

**When Vampires Come out of the Closet:**  
**An Analysis of Southern Values and ways of Dealing with Difference**

Featuring Charlaine Harris' *Southern Vampire Mysteries*

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The Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies 2016

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## Introduction

In 2001, Southern author Charlaine Harris published *Dead Until Dark*, the first book in what would grow to be a thirteen-novel series known as the *Southern Vampire Mysteries*. Continuing the pattern of novels Harris had written before (i.e. the *Aurora Teagarden* books and the *Shakespeare Mysteries*), *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* focuses on a female protagonist—in this case, Sookie Stackhouse—in a deep southern setting. Harris released one Sookie Stackhouse book a year and wrapped up her work in 2013, by which time *True Blood*, the television show inspired by her novels, had become wildly popular. With thirteen million viewers during its peak time, *True Blood* proved to be one of HBO's most popular shows ever, and *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* were certainly Harris' most popular novels thus far, with several reaching the New York Times Bestseller List (Garofalo) (Rich).

Charlaine Harris was born and raised in the Mississippi River Delta, earned her bachelor's degree in English and Communication Arts at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee, lived in Arkansas, and currently resides in Texas. She uses her experience of living all over the mid-south in her *Southern Vampire Mysteries* series when she introduces the new threatening, ostracized social group of vampires into the small, fictional town of Bon Temps in Northern Louisiana. The oppression and judgment that vampires and other supernatural beings meet there resonates historically with the attitude in the south when groups previously judged as inferior fought for rights and power. These periods include the Civil Rights era, woman's suffrage, and the Gay Rights movement, and during each the south was particularly slow to change its ways.

Harris' s series is told from Sookie's point of view, and thus the culture of the south sans the presence of vampires is displayed in the novels as well. It becomes clear that vampires are

not the antagonists of the *Southern Vampire Mysteries* stories—after all, it is often humans committing the murders and other crimes that Sookie works on. Vampires, like humans, have both good and bad in their nature and, like other social groups, have heroes and villains in their midst. Sookie can read the minds of other humans, and of some other supernatural beings as well.\* Therefore she gets a good perspective of what the town of Bon Temps is thinking and is able to act, circumstantially, as a semi-omniscient narrator. Sookie hears, sees, remembers, and even sometimes enacts the southern stance on social justice issues. These include dealings with race, the social other, mixed couples, sexual acts as sinful, biological sex and gender. Sookie has grown up with sexism, racism, religious condemnation of sex, ableism (with her own telepathy judged as a disability by those around her), and the ideal of being “normal” and God-fearing. However, due to her ability to read minds and her autodidacticism from reading novels, Sookie has a larger capacity for acceptance and more of an impulse to try new things than most of those around her. Through Sookie Stackhouse, Charlaine Harris creates a depiction of deep southern culture with all the good and the bad, critiquing the ostracism of certain social groups and the assumed supremacy of straight, white males, while also exalting the earnest, strong and genuine way a young woman from the south can grow up.

In her interview with me, Harris said that she “didn’t want to hit anyone over the head with a heavy message” in her vampire novels, which are often read purely for entertainment. However, the fictional world she constructs in her novels is a mirror of a very real world with real problems, and her writing confronts these problems in a serious and essential way. Behind the exciting entertainment, the romance and sex (amplified to the extreme in HBO’s portrayal of the saga), and the fantastical covers of these books, lies an exceedingly accurate and revealing

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\* Sookie is better at reading human minds, and rarely picks up vampire thought. Other supernatural beings are also more difficult for her to read directly.

reflection on much of life in the American south.\* A reader must only have the courage to open up the floating vampire-bedecked cover of *Dead Until Dark* and delve in to find out.

### **History of the Vampire**

Harris' *Southern Vampire Mysteries* began coming out in 2001, after L.J. Smith's *Vampire Diaries* and before Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight*. While these series are all quite different, they have in common a certain modern take on vampires who are able to live among, restrain from killing, and sometimes even blend in with humans. This is a very different model from the vampires of folklore or, indeed, from the vampires in fiction just over a hundred years before.

