and mobile homes in Bon

Temps. Full of modern conveniences, impeccable furnishings, and unlimited groceries, the house is an unattainable paradise of modernity and excess. While the mansion seems to represent the supposed relationship between wealth and leisure, affluence and carefree happiness, it actually serves to reinforce Maryann as the personification of excessive consumption. By using the house and its excesses to control people, including Tara and her boyfriend Eggs, Maryann is able to consume their lives for her own gain and strengthen her destructive power over others.

Juxtaposed with this lush example of wealth is Sookie's home, which has been in the Stackhouse family for generations and lacks the luxury and relaxed affectation of Maryann's home. Old and in need of many architectural and appliance repairs, the house reinforces the working class background of the Stackhouse family, as well as foreshadows Sookie's inevitable future as a waitress. More importantly, though, it establishes Sookie as consumable in that anyone who wants her has easy access to her. The house is not secure against intruders and most of her time spent in her house is after she has been victimized and attacked by Rene. Everyone walks into her house without knocking so that they can view her lying on a couch in her battered state, consuming her injuries for their own purposes, which include Arlene processing her guilt about dating Rene and Jason trying to understand his future by talking to Sookie. Whereas Maryann's house admits a select few for her specific consumption, Sookie's house encourages unlimited access for anyone wanting to consume some part of Sookie.

Characters. The characters in this episode personify consumption, consumerism, and commodification. As mentioned in the previous section, Maryann and Sookie are primary characters in reinforcing the allegorical meaning of the episode, and they are

joined by Bill, whose actions also contribute to the symbolic meaning of consumption, consumerism, and commodification. While Maryann personifies consumption and consumerism through her excessive lifestyle and manipulation of people, Sookie is susceptible to consumption because she is the opposite of Maryann: easily manipulated and controlled, and consistently available to others. Maryann consumes the experiences of Tara in order to eventually control her entire life; Sookie's life experiences are always available for public consumption, which is demonstrated at the end of the episode when Arlene makes a comment about Bill and Sookie getting married since Vermont legalized vampire marriage.

The way that Bill treats the giving and taking of blood commodifies life and makes it a consumable entity. While Sookie is recovering from Rene's attack, Bill arrives at her house and immediately tries to feed her his blood; she refuses, stating that she wants to feel human. Essentially, her refusal indicates that she believes living is a natural process that should not be artificially altered. By being able to unnaturally heal wounds and resuscitate people, Bill is able to treat life as a commodity to be distributed at will for the consumption of whomever he selects, thus making it a rare and valuable commodity, not available to everyone.

Plot. The events that occur throughout this episode reinforce the series' symbolic meaning of oppression and societal control, primarily through the solved mystery of who killed several Bon Temps women who were known to have socialized with vampires. Because these women had a proclivity for sleeping with or associating with vampires, they were killed by Rene in the ultimate action of societal control. Since the deaths are not considered tragedies by most townspeople or law enforcement officials, the murders

are practically condoned by society as a form of purging the bad from the good. In this way, Rene seems almost justified in his actions because the power of societal approval is on his side. Reinforcing the episode's allegory of consumption and consumerism, Tara opts for a life of leisure and continues to reside at Maryann's mansion, unaware that she is being manipulated and set up to be completely controlled and consumed in future episodes. And finally, by refusing to drink Bill's blood to heal quickly, Sookie rejects the way that life has become a commodity that can be controlled by vampires.

"Scratches"

The third episode in the second season, "Scratches," is an allegory for enlightenment and understanding, two elements that reinforce the series' symbolic meaning as a text about oppression (Tucker & Winant, 2009). The episode emphasizes that enlightened individuals are more capable of fighting oppression than those who are unaware or lack knowledge. The title references the injury sustained by Sookie at the start of the episode, but also suggests the process of scratching at the surface of something to reveal the complexity that lies beneath; this is demonstrated when several characters learn more than they expected after minimal exploration or "scratching" at the surface. This allegory is different from the previous two episodes because it emphasizes the power that comes from both control and knowledge, the latter of which is centrally highlighted throughout the episode. The following sections analyze how the setting, characters, and plot reinforce this allegory.

Setting. The different locales in this episode reinforce the allegory by being the metaphorical keys to knowledge. In other words, the physical locations reveal information to the characters that would not have been known to them had they not

visited the locales. Fangtasia, the vampire bar owned and operated by Eric, has double

meanings because it provides refuge for Sookie after she is attacked by Maryann, yet it is

a literal prison to Lafayette who is locked in the basement. However, by being in the bar,

Sookie is able to learn of Lafayette's location and thereby the extensive lengths that Eric

will go to in order to punish someone for dealing vampire blood. Sookie's minimal time

spent in the bar reveals disturbing truths that she could not have anticipated. Similarly,

the Fellowship of the Sun church leadership camp that Jason attends symbolizes the

depth of the church's hatred for vampires through the training exercises, group activities,

and religious requirements demanded of members. The extent of the church's

fundamentalist doctrine is not entirely clear until Jason's first experiences at camp,

indicating that by merely scratching the surface of the church's beliefs, he is able to learn

about the complex and deep abhorrence held for vampires by the church's leaders.

Characters. Many of the characters contribute to the allegory by alluding to their

circumstances and dealing with the outcome of their actions. As already mentioned,

Sookie's discovery of Lafayette resulted from minor exploration of the bar and briefly

hearing the thoughts of a Fangtasia employee. Other characters who personify this act of

exploring below the surface are Andy, Tara, and Sam. Believing that something is not

normal about Maryann, Andy investigates a party at her house and discovers that the

partygoers act in very unusual ways. By following his instincts and exerting little effort,

Andy learns that Maryann is a disturbing force to be reckoned with and one who

potentially poses a threat to the rest of the town. Similarly, Tara begins to notice strange

occurrences at Maryann's parties, and she immediately begins to resist Maryann and

wonder about her. Although Tara will not break free of Maryann until the end of the

season, Tara's minor questioning of her methods and motives is significant because it indicates that the truth about Maryann is far more extensive than the surface appearance would suggest. Finally, Sam, too, attempts to understand Maryann, and he asks his employee Daphne about her experiences with Maryann. By having a simple conversation with Daphne, Sam learns that Maryann is a maenad with extensive powers and that Bon Temps is in great danger. Although he suspected she was supernatural, he did not anticipate such grave and disturbing information about her. All of these characters learn about the complexities of other characters that they did not know existed, simply by taking small actions (and scratching the surface) to become enlightened.

Plot. The plot provides the narrative framework for this allegory to occur. Bill and Sookie barter with Eric for Lafayette's release. Eric's conditions for release reinforce the allegory because he, too, is trying to gain knowledge and must have Sookie's assistance in doing so. Attempting to find Godric, his abducted maker, Eric requires Sookie's mind-reading ability in order to reveal who abducted Godric and his current location. Furthermore, Maryann's continued presence in town is disturbing for Andy and Sam, thus causing them to try and learn more about her. While at church camp, Jason is continually trying to learn about what the church expects of him and what their goals are, leading him to become acquainted with the church's pastor and wife. Now in a privileged position to learn more about the Fellowship of the Sun from its leaders, Jason asks about their feelings toward vampires and finds out the church's plan is to eradicate vampires, not simply despise them publically.

"Release Me"

"Release Me," the seventh episode in the second season, is an allegory for several

types of imprisonment, which the title clearly implies, and it reinforces the overall

allegory of oppression and control. The characters desire to be physically or emotionally

released from their circumstances and captors because in some way they are all harmful

and dangerous. The episode strongly allegorizes freedom from religion and presents any

sort of religious affiliation as indoctrination into cult-like fundamentalism. The setting

provides physical confinements, while the characters personify religious conflict by being

either captors or prisoners.

      Setting. The main settings in this episode differ from the regular Bon Temps

locale, highlighting the new locations in Dallas, Texas, as literal and figurative prisons.

The most significant of these locations is the Hotel Carmilla, a hotel specifically designed

for vampires with blackout shades over the windows, ensuring vampire safety during

daylight hours. Named in homage to Le Fanu's gothic vampire novel *Carmilla*, the hotel

represents the acceptance and validation that vampires cannot receive in a town like Bon

Temps, but actually also represents a glorified prison. During daylight hours, the hotel

transforms into a light-proof lair for vampires, keeping them inside no matter what. Also,

the symbolic meaning of the hotel as a prison is reinforced when Lorena refuses to let

Bill leave their suite (which I discuss below), showing their room as a place in which

individuals are held against their will.

      The second locale that reinforces the allegory of confinement is the Fellowship of

the Sun church. This space represents a prison in two primary ways, including the

imprisonment of Godric and Sookie, and the symbolic "lock-in" that the church stages to

force their doctrine on participants. Held in separate quarters, both Godric and Sookie are

locked in the church basement because they either are a vampire or a human who

associates with them. By imprisoning those who differ in lifestyle and opinion, the church establishes itself as a confining institution that does not allow for difference or tolerance, and thus presents itself as a place from which people need to escape. Secondly, the planned lock-in physically confines willing churchgoers in the sanctuary, symbolically transforming it as a place of keeping out undesirable entities and keeping in malleable minds that the church can attempt to mold.