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* was released in 1897, bringing vampires into popular British literature and, not long after, into the cinema as star beings in films such as *Nosferatu* (1922), *The Horror of Dracula* (1958), and *Count Dracula* (1970). Fred Botting, author of *Gothic*, claims that Dracula is essentially "a foreigner trying to pass as English" (Botting 150). If this is a true evaluation, then it appears that the time and place Stoker was writing from was possibly even less accepting of foreigners and social others than Harris' modern American South. In *Dracula*, when people find out that Count Dracula is a vampire, "the hunter becomes the hunted, and vice versa, as Dracula is driven out of Western Europe" by an angry male mob of "lawyers and doctors at the centre of late Victorian commercial life" (Botting 151, 147). At the end of the book, Dracula is killed by proper British men, he crumbles to dust, and the innocent woman whose blood he tried to suck is released from his seductive powers. This literary account of how

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\* It is essential to note that the issues dealt with in this paper (racism, ostracism of social others and mixed couples, fear of sex, gender stereotypes, and sexism) are not unique to the southern United States. However, since Harris is writing from a background of living in the south, and setting her novels in the Deep South, it is the purpose of this paper to analyze how these issues are dealt with and ideologies are formed in a particularly southern way.

insecure vampires are when it comes to revealing their identities\* and of the reaction of the masses upon discovering a vampire in their midst is much more in line with the way that vampires have been viewed historically. As most comprehensive encyclopedias of mythology will tell you, vampires are “the evil dead who leave their graves at midnight to ravish the living and suck their blood” (Leeming 391). The *World Book* explains that “Eastern Europe and Balkan countries, such as Albania, Greece, Hungary, and Romania” are places where many vampire tales have their origin, although the stories of vampires eventually reached a worldwide audience (268). In much of Europe, those who had violent deaths, took their own lives, or upset the church to the point of condemnation were said to become vampires. Research was done and books were written about how to find and ‘destroy’ vampires, who were seen as the most violent and elusive of threats to society. Botting claims in his book on gothic literature that the origins of vampires “were explained as fears of Plague, thought, since the Middle Ages, to have emanated from the East” (146).

However, the emergence of works by scholars such as Summers Montague suggested that vampires’ historic and literary presence was far more noteworthy than being a simple stand-in for the plague. Montague (1880-1948) gained a reputation as the world’s greatest expert on vampires, largely because his true belief in the existence of vampires and his passion to track them down and destroy them led him to publishing many informative books on the subject (Joshi 245). The introduction to Montague’s 1928 book, *The Vampire: His Kith and Kin*, opens with the lines: “In all the darkest pages of the malign supernatural there is no more terrible tradition than that of the Vampire, a pariah even among demons. Foul are his ravages; gruesome and seemingly barbaric are the ancient and approved methods by which folk must rid themselves of this hideous pest” (ix). Clearly the feelings Montague wanted to endorse while writing were ones of hatred,

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\* Dracula tries to hide his species.

aversion, and defense against evil creatures in the otherwise good, human community. He goes on to describe the vampire as “one who has led a life of more than ordinary immorality and unbridled wickedness,” and as “a man of foul, gross, and selfish passions” (77). His book continues to detail protective measures humans can take to defend against these evil beings.

Montague’s absolute dismissal of vampires as sub-human aligns with all the elements of speciesism pointed out by Y. Michael Barilan in his “Speciesism as a precondition to justice.” Barilan finds fault with the practice of “paying more respect to human interests and rights... merely because membership in the human species is believed to grant superior moral standing” (22). He suggests that “if we wish to treat humans differently, we must show a morally relevant difference between the human and the animal,” or, in our case, the vampire (22). The question of whether humans are actually more morally advanced and benevolent than vampires is one that Charlaine Harris deals with again and again in *The Southern Vampire Mysteries*, and the conclusion seems pretty clear—that the failings of some vampires are not significantly more horrendous than the failings of some humans.

The way that Harris portrays her urban fantasy world of vampires involves the vampires as worthy of having rights, like any other social group in America and (optimally) in the world. Harris clearly imagined what it would be like if vampires actually did “come out of the coffin” and try to assimilate into society (*Dead Until Dark* 1). This scenario of modern semi-acceptance fits into the sort of new wave literary vampirism that has been so popular amongst teenagers and adults at the turn of the twenty-first century.