Characters. Many of the characters in this episode take on the role of captor or prisoner and contribute to the episode's symbolic meaning. Sookie and Bill are both situated as prisoners, creating an unusual similarity between them. Sookie's imprisonment by the Fellowship of the Sun church personifies the stereotype of feminine weakness, emphasizing her as incapable (she is captured) and as a victim (she is almost raped). Her apparent weaknesses are mirrored in Bill's encounter with Lorena because it features a gender role reversal. Despite being the male in the situation, Bill is subordinate to Lorena and seems unable to become her equal since he is a victim of her violent behaviors (she obliterates his cell phone and is physically aggressive with him).

Lorena and Maryann are both oppressors, physically, emotionally, and mentally holding people captive. By desperately trying to maintain control over Bill, Lorena embodies religious fanaticism that refuses to accept that someone does not adhere to the same doctrine. It is incomprehensible to her that Bill would voluntarily mainstream, and her ardent attempts to convince him to follow his vampire nature strongly resemble conversion strategies that religious zealots preach to nonbelievers. Maryann is still an allegory for the oppressive nature of consumerism, but even a more exaggerated version of herself than in the previous episode. In addition to personifying the excess and waste

of consumerism, she now embodies consumption because she physically eats and serves as food the hearts of other people. Her personification of consumerism and consumption has imprisoned the town and threatened their safety, as is evidenced by her brainwashing of Eggs so he kills Daphne, a dedicated follower and waitress at Merlotte's.

  Plot. All of the primary events in this episode reinforce the allegory of confinement, thus explaining the characters' desires to be free and the relevance of the title. In addition to Sookie and Godric being trapped in the Fellowship of the Sun church, Bill is also physically and emotionally imprisoned by Lorena. Refusing to let go of her control over him as his maker, Lorena physically prevents Bill from leaving the Hotel Carmilla and verbally taunts him about his relationship with Sookie, indicating that a relationship with a human is its own form of oppressive imprisonment. Flashback scenes of Bill and Lorena in the 1930s also reinforce this allegory by showing Bill's abhorrence for Lorena's form of vampirism, suggesting that both she and vampirism are confining forces for Bill. Ultimately, Bill is unable to break free of Lorena, and Eric has to go save Sookie from the crazed church leaders. Meanwhile in Bon Temps, Maryann still has supernatural control over many of the townspeople and she regularly exerts this control by having orgies and ordering her subjects to kill one another. Mostly unaware of the extent of Maryann's dominance, the townspeople are unwitting prisoners while they enjoy her parties, representing the blissful, yet ignorant, consumerism that is consistent with Maryann's personification of consumption and consumerism.

"Beautifully Broken"

  The second episode of the third season, "Beautifully Broken," is allegorical for the complex process of redemption, and while some characters are redeemed in the

episode, others just start on their path to needing redemption (Tucker & Winant, 2010). On the surface, the title is an oxymoron because broken things are generally considered disfigured rather than beautiful. However, the symbolic meaning of the title suggests that, in keeping with the redemption allegory, falling apart must occur before one can be put back together. The process of breaking and being put back together is personified by the characters and emphasized by the main settings for the plot.

  Setting. The settings in this episode, more so than any other in my sample, connect socioeconomic status with the allegorical meaning. Three locales reinforce the complex process of redemption and the settings create a disparity in that poor characters from beleaguered circumstances are in need of help and redemption, whereas wealthy characters are not. The three examples that demonstrate this point are Russell Edgington's mansion in Mississippi, the town of Hot Shot, and the Mickens's family trailer. Luxurious and elegant, Russell's mansion positions him as being a superior person because of his worldly goods; created for the comfort of vampires, his mansion boasts excessive amenities and furnishings, thus making him not in need of redemption. The impoverished town of Hot Shot and the dilapidated Mickens's family trailer, however, represent the occupants as being lower-class and uneducated, and therefore in much need of help. The condition of these settings alone inspires Jason and Sam to help the occupants of these respective places. Because Russell is represented as being non-redeemable, meaning no other character considers him to be capable of being redeemed, his opulent home provides a clear juxtaposition to these other locations and helps reinforce the symbolic meaning of the episode.

Characters. In keeping with the theme of redemption, the characters in this episode are represented as being either those in need of saving and those able to save others. Tara, Tommy Mickens, and Crystal from Hot Shot are clearly in need of saving, while Lafayette, Jason, and Sam actively try to redeem them. It is interesting to note that as the series progresses, the emphasis on peripheral characters increases, causing some storylines with main characters to seem incongruent with the rest of the allegory. This is clearly seen in "Beautifully Broken" because Sookie's and Bill's (the primary protagonists) storylines do not contribute to the allegory in any significant way.

In her grief over Eggs's death, Tara attempts to commit suicide and is saved by Lafayette, who discovers her shortly after she overdoses on pills. She is incapable of recovering on her own, and in keeping with the correlation between setting and socioeconomic status, she is a poor character presented as being in need of redemption. In an effort to help her, Lafayette takes Tara to visit his mother in an insane asylum, showing her what happens to people who do not accept help when offered to them. While there, his mother looks pointedly at Tara and declares, "God killed you, too." Resignedly, Tara replies, "almost," indicating that, although she had not previously thought possible, she is indeed capable of being redeemed and therefore no longer "broken" as the title suggests.

Similar to Lafayette, Sam and Jason discover people in need and extend offers of assistance. After discovering his biological family, Sam tries to get to know his brother, Tommy, better, only to be rebuffed and surprised at Tommy's bitter cynicism. Tommy symbolically embodies being broken, which is demonstrated when he removes his sheet and his chest is covered with scars, presumably from frequent fights or domestic abuse.

Having been physically and emotionally broken down by his circumstances, Tommy needs help and Sam represents his path to redemption; Sam can show him how to change and can physically protect from more abuse and injuries. Much like Sam, Jason tries to help Crystal, one of the destitute people from Hot Shot. Personifying the racial stereotype of "white trash," Crystal is unlikely to be changed because her low socioeconomic status presents her situation in life as being inevitable. However, Jason's sympathy inspires him to pursue helping her, suggesting that she can somehow be redeemed because someone of a slightly higher class is now personally invested in her future.

   Plot. Some of the plotlines in this episode seem to distract from the overall allegory of redemption, making it one of the few incongruous episode plots in my sample. Bill's abduction by the king of Mississippi and Sookie's recruitment of Eric to find Bill do not contribute to the allegory, but rather occasionally set up the other characters' storylines. Sookie's preoccupation with Bill requires that Lafayette watch over Tara as she grieves, which explains why he takes her to work with him at Merlotte's. While there, she meets Franklin, a vampire who helps her assault two men who disrespect the memory of Eggs, thus helping her to release some of her sorrow and begin her process of redemption. While assisting Andy with a raid at Hot Shot, Jason encounters Crystal and becomes determined to save her from her circumstances. And in trying to learn more about his past, Sam investigates and locates his biological family, which leads to his many attempts to redeem Tommy. Jason's and Sam's storylines also occur independently of Sookie and Bill, indicating that perhaps redemption is not possible or needed for those two main characters.

"Evil is Going On"

The final episode of season 3, "Evil is Going On," is an allegory for the control that death, as the ultimate evil, has over individuals, whether or not they are considered to be good or bad (Ball & Hemingway, 2010). Reinforcing the series' overall allegory that people are constantly oppressed and controlled by outside forces, this episode emphasizes the inevitable and necessary departure that people must make from their surroundings, be it a literal death or a metaphorical death (both of which are seen in this episode). Metaphorical death is marked by a departure from one's situation in life, an abandonment that overtakes the person who is figuratively dying. The title, therefore, indicates that death in any form is constantly occurring and is unstoppable. The setting, characters, and plot contribute to the construction of death as evil and the overall allegory of the episode.

Setting. Two primary settings contribute to the allegory of death, including Fangtasia and the cemetery. Fangtasia, the vampire bar, is a place of detainment for the season's villain, Russell Edgington. Because Russell's physical condition is poor and near death, the bar symbolically represents a coffin, or a place where one is held before arriving at his or her final resting place. This representation is reinforced when Bill and Eric dispose of Russell elsewhere, maintaining the bar's image as a place of transition between life and death. The cemetery, though only briefly shown, is significant to the allegory of this episode and to the allegory of the next season's finale, as well. Symbolizing death, the cemetery emphasizes that death has the ultimate control over everyone and that it is an equalizer among evil and righteous individuals. On another level, the cemetery also provides a space for Sookie's metaphorical death because the locale allows her faerie relations to visit her and take her away with them. In this way, the

setting reinforces the inevitability of some form of death.

Characters. Several characters personify death and reinforce the allegory of the control that death has over everyone. Sookie, Tara, Russell, and Tommy all experience some sort of death and appear to make a permanent departure from their surroundings. By accompanying the faeries, Sookie abandons her life in Bon Temps and embodies death because she lets it overcome her; she exerts no effort against the forces trying to control her future and, much like death, accepts her fate when it is presented to her. Tara experiences metaphorical death when her life in Bon Temps becomes unbearable and she decides to leave. Remaining in town is not presented as a possibility for her, showing that death is necessary for her life in town to end and for her life not be a source of pain for her anymore. Her departure is also unknown to everyone else, referencing the sometimes unexpected nature of death and the sudden loss that results from it. Russell and Tommy are antagonistic characters whose encounters with death are ambiguous; in other words, the audience is not certain whether or not the characters are actually dead at the end of the episode. However, they still embody the lack of control that one has over death. Russell's fate is determined by Bill and Eric, who eagerly try to destroy him. He is continuously shown to be powerless against the outside forces that seek to harm him, reinforcing the overall allegory of the series. Likewise, Tommy's fate is affected by Sam, who shoots him while Tommy tries to run away. This moment is particularly symbolic of death coming out of nowhere to snatch those least expecting it.