An article by Lucy Tobin called “Education: Vampires: a Force for Good or Evil?” reflects on a 2010 conference at Cambridge University in which psychologists, sociologists, and literary scholars discussed the paranormal vampire literary trend and how it was influencing

adolescents. In the conference, Professor Maria Nikolajeva expressed concerns about books “like *Twilight*” teaching “conservative ideology” and patriarchal gender roles to unsuspecting teenagers (Tobin 11). However, there was also a consensus amongst the attendees of the conference that such books could be an “excellent training field for understanding how other people think, feel and act” (11). In the end, Nikolajeva admits to Tobin that the new vampire fiction movement is beneficial, at least in the sense that it is encouraging young people to read. She allows that “if [adolescents] read *Romeo and Juliet* and *Wuthering Heights* because the back covers say ‘Bella’s [*Twilight* protagonist Bella Swan] favourite book,’ then that would be great” (11). Thus the article ends on a positive note looking forward to teenagers exposing themselves to “narratives of highest artistic quality—which *Twilight* books are not” because of their newfound motivation to read (11).

Although the discussion mostly references *Twilight*, the conference was about vampire literature, and other dark fiction styles, as a whole. While it is not the purpose of this paper to speak for every modern vampire book, it is still relevant to reference scholarly views on the genre. Especially when those views are so condescending of books that have elements of the fantastic and portray gender dynamics and sexism in the way that it is still widely practiced in many areas. The *Southern Vampire Mysteries* as a series is more geared towards adult readers, but just like *Twilight*, it deals with vampires, it in many ways portrays conservative, southern values, and it can help teach sympathy and open-mindedness towards a social other. Noting these similarities, it seems that there is a chance that academics like Nikolajeva and her colleagues at the conference may write off the *Southern Vampire Mysteries* as a mere stepping-stone on the way to finding more serious, non-fantastical literature. This line of reasoning is flawed because, despite its use of vampires and its depiction of southern values, Harris’ series is serious literature

that can teach many of the same lessons as realistic and historical fiction. Certainly *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* is not much more troubling for teaching teenagers and other readers than (to use Nikolajeva's example) *Romeo and Juliet*, which, after all, contains horribly stringent patriarchal gender roles and deals with fourteen-year-olds poisoning and stabbing themselves due to the pain of their great love.

After spending time analyzing *The Southern Vampire Mysteries*, it becomes abundantly clear that the books do more than simply teach empathy and encourage reading; they explore distinctive perspectives on life and the tensions of differing beliefs. The protagonist Sookie Stackhouse brings to the novels both her history from being born and raised in a small southern town, and her unique ability to read the minds of those around her. Sookie has never been college-educated or motivated by others with the idea that she can be anything she wants to be, yet still she becomes a heroine during the series based off of her own sympathy and gumption. She also allows readers to gauge social issues through the perspective of a relatively open-minded small-town southerner as well as sometimes providing the perspectives (which she hears through telepathy) of southerners who struggle more with acceptance and modernity.

The *Southern Vampire Mysteries* have a lot to teach about social justice and the southern region. Spanning from the a fictional town in rural Northern Louisiana, to Dallas, Texas, to Jackson, Mississippi and to the sprawling city of New Orleans, Harris provides a wide array of mid- and deep-southern settings in various parts of her saga. While noting their differences, Harris also points out the shared values of these cities in the same region. Conservative, traditional, often out-dated ideas prevail, and this atmosphere makes it extremely tense when groups who threaten the dominant ideology, like vampires, come in. In the article "Mystery writer finds progress in fantasy tales," Ben Steelman describes Harris' choice of vampires

arriving on the public sphere and trying to integrate in the mid-south as progressive. Steelman tells readers that when Harris was deciding what element of shock she could use in writing her series, she thought “what if vampires popped up around us—still a little exotic but as commonplace as, say, Democrats” (1). This thought process provides a good illustration of the region Harris is depicting in *The Southern Vampire Mysteries*—a region where beliefs are rigid and outsiders are not very welcome. When local women begin associating with vampires physically or romantically and deciding their political stance on vampires for themselves, relations become even more agitated.

The history of the vampire from mythology, from literature, and even from the real world (in those times and places when vampires were thought to be more than a myth) always treats the vampire as a vile, devil-like demon with no morals. Just like a real ostracized community in the world today, the vampire community was at first completely unaccepted as equal with the rest of society. Just as people of color used to be enslaved without question and homosexuals used to be condemned in court for improper behaviors, vampires used to be run out of town and staked without any discussion (as in *Dracula*). They represent the threat of a social other, and much like many real-live others, they are seen as sub-human. Charlaine Harris looks at the progression that other social groups have made in the world, even in conservative areas, and applies the development to vampires—fantasy creatures long associated in literature with violence, danger, sensuality, darkness, parasitism, and deceit. Harris’ decision to have the vampires in her books openly admit their existence and identity in hopes of achieving the same rights that humans get is subversive in vampire fiction, unlike *Twilight* or *The Vampire Diaries*, in which supernatural beings still keep their existence a secret. The forthrightness of *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* in making public and focusing directly on the issues of the region in an urban fantasy genre

empowers readers to use analytical skills to discern how similar challenges manifest themselves in the real world around them, and to be more aware of how social differences play out locally in their lives.

## **Race and the Social Other\***

### **The National Level**

Vampires in Charlaine Harris' *Southern Vampire Mysteries* represent the disliked, out-of-favor social group of the day. Harris has said that she wrote her books partly as a metaphor for gays in America, but it seems that the stories cover more marginalized groups than that one, and even comment on a vaster place than just America (Joshi 138). At the beginning of the third book in the series, *Club Dead*, readers are given information on how vampires were treated internationally when they first came out:

Reaction varied sharply, depending on the nation. The vampires in the predominately Islamic nations had fared the worst. You don't even want to know what happened to the undead spokesman in Syria, though perhaps the female vamp in Afghanistan died an even more horrible—and final—death... Some nations—France, Italy, and Germany were the most notable—refused to accept vampires as equal citizens. Many—like Bosnia, Argentina, and most of the African nations—denied any status to the vampires, and declared them fair game for any bounty hunter. But America, England, Mexico, Canada, Japan, Switzerland, and the Scandinavian countries adopted a more tolerant attitude (*Club Dead* 6).

This description of the acceptance or lack thereof of vampires is reflective not only of reactions to homosexuals, but also of the policy on immigrants and refugees. Vampires are no longer

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\* This section is analyzed in part through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT), a “mode that examines the appearance of race and racism across dominant cultural modes of expression” (Brizee, et al). CRT is closely connected to the humanities, and in this case looks at how race is dealt with in historic and modern literature. CRT finds texts to be “proof of the institutionalized inequalities racialized groups and individuals experience every day,” with the unequal distribution of power and rights permeating all aspects of life (Brizee, et al). CRT tries to focus on all groups of color (e.g. Asian American, Latino, Indian, and more in addition to African Americans) in its present approach.

supposed to be predators to humans, because of the invention of Japanese-manufactured bottled blood, also called TrueBlood or Life Flow, so like these other social groups looking for acceptance, vampires are not necessarily out to hurt humans. Still, some countries have very little tolerance for such things as immigrants, homosexuals, refugees, or vampires, while other more liberal-minded countries allow for some rights, but not necessarily equal rights. Harris has grouped America with the more tolerant countries, a decision that could certainly leave room for debate. However, since vampires are accepted in America in this series, Harris makes sure to depict the southern region as particularly rebellious of the national law and unwelcoming towards vampires.

Sookie, who has been born and raised in a small town in Louisiana, begins her narration of the series on the first page of the very first book, *Dead Until Dark*, by saying “Ever since vampires came out of the coffin (as they laughingly put it) two years ago, I’d hoped one would come to Bon Temps. We had all the other minorities in our little town—why not the newest, the legally recognized undead? But rural northern Louisiana wasn’t too tempting to vampires, apparently” (*Dead Until Dark* 1). Sookie is excited to meet someone new, who might think differently than most of the people she knows, but she does not realize the extent to which the rural south is uninviting toward minority groups struggling to lead regular lives (or deaths). In Sookie’s world, vampires have agreed amongst themselves to tell humans that they are simply victims of a virus that made them unable to withstand sunlight, silver or garlic. Sookie learns that this “politically correct theory” is in fact propaganda spread around by the vampire community, who in reality are dead, so that “they can be more easily accepted, as sufferers from a terrible disease” (*Dead Until Dark* 2, 252). Vampires’ attempt to conceal their true nature shows how aware they are of the disgust and resistance they will meet; the more different they are from the

expected norm of humans, the more hated they will be. Thus they even try to make their vampirism seem less fantastical.