Plot. Through the primary storyline, this episode reinforces the symbolic meaning of death as the ultimate evil. In their attempt to destroy Russell, Bill and Eric dispose of him in a cement block in the ground, eliciting imagery of a permanently buried coffin.

Sookie realizes that in order for her to survive she must cut off all contact with vampires. Realizing that she will never be free of her connections to vampires, however, causes Sookie to run to the cemetery. By having her run to the cemetery to get away from vampires, the producers essentially permit Sookie to seek refuge in death, demonstrating that that is the only way she is safe from them. While still trying to recover from the death of her boyfriend, Tara undoes her braids and cuts her hair in a scene that is reminiscent of those featuring people preparing to die by suicide. Her metaphorical death occurs shortly after this scene, when she abandons her life in Bon Temps and drives away without a word to anyone. The producers use these storylines to emphasize the power that evil forces have on people and the only possible outcome is succumbing to death.

"I'm Alive and on Fire"

The fourth episode of the fourth season, "I'm Alive and on Fire" reinforces the series' allegorical meaning of being under the control of outside forces (Oliver & Lehmann, 2011). The title indicates the dichotomy of being alive yet incapable of acting, aware yet unable to change anything because of oppressive forces. The episode is based on the witch named Marnie who exerts her control over members of the town and represents an ignorant oppressor who actively destroys people's lives because they do not agree with her. The setting of her shop reinforces this representation, as do several of the other characters and the overall plot.

Setting. The significant setting in this episode that reinforces the allegory is Marnie's wiccan-themed shop. Divided into two separate spaces—the front room is the shop and the back room is her private meeting room—the shops represents a fortress protecting her hatred and ignorance from outside influence. She rarely leaves her shop

and performs most of her spells in the private meeting room. This setting allows her to maintain control over others while never leaving the safety of her shop, symbolically preventing logic and understanding from invading her world and challenging her ignorance. The shop also represents a source of power because it is filled with books, sacred objects, and other magical paraphernalia that enable Marnie to perform her witchcraft.

Characters. Several characters reinforce the allegory of oppression and control by embodying social issues that are frequently affected by societal and political ideals. Marnie, Eric, Sookie, and Jason are characters who most actively embody the positions of oppressor and oppressed. Marnie personifies religious and political intolerance. With very little reasoning presented to justify her hatred of vampires, she represents ignorant closed-mindedness that causes discrimination and destruction. She personifies the immense danger of letting a few disgruntled individuals control social and political conversations, and dictate who or what is worthy of consideration, rights, and existence. Eric and Sookie represent the direct victims of hatred and ignorance because the former is cursed by Marnie and the latter has to take care of Eric in the aftermath. By losing his memory, Eric personifies marginalized groups that are denied a voice and the ability to fight for their rights. Without his memory and abilities giving him the upper hand, Eric represents individuals who deserve equality and choice, yet are denied them because of external oppressive forces. Jason, meanwhile, personifies gender violence toward individuals perceived as weak. While compassionately trying to help the people of Hot Shot (a predominately feminine trait), Jason is gang raped, symbolizing the violence that is directed toward those that do not conform to societal rules for appropriate behavior.

Plot. The storylines in this episode reinforce the allegory of outside forces controlling one's life. Marnie's role as oppressor affects the lives of many Bon Temps residents. After being cursed by Marnie, Eric must deal with the loss of his memory and being stripped of his identity. In this character reversal, Sookie, too, is greatly affected by this curse because Eric becomes her charge, moving into her home and relying on her for survival. Marnie's actions take over Sookie's entire life, occupying most of her time and energy, and denying her the right to a life as an autonomous individual. Marnie also curses Pam, threatening her existence by causing her to decompose. Furthermore, Tara, Lafayette, and Jesus (Lafayette's boyfriend) unwillingly become involved with the curse on Eric, forcing them to try to fix the situation so that Eric will not seek revenge someday. In keeping with her personification of hatred and ignorance, her control is widespread and experienced by many townspeople, many against their will, reinforcing her personification of societal and political oppression.

"And When I Die"

The final episode of the fourth season, "And When I Die" is similar to the previous episode in my sample because it also reinforces the overall allegorical meaning of the series as a representation of social and political oppression (Tucker & Winant, 2011). Tying together many of the smaller allegories used in previous episodes, this allegory connects the inevitability of death to the dangers of consumerism, with the title suggesting that death is something for which individuals should prepare. The producers use time and geographic settings to connect these allegories, as well as the characters and plot to convey that external forces have the ultimate control over one's life.

Setting. Two key settings contribute to the episode's allegory of death, consumerism, and control, including the timing of the events and the cemetery locale for the climax of the plot. Set on Halloween, the producers use the history and symbolism of All Hallows' Evening to represent the precarious nature of life and the constant shadow of death that shrouds one's existence on earth. By emphasizing the thin veil between the living and the dead on Halloween, the threat of death to conquer life at any moment is made a distinct possibility, echoing the allegory of "Evil is Going On." The second locale is the cemetery that is directly adjacent to the location of the pyre that Marnie erects to destroy Bill and Eric. Symbolizing the thin veil between life and death, and the inevitability of death, the cemetery represents the fact that death does not discriminate when claiming its victims—everyone is destined for the same fate. The cemetery reinforces the significance of Halloween, suggesting the reach and power of death is somehow stronger in cemeteries on Halloween.

Characters. Of the extensive cast of over two dozen characters, the primary characters that contribute to the episode's allegory are Marnie, Jesus, and Lafayette. Marnie's desire to acquire Jesus' supernatural abilities in order to assist in her evil plot situates him as a commodity, something to be consumed and then discarded, and portrays her as a devil. Furthermore, because Marnie dominates Lafayette's body, he is also represented as a basic commodity, providing Marnie's spirit a vessel in which to enact her plans. Because both men are people of color and Marnie is Caucasian, their commodification is even more significant in that it shows that white people can easily control and dominate people of different races and ethnicities. Even though Marnie's plan is ultimately foiled and she is destroyed, her actions against people of color symbolize

society's oppression and silencing of non-white perspectives. The representations of Jesus and Lafayette indicate that the abilities, knowledge, and even physical bodies of people of color are always available for the consumption and use of white people.

Plot. The plot reinforces both the smaller allegory of the episode and the overall allegory of the series by highlighting the dangers of consumerism, the imminence of death, and the oppressive nature of external control. Wanting Jesus' magical power for her own use, Marnie's spirit possesses Lafayette's body and kills Jesus. By taking control of Lafayette and stealing Jesus' life and magic, Marnie consumes both men for her own purposes. Her excessive use and waste of human life represents the overindulgence of consumerism and the fact that it will ultimately lead to destruction (as it does for Marnie). Powerful and with a human form once again, Marnie attempts to kill Bill and Eric by burning them at the stake, thus highlighting her disregard for wasting and destroying life. The evils of consumerism and consumption are conquered, however, when her plan fails and spirits from a nearby cemetery summon Marnie to join them. Despite her evil nature, Marnie is granted the same peaceful afterlife that good people receive, which is shown when Sookie's grandmother comforts Marnie and convinces her to let go of her earthly existence. The ultimate and inevitable controller that is death seizes Marnie, emphasizing that death will seek early revenge against those that live their lives in similar way.

Overall, *True Blood* is an allegorical narrative for societal oppression and political control, based on universal struggles between good and evil. This allegory is reinforced by the smaller allegories in the individual episodes and by the settings, characters, and plot. The evolution of the series over four years has caused minor changes in the allegorical meaning, predominantly in the way that secondary characters sometimes

contribute more significantly to the symbolic meaning than primary characters. Also,

villains tend to reinforce the allegory more frequently in later seasons, indicating that

their centrality to the series increases in importance as it progresses.

CHAPTER SIX:

AUDIENCE RECEPTION ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the findings from my analysis of the multiple methods of

interpretation used by audiences to make sense of *True Blood*. Guided by reception

theories, my analysis explicates the multiple ways that viewers understand, make, and

subvert meaning from the series. The viewer's whose opinions are under analysis here are

bloggers writing in response to episodes of *True Blood,* many of which are analyzed in

my two previous chapters, and who are published predominantly on the Racialicious

website. This blog is unique in its critical approach to media texts, featuring professional

and amateur writers evaluating and deconstructing questionable representations of race,

class, gender, and sexuality.

The data for this chapter consists of two Racialicious blogs, two blogs from other

websites, and four Racialicious roundtable discussion blogs, totaling 62 double-spaced

pages. In the following analysis, I identity three different methods of interpretation and

sense-making utilized by the bloggers as they contemplate and attempt to understand the

series. Therefore, my analysis answers the following research question: How do

audiences of *True Blood* demonstrate the various principles of audience reception?

Reception Analysis

In the following sections, I identity three principle methods of interpretation and

meaning-making most commonly used by audiences and studied by reception scholars,

including encoding/decoding, pleasure, and narrative paradigm. Additionally, I also

examine how audiences make sense of *True Blood* based on its adherence to the gothic

vampire subgenre. Utilizing these concepts as a framework for my analysis, I identify

them in my data and include examples from the blogs to illustrate the viewers' use of these concepts in their sense-making processes.

Encoding/Decoding

Television messages are encoded with the producers' preferred meaning and this meaning sets the limits for the decoding processes and the types of meanings derived by audiences (Hall, 1980). The meanings that result from audience decoding processes include dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings, where the first reading adheres to the preferred meaning embedded in the text, the second reading contradicts and does not fully accept the preferred meaning, and the third reading completely rejects the preferred meaning.

Preferred meaning. The preferred meaning constitutes the predominant messages and desired understandings embedded within a text by producers. This meaning establishes parameters for audience interpretations, demonstrating that viewers are ultimately limited in the scope of meanings they make. My analyses of *True Blood* indicate that there are multiple levels of preferred meaning, some of which are not necessarily apparent to all audiences. Starting with the series title and episode names, the series serves as an allegory of contemporary social and political issues. This allegory provides commentary on race, sexuality, gender, class, and other issues, and yet often reinforces the hegemonic forces that it seeks to subvert by relying on stereotypical representations of marginalized groups to convey allegorical meaning. Overall, the preferred meaning of the series is that it is an allegorical representation of oppressed groups that relies on familiar gothic vampire generic conventions to reinforce its message.

Dominant readings. Interpretations that replicate and support the apparent message of a narrative are readings that adhere to the dominant cultural order. As a blog with a critical perspective, Racialicious blogs rarely adhere to the surface dominant reading of media texts. The bloggers who contribute to the website rarely express agreement with *True Blood*, meaning that most comments challenge or negotiate the surface meaning of the series. I include the following examples to demonstrate three different types of dominant readings the bloggers use to understand the series, express agreement with characters, and elucidate dominant meanings through opposition. These recurring types of readings are taken from blogs written about episodes that span the current run of the series, indicating that viewers have utilized these readings consistently.

The first type of dominant reading is one in which viewers recognize overarching political themes as a way of understanding the overall narrative. In one of the first Racialicious blogs written about *True Blood*, Winfrey Harris (2008) notes that the preferred meaning of the series' coincides with real current and historical struggles for equality:

> The most logical parallel for the struggles vampires are going through is the LGBT fight for rights, remixed for the *True Blood* universe…However, there are parallels to other struggles referenced as well. The Vampire Rights Amendment is an obvious nod to the as yet unratified Equal Rights Amendment. And more than a few allusions to black struggles for equality (para. 10).

Both creator Alan Ball and author Charlaine Harris also emphasized the parallel between the series and the struggles experienced by marginalized groups, suggesting that this broad interpretation adheres with the goals and parameters established by the producers. Referencing political inspirations seems to help the bloggers contextualize their comments and add significance to their evaluations.

Another type of dominant reading from the bloggers is agreement with and liking for specific characters. This type of reading is significant because it stands in clear contrast to the negative evaluations that bloggers often make about most of the main characters, especially Sookie and Bill. While both of my examples refer to the character of Pam, she is not the only character with whom audiences agree; Lafayette, Tara, and occasionally Jason are also characters that are mentioned in this type of interpretation. In the following example, a blogger in a season 4 roundtable exclaims her despair over a narrative development which adversely affects Pam: "Also, poor Pam! I love that face! Though she should have had more patience and not stepped inside of the circle" (Peterson, 2011a, para. 199). By expressing distress on Pam's behalf, the blogger communicates that her personal regard for the character adheres to how the producers likely wanted the character to be perceived. Because Pam, Lafayette, Tara, and Jason are never portrayed as anti-heroes whom viewers are supposed to hate, liking them fulfills the producer's goals.

A second example of this type of dominant reading occurs in the following exchange about the season 4 finale. Exalting Pam because of her negative comment about and disgust for Sookie, several bloggers discuss their appreciation for Pam, although only two bloggers' comments are cited here (Peterson, 2011b):

> **Alea:** Pam is, like, the one person who will tell the truth about Sookie. Her name is fucking stupid.
> **Amber:** I <3 Pam. It is about damn time somebody said it! "I'm so over Sookie and her stupid faerie vagina…" COSIGN. +10,000 (para. 285 and 286).

While Pam's comment about Sookie could be interpreted as violating the dominant meaning of Sookie's importance as protagonist, Pam is consistently presented as a

sympathetic character. Therefore, by appreciating the producers' positive portrayal of Pam, audiences adhere to their dominant message.

Finally, the third type of dominant reading that I identified in the blogs is that of devil's advocate. The bloggers rarely agree with characters and actions, and frequently vocalize their opposition to the blatant meaning of the narrative. For example, at the end of season 4, Sookie is in danger of being shot by a deranged woman. Tara walks in during the altercation and pushes Sookie out of the way of the gun, taking the bullet instead. This plot development incited outrage from the Racialicious roundtable blog, with the participants challenging the producers' decision to make Tara dive in front of Sookie. As is demonstrated in the following exchange from a season 4 roundtable discussion, adopting the dominant reading equates with playing the devil's advocate (Peterson, 2011b):

> **Kendra:** Not only did she say fuck it, she dove with the intensity of a secret service agent.
> **Amber:** Seriously! Couldn't she have reached for something to throw? She wasn't thinking at all.
> …
> **Joseph:** As devils advocate. cause i feel we need one of those. (even though honesly tara could have dove for her knees, WRITERS!)…It has been established they [Sookie and Tara] were friends that were sweet to each other for most of their lives. Its only recently that one has been a vampire crazy jerk. Also, pushing someone out of the way of danger is an instinct… [original spelling and grammar] (para. 484-5, 489, and 491).

Adopting the opposite perspective from what he really thinks, Joseph presents the dominant reading. This is significant because it demonstrates that at least some of the bloggers understand how the overall narrative is meant to be read. In this specific exchange, Joseph uses the dominant reading in the form of devil's advocate to ease some

of the rage that the other participants were feeling, and in doing so reinforces the notion

that adhering to the dominant reading is easier than opposing or negotiating meanings.

Overall, the dominant readings that I identified in my data are not conventional

examples of adhering to the preferred meaning. Only by making sense of the series

through the lenses of political and social movements do the bloggers' readings match

those intended by the producers. Other more common readings dominate the blogs. By

expressing agreement with or liking for certain characters, the bloggers adopt the

producers' meanings in ways that are limited to the actions and thoughts involving those

characters. Lastly, adopting the dominant reading often results as a form of countering

the oppositional readings of the bloggers, thus demonstrating some bloggers' ability to

identify, but not agree with, the dominant reading. The following section analyzes

negotiated readings, which are those that tend to strike a balance between dominant and

oppositional by not completely adhering to one or the other.

Negotiated readings. Interpretations that alter the preferred meaning, while still

primarily adhering to it, are negotiated readings. In my data, these types of readings

frequently occur as ways for the bloggers to make sense of the series; it seems that they

question the dominant meanings in the series to see if their interpretations make more

sense than the meanings presented by the producers. At the beginning of the series,

Winfrey Harris (2008) questions how the issues of race and racism are handled and

discussed by the characters. In regard to Tara and her comments about racism, Winfrey

Harris (2008) negotiates the meaning and motives behind Tara's use of race and racism:

> Tara brought up race to save Jason Stackhouse from extended questioning at the
> police station, arguing that race (and interracial relationships) are still a major
> issue in the post-Vampire world. In some ways, this could paint Tara as a racial
> opportunist—someone who discusses race to start drama or when it benefits her,

not to further the cause of racial equality. I suppose I'll have to keep watching the series to see how this develops (para. 11).

As a series that often purports itself as one that challenges—rather than reinforces—representations of racism, the likelihood that the producers actively portray Tara as a racial opportunist seems minimal. Therefore, Winfrey Harris's (2008) negotiation of meaning about the motives for Tara's actions serves as a way of trying to understand the meaning of the series, while also not altogether dismissing the dominant meaning.

A second example of negotiation occurs in Ryan's (2009) article, which was written in response in response to Peterson's (2009) article proclaiming the series' negative representations of women and sex. Writing for Nerve.com, Ryan (2009) takes the stance that *True Blood* perpetuates sex positivity strictly because the female characters have sex and enjoy it:

> Of course, last season featured the problematic subplot of women, or "fangbangers," being murdered for sleeping with vampires. Even though the killer was set up as the season's ultimate villain, showing these women getting punished for their sexual activity ran the risk of keeping the old, unfortunate trop alive….To a degree, *True Blood* is confused and confusing when it comes to its portrayal of sex. But the show seems to be growing towards a more natural and nuanced depiction of sexuality, not just for the women but for everyone in the vampire-filled town of Bon Temps. If the show were all bacchanal madness and beefcake adoration, Peterson would be right: we'd have a problem. But as long as we can find a spark of soul amid the profane, watching *True Blood* should be a guiltless pleasure (para. 3 and 9).

That Ryan (2009) acknowledges minimal problems within the series, yet optimistically highlights how the show is apparently evolving, demonstrates his negotiation with the preferred meaning. Allowing that it is "confused and confusing" to a degree, this author presents his own confused and confusing assessment of the series by downplaying the harmful handling of sexual freedom and proclivities in the first season and highlighting what he interprets to be positive representations in the second season.

A final example of this type of reading occurs in a blog about the season 3 finale. The bloggers take issue with a scene in which Tara cuts her own hair, and they debate the significance and meaning of her actions. While a few participants view the scene as pandering to African American women, one participant negotiates with the meaning of the scene and describes her multiple readings of it (Lim, 2010):

> At first, I read it as an engendered scene, of "look at the woman cutting her hair to change her life," which seems to be a leitmotif of women's transformation stories in literature, mythologies, and pop culture. However I had to check that idea because hair-cutting seems to symbolize, in both spiritual and secular traditions, a letting go, a movement towards transforming one's life for people of various genders (para. 7).