Unfortunately, the vampires meet with lots of prejudice no matter how they act. Harris created a group of humans called ‘drainers,’ who subdue vampires and steal their blood because of its capacity to increase sexual potency and boost the immune system (*Dead Until Dark* 6). This type of violence occurs internationally, and vampires face the threat of being drained no matter whether they are benevolent and friendly or dangerous and defiant towards humans. Other anti-vampire groups also emerge, such as the ‘Fellowship of the Sun,’ an extreme religious organization that focuses on getting vampires to ““meet the sun”” either by force or by choice due to their own “terrible remorse, or perhaps ennui, after a long life” (*Living Dead in Dallas* 107). Just like in common mythology, when vampires remain in the sun in *The Southern Vampire Mysteries*, they burn and are completely destroyed. The level of hatred necessary to form a popular group\* whose desire is to kill certain beings or encourage them to commit suicide is reminiscent of groups formed throughout the long history of segregation in the south. In fact, Sookie thinks of the Fellowship as “what the Klan was to African Americans” (104-105). Harris makes it clear that the vampire minority has a universal struggle, all through the world, to try to be treated fairly and to attempt to assimilate. Just as African Americans struggled after emancipation, and homosexuals struggle after coming out, vampires face a grueling and challenging process in revealing themselves and integrating into society, even in the countries that will allow them to reside there and give them legal protection. Harris’ choice of the Deep South as the setting for this social justice conflict underscores the importance of individual

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\* According to Sookie’s narration, the Fellowship is “the fastest growing cult in America” (*Living Dead in Dallas* 105).

people's capacity for following the politically correct laws dealing with vampires, instead of just the way that a country has decided to deal with a group on a grand scale.

### **The Personal Level**

The way that readers get individual perspective in Harris' novels is through Sookie, her own thoughts on and interactions with vampires, and the reactions of her peers about her association with the vampires. The first night that vampire Bill comes into Merlotte's, the bar where Sookie works, at the beginning of *Dead Until Dark*, he orders red wine because Merlotte's is out of synthetic blood. Sookie reflects that she "think[s] he just wanted some company," but sadly he was not welcome by all the customers at the bar (*Dead Until Dark* 16). Drainers lure Bill out to the woods by the parking lot under the pretense of being friendly, and they begin to drain his blood to make a profit. Luckily, Sookie's telepathy clues her into what the drainers were planning; she gets outside in time to save Bill and release him from the silver chains that were used to bind him. After this first display of southern prejudice and hatred, which Civil War veteran Bill must have become accustomed to during his more than a hundred years in the south, Bill and Sookie talk for a while. Bill tells her that "most humans are squeamish about vampires," observing that she does not act as averse as others. Sookie, who has been looked down on and referred to as abnormal and even disabled all her life due to her telepathy, thinks to herself "Who was I to be squeamish about something out of the ordinary?" (*Dead Until Dark* 51). As Tobin indicates, the emergence of vampires in Bon Temps seems to immediately have the effect of making Sookie more empathetic and more "understanding" of "how other people think, feel and act" (Tobin 11). From this point in the series, Sookie begins to become friends with Bill and immerses herself more and more into the world of the supernatural.