The blogger is unable to determine the dominant meaning of the scene by negotiating between two possible interpretations. Her first reading is more oppositional in nature, labeling it as one that adheres to an archetypal representation of women's behavior. Her second interpretation alters the first one slightly, noting that the symbolic meaning of the scene may not be directed solely at women, thus possibly adhering more to the dominant meaning intended by the producers.

As these examples show, negotiated readings allow viewers to make sense of media texts in spite of confusion and opposition, and often result in readings that are not definitive. In other words, most of the bloggers I discuss here do not create meanings that simply alter the dominant readings. Rather, they explore multiple possible meanings in order to explain and understand the series, offering both dominant and oppositional perspectives to arrive at a negotiated or inconclusive interpretation. In this way, this type of reading allows for ambiguity within the text and uncertain audience interpretations. Unlike these readings, however, oppositional readings do not feature ambiguous analyses, but rather offer definitive understandings; I explore this type of reading in the

following section.

      Oppositional readings. Interpretations that reject the preferred meaning and create new meaning are oppositional readings. These readings subvert the intended meaning and attempt to uncover deleterious messages embedded within the narrative. Not surprisingly, Racialicious's critical perspective yields oppositional readings more often than dominant or negotiated readings. Challenging the messages within the series is a primary objective of the roundtable discussions about the series. Therefore, I had difficulty in narrowing my selection of examples for this section. I use the following five examples to demonstrate the depth of the bloggers' critique and to highlight the elements that they take issue with most frequently.

      The first excerpt discusses the producer's consistent use of graphic sex and the resulting debate about whether the representations of sexuality are helpful or harmful to women. In her article on the Double X website, Peterson (2009) rejects the notion that the spate of vampire media, especially *True Blood*, promotes representations of healthy sexuality:

> The latest wave of novels and series are not like the glossy look-but-don't-touch sexuality you see in *Vogue*. They reflect our culture's deep ambivalence about women's sexuality and our obsession with glorifying chastity and sexual violence…[Alan Ball] is still transmitting the same idea: To be desired, a woman should be beautiful, virginal, and submissive (Para. 1 and 3).

Drawing on knowledge of the then-aired first two seasons, Peterson (2009) opposes the idea that the series' representations of sexual intercourse are healthy and desirable, but rather that they perpetuate unattainable standards for women and potentially position them as victims of sexual assault. Because the sexually explicit content is undoubtedly a contributing factor in *True Blood*'s mystique, Peterson's (2009) critique is important

because it explicates the insidious conflation of sex and aggression. Furthermore, it also suggests the source of the problem—creator and producer Alan Ball—and holds him accountable for the narrative's negative treatment of female sexuality. Referencing Alan Ball is common in Racialicious, as the next two examples demonstrate.

In the season 3 finale, Sookie encounters her faerie relatives and accompanies then to their homeland, disappearing from the Bon Temps cemetery without a trace. Rather than wonder where Sookie is, the Racialicious bloggers rejoice in her absence, with one blogger who notes that (Lim, 2010),

> If Sookie's dissappearing [*sic*] act was supposed to be meant as a morsel to make us want to watch no matter what next season, then Alan Ball really needs to start having focus groups (para. 36).

By challenging this narrative development, the blogger is questioning Alan Ball's understanding of his audience and his ability to write and produce for them, undoubtedly an outcome *not* intended by Ball. Suggesting that Sookie's departure would enhance the quality of the series, this comment contradicts her importance to the plot.

Echoing the aforementioned comment about Alan Ball, the following example from a roundtable discussion about season 4's finale blatantly accuses the series creator of purposely writing bad things to happen to people of color. When the bloggers discuss a storyline involving Luna, a woman of Mexican and Native American descent, one blogger responds to the character's on-screen comment about happiness by stating that "It's not God that doesn't want you to be happy, Luna, it's Alan Ball and the writing crew. POCs get no happiness girl" (Peterson, 2011b, para. 363).

My last two examples are similar to the previous three in that they subvert meaning and deconstruct what the series usually communicates. These are particularly

significant because they critique the construction of the narrative and how the overall series treats women. While discussing the storyline involving the Hot Shot drug dealers, the bloggers in a season 4 roundtable question the representation of race and class, with one blogger writing that, "'White trash" equals incest. That they're werepanthers attempting to preserve their bloodline is a thin cover for what is otherwise a pretty cheap narrative move" (Peterson, 2011a, para. 14). This comment challenges the representation of lower class individuals, arguing that the producers are simply exaggerating class differences as an excuse to include shocking content (the comment about preserving the bloodline references the extensive rape scene in which Jason is raped by multiple Hot Shot women in order to further their werepanther bloodline). It also highlights how damaging this representation is, emphasizing that making class status an indicator of sexual depravity is socially damaging.

Lastly, I include this final example because of its important commentary on how the series—particularly the fourth season—represents strong women. In the season 4 finale, vampire and advocate Nan Flannigan lambasts Bill and Eric for their obsession with Sookie, and they retaliate by killing her. As a character that has been in the series from the beginning and rarely presented as antagonistic to the main characters, Nan is unique in that she is one of the few women characters to be in a position of power. The bloggers contest her death, arguing that it is not only a cheap narrative move but that, more importantly, it is a prime example of how the producers treat assertive women: "Girl, you know it's bros before hos on True Blood. Powerful women die violently, powerful men are just dealt with" (Peterson, 2011b, para. 388). Speaking about how the series punishes women who refuse to be meek and mild, the blogger explains a problem

that is present in the entire series and not just this episode. Contradicting the way women are represented challenges the surface preferred meaning of the series because it has a female protagonist. The bloggers demonstrate that the insidious disempowering nature of the series prevents women from being successfully autonomous.

Utilizing oppositional readings to critique the series, the Racialicious bloggers challenge the ways *True Blood* represents sexuality, women, race, and class, often with harmful consequences for the characters. They subvert the preferred meanings in the series by emphasizing the questionable ways in which Alan Ball and the rest of the producers structure the narrative and how they construct the characters' identities. They reject the dominant meanings in the series in order to expose harmful structures that negatively portray members of marginalized groups. As bloggers for a critical website, the Racialicious contributors create oppositional readings as a way of exposing social injustices with the intention of creating awareness and furthering audience enlightenment about these issues.

Pleasure

Audiences derive pleasure from consuming media for several reasons, with primary ones being the "emotional realism" of narratives, the ability to demonstrate control over a medium, and the power to make multiple meanings. Specifically, subverting meanings from the dominant ideology provides audiences pleasure because it gives them a sense of power to possibly displace the power structure of media messages (Fiske, 1987). In other words, viewers experience pleasure from creating oppositional readings. Racialicious bloggers communicate this pleasure by explicitly describing their enjoyment of the series or participating in commentaries that utilize hyperbole and

sarcasm to subvert meaning.

The following examples display moments of pleasure derived from evaluating the series, starting with bloggers' critiques of its stereotypical representations of African Americans and the inherent structure of racism embedded within many episodes. Upon first starting to watch the series, Winfrey Harris (2008) notes,

> If only I were better at turning off the anti-racist/feminist part of my brain. Then I wouldn't notice that Sookie's best friend Tara…is but an HBO'd version of the typical sassy, black sidekick and that Tara's cousin Lafayette…is a mélange of black male/gay male stereotypes…Am I still going to dig *True Blood*? Yep. I'm adding it to my list of guilty pleasures…But seeing, yet again, another great show by an admired director/writer with one-dimensional portrayals of black people reminds me why we need more of us behind the scenes in Hollywood (para. 5 and 10).

Winfrey Harris (2008) presents a contradiction by acknowledging that the show is indeed racist, but that she plans to view it in spite of that fact. The explanation for this contradiction lies in the pleasure that results from viewing the series. Providing stimulation for "anti-racist/feminist" and other worldviews, it begs for critique and enables viewers to display their critical and analytical thinking skills by deconstructing its representations of race, gender, class, and sexuality, while simultaneously providing some form of entertainment.

A similar example of this takes place in a Racialicious roundtable discussion about a season 3 episode, in which the participants take pleasure in questioning the lack of people of color in the series, though the methods of critique differ slightly (Peterson, 2010):

> **Tami:** True Blood suffers from a case of "Hollywood diversity," where you throw in a few people of color to give the appearance of diversity, but not "too many," which might turn off mainstream (read: white) audiences whom you assume to be uncomfortable with "the other" (read: non-white people).

> **Andrea:** I'm guessing that Alan Ball and the other TB creative figured that they could get away with such a thing because Bon Temps is a fictional place. If we ain't heard of it, goes the thinking, who's going to question the racial demographics of the town? (para. 1 and 2)

Unlike the first example I included, this one features bloggers who employ humor to criticize the series. Sardonically diagnosing the series with a disease that infects all episodes and causes a startling lack of people of color to have roles, these comments reinforce the ridiculous fact that a show set in the Bayou has only a handful of people of color. Essentially making a farce out of what is otherwise supposed to be a serious show, these bloggers challenge the producers by creatively using humor to disrupt the value their work.

Another example of bloggers using humor to expose problems through exaggeration occurs in a season 4 blog. While discussing the Hot Shot storyline, the roundtable participants use hyperbole and sarcasm to convey their disgust with what they perceive to be destructive stereotypes used repeatedly by the producers (Peterson, 2011a):

> **Joseph**: I wonder if the writers have a "Big Book of White Trash Stereotypes" they dig into when these Hotshot people need to speak.
> **Latoya:** @Joseph—Yes, clearly.
> **Amber:** @Joseph OMG they definitely do and they keep it on the bookshelf right next to "Upholding the Cult of True Womanhood: A Handbook" and "On Screen Torture Using American Slavery References" (para. 11-13).