However, the other humans in Sookie's community are not very accepting of this alliance. Several violent and sexual murders of women in Bon Temps are blamed on the presence of the vampire in town. When Sookie wonders aloud to Bill who could be committing the crimes, he responds by saying that if a vampire had killed them, they would have been sucked dry of blood rather than strangled. Sookie feels that "just when [she] was beginning to get comfortable with Bill, he'd say something so cold, so vampirey, [that she] had to start all over again" (*Dead Until Dark* 93). Although her nature is to be more open-minded and accepting than those around her, she is still a product of the south in some ways, being brought up to see certain things as normal, accepted and good, and other things as irregular, unnatural and therefore bad or even sinful. Though it is against her upbringing to accept vampire nature, she thinks outside of the narrow box of southern mentality and proposes that the murderer could be "someone who's determined to kill women who've been with vampires," as all the victims had been (93). Even though this ends up being true, and the end of *Dead Until Dark* reveals that the killer is Rene, a bigoted human male who hates vampires interacting with human women, many people in Bon Temps are extremely suspicious of the vampires. When it begins to look like Sookie is not just friends with Bill, but is dating him, peoples' thoughts get even more prejudiced around her. She accompanies Bill to a vampire bar called Fangtasia one night to do some of her own telepathic investigating of the murders. The bar is full of vampires and 'fang-bangers,' or humans who allow vampires to suck their blood and have intercourse with them, and it is full of thoughts about bloodlust and sex, making the bar a strong element of the vampires-as-homosexuals allegory. Of course, the allegory is complicated when Sookie's gay, black co-worker at Merlotte's responds to the news of her going out with Bill by saying "I thought you were going to say you were dating a black, but you've gone one better, ain't you, girl?" (149). It makes

more sense for vampirism to represent, not just homosexuality, but the newest, most hated and feared ostracized group of the time. While liberals will joke about them sympathetically, some conservatives will form groups to suppress them.

Although vampires like Bill Compton try to assimilate to a human lifestyle, “dissociating [themselves] from the vampires and aligning [themselves] with the humans” in times of tension, there are some more threatening vampires that arrive in Bon Temps who Sookie observes “make no real effort at assimilation” (151, 153). Because of this, the local, human men of the town decide to burn down the house where these vampires are known to have retired to their coffins while the sun is out for the day. Sookie is in anguish, not knowing whether Bill went to the house to try to get the aggressive vampires to leave and ended up sleeping there. Despite her state of misery, one of the firemen called onto the scene begins laughing, and joking to his co-worker, observing that they now have “southern fried vampires” (176). Although killing vampires is against the law nationally, most of the law-enforcers whom Sookie encounters in the south personally disagree with the law and are not at all heart-broken when it is disobeyed. Another male official dealing with the law is Sid Matt Lancaster, a lawyer who tells Sookie: “I’m not for this vampire stuff. I think it’s taking a chink out of a wall we should keep built up, a wall between us and the so-called virus infected. I think God intended that wall to be there” (264-265). The fact that Harris wrote down this narrow-minded perspective fifteen years before it became a popular arguing point for a 2016 presidential candidate is both impressive and revelatory of the continued emergence of xenophobic attitudes that have been around for centuries. Again the candid realism of the ways that prejudice is truly enacted come alive in her fantasy books.

In *Living Dead in Dallas* (2002), more writing that mirrors and almost predicts the prejudices of real life in the year 2016 comes forth when Harris has the Fellowship of the Sun commit a mass shooting at a vampire bar. Sookie is present at the shooting, but when she has survived, escaped, and calmed down, she thinks: “The vampires of Dallas and their human friends were now martyrs, which probably suited [the leader of Dallas vampires, Stan] down to the ground. The Dallas Midnight Massacre was being touched in all the newsmagazines as the perfect example of a hate crime” (*Living Dead in Dallas* 218). It is impossible not to think of the tragedy in Orlando when looking back at the passage less than a fortnight after the shooting at a gay bar there. But more than this one event, Harris’ decision to write about burning down houses, planning publicized deaths, committing mass shootings, and murdering friends of the ostracized social group is not a fantasy-induced choice, but a choice based off of centuries of history as well as a lifetime of the author’s own real-life experience living in southern America.

By the time the third book in the series, *Club Dead* (2003), comes to a close, Sookie is losing her nerve about being around vampires. After rescuing Bill from a mansion filled with vampires where he is being held captive in Jackson, Mississippi, with the help of vampire Eric Northman, the powerful owner of Fangtasia, Sookie tells Eric: “I’m through with you all. I’m tired of seeing all this sick stuff. I’m tired of having to be brave, and having to do things that scare me, and having to hang out with the bizarre and the supernatural. I am just a regular person, and I just want to date regular people” (*Club Dead* 245). What Sookie does not seem to realize in this passage is that she is tired, not of vampires in and of themselves, but of the violence and judgment that comes along with associating with a group subject to major social injustice. After a taxing journey to Mississippi to deal with a problem that she feels is not her own (because it does not involve her species), Sookie claims release from the supernatural world.