This type of humor appears several times in my data and is always used to emphasize that the bloggers not only think of themselves as clever, but as more clever than the producers and writers. By uncovering the alleged laziness of the show's creative team, the bloggers seem to enjoy these moments of feeling superior because they have, in essence, "cracked the code" of the narrative.

A final example of bloggers challenging the producers as a form of pleasure occurs in the roundtable discussion about the fourth season finale. Frustrated about how the producers killed off Lafayette's boyfriend, Jesus, the bloggers create a moment of remembrance for him, which is something he was deprived of in the episode (Peterson, 2011b):

> **Latoya:** Okay, we need a eulogy for Jesus.
> …
> **Alea:** Jesus, you are still kind of sketch as a motherfucker, but you [seemingly] only had good intentions toward Laffy, and I'm sorry that Alan Ball took you out in such a piss poor way (para. 456 and 460).

Several bloggers participate in this eulogy for Jesus, indicating that they feel the freedom to create a space to mourn the loss of a character in spite of the way the producers decided to treat the character's storyline. They challenge the meaning of the narrative development by communicating disapproval with the producers' decisions, thus demonstrating their power of the series to create something the producers did not.

Viewing *True Blood* provides the Racialicious bloggers with pleasurable experiences because it gives them the opportunity to subvert the producers' meanings and create their own. Despite the problematic elements within the series (e.g. so few people of color, poor treatment of women, stereotypical representations of class, to name a few), the bloggers acknowledge their pleasure in viewing and intent to continue doing so, primarily so they can deconstruct it. The series also provides them with the opportunity to assert their dominance over it by creating new meanings and events that they felt were neglected by the producers. Finally, bloggers use humor to express their frustrations and analytical abilities as audience members to uncover harmful representations in the series. This section displays how the bloggers find enjoyment with the narrative, and the

following section explores how they make sense of the narrative.

Narrative Probability, Fidelity, and Coherence

Fisher's (1984, 1985) narrative paradigm addresses audience interpretations by

connecting the construction of the narrative to responses of audiences. Narrative

probability is the likelihood of the story in terms of setting, plot, and consistent characters

and actions (Fisher 1984). Narrative fidelity is the degree to which narratives are similar

to those experienced by audience members and the degree to which they "ring true" with

the audience members' life experiences (Fisher, 1984). Narrative coherence involves the

narrative inferences that audience members make if the causal links between events in a

narrative do not make sense (Chatman, 1978). I identify these elements in the following

three subsections.

Narrative probability. Viewers evaluate narratives on the basis of the coherence

of the elements within the narrative, including characters, events, and setting. While it

was still in its first season, *True Blood* made sense to some viewers because of the ways

that it reflected other well-known vampire texts (e.g. Southern setting). By being

consistent with audience expectations for a vampire story set in the South, the series had

probability for viewers. While writing a blog about the first season, Winfrey Harris

(2008) notes that the series has

> An out-of-this-world plot line, dark wit, smouldering [*sic*] vampires, lots of sex
> and violence (It's not TV. It's HBO), southern accents thick as honey, lots of
> Spanish moss—what's not to like? I've been a sucker for Louisiana bloodsuckers
> since Anne Rice wrote "Interview with a Vampire" (para. 4).

In this blog, Winfrey Harris (2008) equates *True Blood* with *Interview with a Vampire*,

simply because both texts feature erotic storylines about vampires living in Louisiana.

The similarity between the texts is debatable and not of interest here; what is important to

note is how the consistency (or even the appearance of consistency) of vampire stories

taking place in the South contributed to one viewer's liking and understanding of a new

television series.

Another example of narrative probability occurs when viewers have learned what

to expect from the series and feel qualified to assert what could happen in the future. Her

knowledge of the previous seasons allows this season 4 blogger to predict how the

producers will treat a character in future episodes (Peterson, 2011a):

> **Latoya:** Terry is the best man ever.
> **Kendra:** @Latoya, please don't say that, he'll die next week! (para. 160 and 161).

Here, the blogger named Kendra claims that a quality character will die strictly because

of the fact that the character is written as a good person, indicating that this has occurred

in previous episodes and is therefore probable.

A final example of probability occurs in a season 4 roundtable blog when the

bloggers discuss the scene involving Jason getting raped by the women of Hot Shot.

Recalling storylines from the previous season, two bloggers have the following exchange

about the scene (Peterson, 2011a):

> **Joseph:** Man, a two episode arc? This is worse than SVU.
> **Kendra:** @Joseph, Should we really be surprised? Tara had practically a full season rape arc last season. For Ball & Co. this is old hat at this point (para. 1 and 2).

Because rape is featured predominantly in the previous season, Kendra asserts that it

seems to be a plot device frequently employed by the producers and viewers should not

be surprised when it is used. By having multiple characters get raped over the course of

the series, the producers create an expectation that it will occur, making it probable and

consistent with the narrative development of the series. That viewers notice it as a

harmful plot device is significant, indicating that their social awareness about issues such as sexual assault is heightened.

Narrative fidelity. Viewers evaluate narratives by comparing the stories with their own lives. If the events in the story "ring true" with viewers' experiences, then the narrative has fidelity. The Racialicious bloggers frequently compare the story to their own experiences and knowledge, resulting in an assortment of mixed opinions that do and do not find fidelity in the series. An example of finding fidelity in the series occurs when Winfrey Harris (2008) discusses Tara's question to Bill about slave ownership and connects it the real struggles experienced by oppressed people:

> If I was in Tara's shoes, I would also wonder about his opinions on the rights of blacks. As we all should know, being a member of an oppressed group (even a fictionally oppressed group) does not guarantee solidarity with other people who are members of oppressed groups (para. 8).

The author connects her statements to her reading audience and assumes that they too have experienced oppression (and thus have fidelity in the narrative), or are aware of and sympathetic toward the plight of oppressed groups. It also indicates that she is a member of an oppressed group and finds Tara's experiences with Bill to be consistent with those she has experienced.

Similarly, when the Racialicious bloggers evaluate the actions of Lafayette as a gay man for their authenticity, one participant explains how the character and actions of Lafayette are consistent with the participant's life experiences (Peterson, 2010):

> But as a gay man of color, it seems to me Lafayette seems to portray how a lot of gays would act in the face of such latent and sometimes not so latent bigotry (para. 12).

The blogger identifies with Lafayette in multiple ways, including race and sexual orientation, and finds that the character's actions are consistent with those of real people

that the blogger knows. Another example akin to the previous two occurs in the blog

about the season 4 finale when Tara says she does not believe in God (Peterson, 2011b):

> **Kendra:** Tara's an Atheist!
> **Alea:** Score one for non-Christian black folks (para. 12 and 13).

In this case, the bloggers identify with the character because she breaks a stereotype of

black Southerners being Christians. Whether or not the bloggers are atheists is not

known; what is known is that the bloggers' lived experiences challenge the notion that

Christianity is the religion of most African Americans in the South and that Tara's

atheism has fidelity with them.

A final example of fidelity in *True Blood* occurs when one character begs her son

not to date a vampire. Comparing the mother's narrow-mindedness with real-life

experiences involving race rather than vampirism, one blogger notes that (Lim, 2010),

> Watching Hoyt's mother and ex-girlfriend plead with Hoyt to "not go vampire"
> has the allegorical "racial duty to whiteness" talk that I suspect some female
> relatives and friends have with white people in private when they pursue women
> of color out of a seething sense of seeing whiteness as physical/sexual/romantic
> ideal as defocused…I thought about what I've gone through with my own white
> ex-husband and his white female relatives… (para. 53).

Hoyt's experience of being accosted for dating a vampire rings true with the blogger's

experiences of being judged for being married to a white man. That the blogger

recognizes the storyline as an allegory for whiteness is significant because it reinforces

the series' accurate representation of racial intolerance and fear of miscegenation, thus

establishing narrative fidelity with audience members who have experienced those issues.

Examples of the narrative's failure to have fidelity with some viewers serve to

highlight the series' departures from reality, as well as its lack of diversity. While

analyzing the scene where Tara goes into the bathroom, cuts her braids, and emerges

shortly thereafter with a professional quality hairstyle, the bloggers discuss how the scene fails to accurately convey the extensive and complicated process of undoing one's own braids. For the bloggers, this narrative development emphasizes the lack of African American people in town, with one blogger stating that, "no one seems to know where Bon Temps' Black community is-let alone who/where Tara would get her braids done" (Lim, 2010 para. 12). This scene fails to agree with the blogger's knowledge of braiding and therefore does not have fidelity with them.

Narrative coherence. Viewers who are unsatisfied with the causal links between existents in a narrative are likely to draw inferences to fill in details in order to make sense of the story in terms of their experiences. Roundtable participants frequently engage in constructing possible causal links for narrative events and analyzing character behaviors, often in order to satisfy their own interests in the events or characters. While discussing an episode from the second season, one participant hypothesizes about the motives for one character's actions, noting that (Peterson, 2010),

> We get it, Tommy, you don't like him [Sam]. I'd love to be shown why. Is he jealous of Sam's independence? Perhaps. I think on another levels he's scared that Sam is taking away some of the attention. It's kind of like baby sibling syndrome, in a way (para. 15).