As the remainder of the series will show, however, vampires are a part of her world now—and even if they were not, it would be impossible for Sookie to escape from the ugliness of bigotry in Bon Temps.

### **Real-Life Ostracism**

In fact, Charlaine Harris says a lot about race and the social other sans vampire references in *The Southern Vampire Mysteries*, addressing the real-life issues of acceptance and equality faced in the south from day to day. Perhaps the first point in the series where race is addressed directly is when Sookie tells readers Mike Spencer’s automatic defense of his local business: apparently he was “always quick and definite in pointing out, anyone who wanted could be buried by Spencer and Sons Funeral Home; but only white people seemed to want to. Likewise, only people of color chose to be buried at Sweet Rest” (*Dead Until Dark* 39). The unspoken rule of continuing segregation long after Jim Crowe days in Bon Temps rings very true as a reflection of much of the south, where there are still neighborhoods, restaurants, shopping districts, and public spaces dominated by mostly one race and often avoided by the others. Harris extends the racial tension in the *Southern Vampire Mysteries* by letting Sookie read into the minds of a pair of police partners, Kenya who arrives at the site of Dawn’s murder\* “thinking she was sorry she’d eaten that extra doughnut that morning at the Nut House because it might come back up and that would shame her as a black woman police officer” and Kevin, who “was hoping [the murderer] wasn’t a black man because that would make his relationship with Kenya even more tense” (80-81). Here Harris gives audiences access to see racial dynamics of the Deep South, not just in social life, but in professional life. The straightforward demonstration of the strained race

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\* Dawn was a waitress with Sookie at Merlotte’s, and was one of the women who was murdered by Rene in *Dead Until Dark* for engaging in sexual activity with a vampire.

relations via Sookie's telepathy allows readers to understand more about social groups in this region of America. White males are competent and likely to succeed unless proven otherwise, and their main discomfort comes from thinking that oppressed groups might find them unfair or blame them of injustice. Women of color, on the other hand, are incompetent unless proven otherwise, and thus Kenya is afraid that if she messes up or shows weakness on a job, she will affirm racist and sexist stereotypes.

Another character that Harris develops who comes from two ostracized social groups is the human Lafayette, who embodies many of the non-vampire social issues in the series. He works as a cook at Merlotte's, where all the servers are strait, white females. According to Sookie, the waitress Dawn (before she was killed) "had never gotten along with Lafayette, whether because he was black or because he was gay, [Sookie] didn't know" (211). The two other waitresses at Merlotte's "just accepted the cook, but didn't go out of their ways to be friendly," but Sookie herself had "always kind of liked Lafayette because he conducted what had to be a tough life with verve and grace" (211). Lafayette becomes a likable and vivacious character in the books and especially on the television show, where he has a larger role, but he is beaten and killed in *Living Dead in Dallas*, the second novel of the series. Sookie finds out that Lafayette was involved in a series of scandalous local orgies with several other Bon Temps residents. But even at these sex parties—which one would assume to be an avenue for acceptance in an otherwise narrow-minded place—Lafayette's intersectional identity as a gay black man led him into danger. Two white male participants began to hurt him and eventually murder him. When they are revealed as the killers, Tom and Mike are accused of hitting Lafayette "because [they] are proud, and his subservience disgusted and excited [them]" (*Living Dead in Dallas* 269). Again, Harris captures the extreme assumption of white, strait male

superiority in the rural south, whether vampires are involved or whether these alpha males are dealing with some other ‘subservient’ group.