By attempting to understand the actions and motives of a character, the blogger inserts causal links that possibly explain the character's behavior in terms that are familiar to the blogger. A similar inference occurs in regard to an apparent plot hole in the fourth season in which the producers connect vampires to the Spanish Inquisition, but fail to explicitly explain the connection. Trying to understand the link, one blogger offers the following possible explanation (Peterson, 2011a):

> From what Nan said, it definitely sounds like there's a history between the vamps and the witches. I inferred that not only did the vamps have something to do with the Inquisition, but also Salem (para. 87).

These two examples represent causal links that viewers create in order to better understand the story. They draw on their own personal knowledge, as well as their knowledge of the series, to develop possible links that make sense.

When developments in the narrative do not make sense based on the likelihood of their development or their service to the overall story, the bloggers evaluate them for their coherence. Airing in the summer and not following the traditional television calendar that recognizes holidays, *True Blood* confounds expectations in the fourth season finale by setting the episode on Halloween day (Peterson, 2011b):

> **Kendra:** Leather jacket…she's[Sookie] been looking at Bill, I suppose.
> **Amber:** Perhaps it's getting chilly in Bon Temps, you know with it randomly, all of a sudden being autumn and all (para. 83 and 84).

Utilizing Halloween as a plot device proves to be confusing to the bloggers since little to no mention of dates is made in the series. Emphasizing the random nature of setting the episode on Halloween, the bloggers point out that doing so does not match the overall narrative and lacks coherence with the preceding episodes. Since the producers' decision does not follow with their knowledge of the rest of the season, the bloggers dismiss it as a plot device and not something that contributes to the overall narrative.

Incidents that do not contribute to the story are seen by the bloggers as unnecessary and pandering to the frivolous desires of the audience. One such example occurs in the fourth season when Alcide and Eric argue about Sookie and their respective rights to be near her. The whole exchange is viewed as being superfluous to the narrative, with one blogger mocking and complaining about it: "'Fuck you, she wants me here!'

THIS IS FAN SERVICE" (Peterson, 2011a, para. 78). Labeling the event as fan service means that the scene is included in the episode strictly to titillate audiences and does not serve any narrative purpose. By doing so, the blogger degrades the quality of the story and questions the writers' ability to write a coherent script that moves the story forward rather than appeal to the audience's desire for tantalizing content. The bloggers frequently label scenes as fan service, indicating that they are superior to the common audience member who purportedly would want to watch a showdown between Alcide and Eric, or some other scene deemed equally base and useless. By situating themselves as qualified to deem entire scenes and events as fan service, the bloggers establish themselves as being above both the writers for creating such drivel and the audience members who dare enjoy such moments of onscreen fluff.

One final element involved with coherence that I identified in my data involves the number of storylines in the narrative. A common complaint with the bloggers, especially regarding season 4, is the amount of characters and storylines featured, often leading to confusion and unsatisfying conclusions that disrupt the coherence of the narrative. While discussing the season 4 finale, multiple bloggers discuss the hectic nature of the episode, noting that there are "Too many damn storylines this season…the writers are all over the place" (Peterson, 2011b, para. 4). Later in the same blog, another blogger notes that the end of the episode is chaotic: "They're throwing a lot of shit in here last minute. What is Ball thinking? There were already too many storylines this season. Shiiiiiiit" (Peterson, 2011b, para. 238). These comments express the bloggers' frustration with the lack of narrative coherence in the episode, suggesting that the entire season has featured too many characters, much to the detriment of the overall story. This

lack of coherence threatens the quality of the narrative and challenges the producers'
abilities to tell a well-crafted story.

Overall, the bloggers seem less concerned with the probability of the story as they
do with the fidelity and coherence. Expecting certain events based on previous storylines
is commonplace among the bloggers. Determining how the story rings true and makes
sense, however, is what allows the bloggers to deconstruct the story and uncover harmful
representations. These two elements involved with analyzing the series' narrative provide
the bloggers with the opportunity to critically evaluate how the series portrays race, class,
sexual orientation, and other issues, as well as how it is constructed by the producers.

Genre

True Blood's adherence to the gothic vampire subgenre helps audiences make
sense of the series because of its association with other vampire films and television
series. Centering on vampires causes the series to be compared and contrasted with other
texts that audiences perceive to be a part of the same genre, mainly *The Twilight Saga*
and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. These comparisons evaluate the preferred meaning and
narrative probability of *True Blood* as a vampire text, as well as its overall adherence to
the some of the genre's conventions.

In their respective blog articles, Peterson (2009) and Ryan (2009) disagree about
the messages underlying the sexual politics in *True Blood* and *Twilight* because of their
generic similarities. Peterson (2009) refers to *True Blood* as being the latest in "the
genre," inferring that vampires constitute their own autonomous genre, as well challenges
the narrative probability of the texts:

> Sookie frequently finds herself the subject of Bill's wrath while he is trying to
> protect her. In *Twilight*, Edward's penchant for pointing out all the ways in which

he could maid Bell by accident borders on S&M foreplay. This would never have gone down in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*…Perhaps Buffy is a different breed of vampire-fiction heroine: she's the final feminist (para. 2, 4, and 7).

Ryan (2009) challenges this by asserting that Sookie, too, transgresses common conventions found in other vampire texts in the horror genre, and thus does not necessitate comparisons to *Twilight* and other vampire texts: "But, unlike in traditional horror films where virginity equals salvation for the scantily clad heroine Sookie not only lost her virginity and lived—she killed the bad guy" (para. 4). By conflating horror, vampire, and gothic genres, Ryan (2009) situates the series as a rare example of sexual positivity in an extensive pool of negative representations. Both Peterson (2009) and Ryan (2009) utilize their understanding of other vampire stories to understand the series, though the former condemns it as a poor example of the genre and the latter condones it. Therefore, while it does not create consensus among viewers as to the quality of the series, *True Blood*'s adhere to the gothic vampire subgenre does provide them with a framework for understanding the narrative.

Finally, because genre provides a structure for narrative, it is not surprising that the gothic vampire subgenre provides audiences with ways of contextualizing *True Blood*'s narrative in unique ways. While discussing a season 3 episode, one roundtable participant explains that, "many aspects of the show that would read as sexism elsewhere do not bother me as I think the vampire narrative gives them different context" (Peterson, 2010, para. 26). While the participant does not elaborate on which aspects are not sexist, it is clear that one unique element of the gothic vampire genre is that it confounds standards that other genres uphold, including representations of sexist behaviors and ideals. That vampires alter sexist situations, characters, or events indicates that the genre

itself provides a framework for understanding more than just a narrative; it influences understanding of broader social issues that are not necessarily key elements in a narrative.

In this chapter, I analyzed audience interpretations of *True Blood* through the framework of common audience reception theories, including encoding/decoding, pleasure, and the narrative paradigm. Additionally, I identified how the gothic vampire subgenre genre influences and shapes audience interpretations. My findings indicate that audiences with critical perspectives, like Racialicious bloggers, employ oppositional readings most frequently as a way to subvert the meanings of the series and expose problematic representations within it. Viewers also take pleasure in subverting these meanings, often through humor, and most often take issue with the narrative fidelity and coherence of the series, thus frequently comparing the story with their own lives, and providing causal links and assumptions as to the trajectory of the narrative.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

CONCLUSION

This chapter summarizes my study, discusses theoretical and methodological contributions, and explores implications for future research. First, I revisit my research questions about genre, narrative, and audience reception. Second, I discuss my theoretical and methodological contributions that resulted from approaching a media text with these three theoretical perspectives. Third, I examine implications for future research. The goal of this thesis was to examine how *True Blood* adheres to the gothic vampire subgenre, functions as an allegorical narrative, and inspires many different interpretations from viewers.

Findings

The summary of findings is derived from my genre and allegorical narrative analyses of *True Blood*, as well as my analysis of online blogs and articles written about the series. The first research question is answered by my analysis of the series' generic adherence. The second and third research questions are answered by my analysis of the allegorical meanings embedded within the series. The fourth research question is answered by analysis of the different principles of audience reception used by viewers to interpret and understand the series.

RQ1: How does *True Blood* adhere to generic conventions of the gothic vampire subgenre?

True Blood adheres to several of the generic conventions of the gothic vampire subgenre. The substantive elements in the series—themes and issues—are consistent with those of the subgenre. The consistent use of many common themes and issues makes the

series understandable as being part of the gothic vampire subgenre. Where the series strays in its adherence is in regard to two themes, including vampires as heroes who save humans and vampires as survivors of hardships. My knowledge of the entire series gives me the advantage of knowing that these themes, though missing from this study, are present in many episodes not analyzed. This absence is important to note because it indicates that some themes can become conflated, suggesting that the thematic scope of the subgenre needs to be tightened. For example, for a vampire to be cursed with or victimized by vampirism indicates that he or she has indeed survived hardships, even if said hardships are not the focus of the episode. By implying one theme with the presence another, the producers blur the lines between themes, thus preventing a clear distinction between them.

The stylistic elements identified in the series are narrowed down in order to examine the interactional patterns between the characters based on the dialogic pattern of politeness/vulgarity/intensity. This unique approach revealed that common patterns exist for interactions between vampires, between humans, and between vampires and humans. My analysis showed that vampire-human interactions tend to be more polite, more intense, and less vulgar than human-human interactions. Vampire-vampire interactions tend to be less intense and less polite, yet often as vulgar as human-human interactions. These patterns are frequently used to reinforce ideas about gender, race, and socioeconomic status. For example, the human-human pattern is only used by characters who are poor, and sometimes of color, indicating that socioeconomic status and race are associated with vulgarity and impoliteness. Vampire-vampire interactions often follow a

similar pattern, but the vampire context creates alternative explanations for their vulgarity and impoliteness, including the facts that their age has taught them patience, the power dynamics between them are more complex than those between humans, and their use of vulgar language results from extreme circumstances, not just every day conversation. This demonstrates that vampires (all white characters) benefit from a contextual bias created by the producers.

Finally, the situational elements in the series strongly reinforce the social and political underpinnings of the gothic vampire subgenre. Basing the narrative on and around current political and social events (i.e. Hurricane Katrina and the debate over same-sex marriage), the producers convey the situated values and beliefs that are currently shaping social and political discourses across the country. Additionally, *True Blood* represents how vampires can both embody their own culture and adopt other cultures, which is important in understanding how vampires personify the ambivalence people have towards different cultures. Finally, supernatural characters are consistently portrayed as being "Other," and not welcome amongst members of the mainstream. This reinforces the historical roots of the genre by conveying the psychological and social anxieties that occur when the public is faced with having to accept an "Othered" group.

RQ2: What are the allegorical narrative features that adhere in *True Blood*?

True Blood is an allegorical narrative about societal opposition and political oppression. The narrative features that reinforce this allegorical meaning are setting, characters, and plot, as well as the series title and episode titles. A multitude of settings are frequently used to represent social and political issues that affect the characters, including intolerance, consumption, poverty, enlightenment, confinement, death, and

oppression. These settings are powerful in allegorizing these issues because of the breadth and depth of their scope. For example, private places such as homes and public places like hotels and cemeteries are used, as well as geographic locations that are culturally and historically significant like the Deep South. Characters frequently personify the issues that the settings represent. By personifying race, class, and gender issues, the characters reinforce the allegorical meaning of the series with their actions. These actions tend to represent tensions that allegorize issues of power, dominance, and spirituality. The plot provides the framework for these actions to occur within specific settings and combines the series' many storylines into one cohesive narrative. Finally, the contradictory series title indicates that it will negotiate such issues as authenticity and consumption, while the episode titles are representative of the individual allegories in each episode. In these ways, both the series and episode titles reinforce the overall allegory of social control and oppression.

RQ3: How does the narrative of *True Blood* evolve over the course of four seasons?

The narrative of *True Blood* has evolved in four primary ways while still maintaining the overall allegory of oppression and control. First, as the series has progressed, the villains have become more and more central to reinforcing the allegorical meaning. The most recent season's villain, Marnie, completely embodied the symbolic meaning of intolerance, oppression, and control, whereas previous villains contributed to this allegory in more indirect ways. Second, the cast of characters and names listed above the title has greatly increased over the seasons. In fact, in the most recent finale, over two dozen characters were featured in the episode with speaking roles that were relevant to

the plot. This cast inflation has frequently led to chaotic episodes with too many storylines for the producers to address adequately in 50 minute episodes.

Third, this influx of characters has caused the primary characters not to be as central to the series' allegory as they once were. As a result, secondary characters, and sometimes even peripheral characters, significantly contribute to the allegory more frequently than the primary protagonists. A quick comparison between the first season finale and the fourth season finale reveals that the former heavily relied on Sookie to reinforce the allegorical meaning, whereas the latter featured her more often in peripheral storylines that did not rely on her to convey symbolic meaning. Finally, the fourth and final way that the series has evolved is that the later seasons seem to align more with the overall allegory of the series, whereas earlier episodes emphasized smaller, independent allegories that sometimes did not contribute to the primary allegory in any meaningful way. These changes indicate that the series does indeed evolve from season to season, but more importantly that the producers may be trying to unify the episode's allegorical meanings in order to strengthen and reinforce the overall allegory of the series.

RQ4: How do audiences of *True Blood* demonstrate the various principles of audience reception?

Racialicious bloggers utilize multiple methods for interpreting and understanding the meanings of *True Blood*. I identified three primary principles of audience reception in the blogs and articles: encoding-decoding, pleasure, and narrative paradigm. Of these principles, I found that the most frequently employed methods for meaning-making were oppositional readings, pleasure, narrative fidelity, and narrative coherence. The bloggers read *True Blood* in oppositional ways by rejecting the preferred meaning of the series,

questioning its representations of race, gender, and class, and challenging the creative abilities of the producers. The bloggers also clearly experience, and often blatantly express, the pleasure they get from subverting the meanings of the series. In regard to the narrative, the bloggers most frequently discuss how the series does or does not ring true when compared to their own experiences, and they try to understand the series by inferring causal links and inserting possible explanations in order to make the narrative more plausible. A clear theme with these interpretive methods is critique, which is not surprising considering the critical nature of the blog. Even the dominant readings of the series are altered and presented in oppositional or negotiated ways, indicating that the preferred meaning of the series is blatantly obvious to and consistently disregarded by these bloggers.

It is also interesting to note how genre and intertextual references assisted the bloggers in making meaning of the series. Several bloggers relied on their knowledge of other vampire films and television series in order to critique *True Blood*. One blogger even came to the surprising conclusion that the vampire context excuses the series from accusations of sexism, indicating that elements of the gothic vampire subgenre significantly alter viewer perceptions. Additionally, texts like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Twilight* were used frequently to critique and mock *True Blood* which is surprising considering that the former texts are created for young adults and the latter for mature and adult audiences. Only *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* escaped the acerbic assessments of the Racialicious bloggers, indicating that it may be easier for viewers to enjoy vampire-themed television series or films when vampires generally do not assume the role of protagonist.

Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to the literature about genre, narrative, and audience reception theories. Literary and film genres are often applied to television despite the drastic differences between the media, and research about television genre theory is insufficient (Mittell, 2001). By combining applicable elements from literary and film genres, as well as taking into account the uniqueness of the medium, I have demonstrated that a television genre can be built from existing genre theories by exploring the intersectionality of literary, film, and television genres. As a result, I have created the gothic vampire subgenre, a television genre that is specific to the medium. It is unique because it diverges from the Dracula/Byronic prototype from vampire literature, utilizes some common film conventions, and recognizes the shift toward "modern" vampires (Bartlett and Idriceanu, 2006; Kane, 2006; Keyworth, 2002). In this way, I have also expanded one level of meaning for understanding the connection between genre and narrative.

Combining the study of genre and narrative also contributes to the literature about narrative because of the way it examines *True Blood*'s narrative as one from the gothic vampire subgenre. This study demonstrates how narrative is the internal structure of genre that connects generic elements to make a cohesive genre that is recognizable to audiences. By analyzing the series as an allegorical narrative, this study also provides insight into how a narrative can inspire a multiplicity of meanings from audiences. This study also extends narrative theory by analyzing the narrative progression of the series and determining that, as a serial drama, *True Blood* has reached narrative saturation and stagnation. I define this dual term as being the state in which a series that has aired for

several seasons becomes so overloaded with characters and storylines that it fails to progress and make sense. This narrative saturation/stagnation starts to emerge in the third season and is apparent in the fourth season when the narrative is crowded with over two dozen characters and several primary storylines per episode. This concept of narrative saturation/stagnation was corroborated by my analysis of online audience responses to *True Blood*, indicating the importance of studying narrative and audience reception together.

This study also contributes to audience reception theory and Hall's construct that media discourses have polysemic qualities that permit a variety of different interpretations by audiences (Hall, 1980). By analyzing common principles of audience reception research demonstrated by a group of *True Blood*'s audience, I was able to identify how genre and narrative influence the multiplicity of meanings that viewers decode from the series. Specifically, this study showed that narrative does not restrict meanings, but rather allows for various interpretations. The audience responses that I analyzed are important because they provided a glimpse of how the viewers thought and felt about an episode right after it aired, as well as provided insight into how they interpreted the series over time. This insight contributed to my identification of narrative saturation/stagnation. By complaining about the poor narrative coherence and consistency in later seasons due to the excessive amount of characters and storylines, the viewers validated the findings from my allegorical narrative analysis.

Methodological Contributions

This study is also unique in its methodological approach because it combined two theoretical traditions. By utilizing interpretive and critical approaches, I was able to use

multiple analytical frameworks to account for the complexity in audience interpretations. My triangulated method for studying *True Blood* and its audience provided insights that I probably would not have found if I had not conducted generic, narrative, and audience reception analyses in conjunction with one another. Studying one television series through these three lenses has not been done before, and by doing so, this study demonstrates the intersectionality of the three lenses and the value in studying them together.

Future Research

The evolving nature of research provides for the expansion of this project in a few key ways. First, the sample could be expanded to include more than eight episodes; this data increase could potentially provide more nuance to the allegory analyzed here. Future research on the narrative of *True Blood* (allegorical or not) could also benefit from including episodes from the fifth season which is scheduled to air in the summer of 2012. Second, determining the demographics of the bloggers would enhance the methodology of the study and clearly illuminate the complex connections between race, education, gender, age, socioeconomic status and audience interpretations. Although I did not address demographic information in my thesis, future research could explore a similar text that provides more information about its contributors. Third, future studies could include a uses and gratifications approach in order to further explore what gratifications the audience members get out of viewing the series and critiquing it on the Internet. Fourth, blogs with and without critical perspectives could be compared in order to determine how pre-existing viewpoints influence viewers' interpretations and methods of interpretation.

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