### **Mixed Morality**

The great irony behind these displays of racism, which is revealed again and again in *The Southern Vampire Mysteries*, is that it is often thoroughly hypocritical. This hypocrisy can be observed through the relative way that morality is dealt with. Hatred toward Lafayette comes from a racist and homophobic mindset perpetuated by a certain group that wants to amplify its own power and legitimacy by belittling the rights of an outsider group. Although Lafayette is less aggressive and violent than Tom or Mike, never having killed, raped, or purposefully excluded anyone, he is not undisputedly better than them, since there is no one universal moral rulebook to guide their actions. The moral perspectives that Harris includes in her series serve to remind readers that opinions vary and a binary distinction between right and wrong is often impossible. When Tom and Mike assault and murder Lafayette, their reprehensible actions may seem morally acceptable to them because they are trying to preserve their own and their community’s identities. The problem is that these identities are founded in sexist, homophobic, and racist values, making it hard for any audience to support their behavior. However, Harris presents Tom and Mike’s perspective on life along with that of minority characters, sending the message that these men think what they are doing is right and thus an argument for good and bad characters based on morality becomes very complex. Certainly classifying all humans as good and all vampires as bad, or vice versa, is the main example of an oversimplified and inaccurate representation of morality in the world Harris creates. Hatred directed solely towards the

vampires in Harris' books is based on a speciesist sentiment that humans are better than vampires, which is meant to protect the authority of humans in Bon Temps.

When Bill and Sookie first meet, Bill warns her that “Vampires often turn on those who trust them” because they “don't have human values” (*Dead Until Dark* 12). Bill sounds like he is repeating human-made stereotypes verbatim, but Sookie is shrewd enough to not take his warning at face value. She points out that “a lot of humans turn on those who trust them,” too (12). This conversation on the mixed morality of both species, and of every social group, establishes the way that heroes and villains take shape in the rest of the series. It is hard to ascertain any character as completely good, or completely bad, especially when audiences take the time to consider an action or choice from the character's perspective (however contradictory it may be to a reader's own beliefs). The majority of Harris' characters have some elements of both good and bad, like Sookie's grandmother who the narrator claims as her best friend and who always seems to have Sookie's best interests at heart. Gran is very accepting of vampire Bill when he arrives, defying the stereotype that says elderly people have trouble adjusting to new things. However, the sweet old lady is also a long-term, leading member of Bon Temps' club, 'Descendants of the Glorious Dead,' where members get together to remember the soldiers of the Civil War, or “the War of Northern Aggression, as [Gran] always called it” (*Living Dead in Dallas* 24). Clearly, Gran would be seen as terribly offensive by a large number of people, and her ignorance of the message she is sending to African Americans through her ongoing support of the Confederacy is no excuse for her actions. Despite this, it would be impossible to categorize Gran as an antagonist in the series. She is kind and helpful, and she dies fighting the vampire-hating, woman-killer in *Dead Until Dark*.

Gran's murderer (who also killed Dawn and tried his best to kill Sookie) is, incidentally, a non-supernatural man. Lafayette's killers were also ordinary men from Bon Temps. Another human male attempts to rape Sookie in *Living Dead in Dallas*. The couple that tried to drain Bill was human. Sookie's human friend and co-worker, Arlene, turns on her and tries to kill her in *Dead and Gone*. In an equal manner, Sookie encounters many less-than-perfect vampires. Eric Northman takes every chance he can get to touch Sookie and interact with her sexually, even when she asks him not to, then he deceives her into marrying him, even though he soon has to leave her for another woman whom he was promised to. In *Club Dead*, Sookie has to rescue Bill from the mansion of the vampire leader of Mississippi, Russell Edgington. The vampires there are allowing Bill's vampire creator, Lorena, to hold and torture him in the pool house. When Sookie rescues him, Bill himself plays the part of the worst villain. Starved of food and sex, he violently sucks Sookie's blood and forces himself on her in a technical act of rape as soon as they are alone together.

In our interview, I asked Charlaine Harris about her choice of making many humans just as villainous, violent, and sinful as the vampires, whose nature is said to be bestial because it is grounded in bloodlust and sex. In *The Southern Vampire Mysteries*, both species had individuals that were good and evil—and furthermore, many individuals had both good and evil within them.

Harris responded:

That's the way people are. How could I say that people are all on the side of right, when that is so obviously untrue? On the other hand, how could I present vampires as sweet and mild, when their culture is based on murder? Of course every species, race, culture, is a mixture of both (Harris 2).

Harris might have claimed that she did not want to hit her readers over the head with a heavy message, but it seems that defying the still prominent misconception that some beings are more deserving of rights and privileges than others is indeed a very intense message to take on in an

urban fantasy series about vampires. Throughout the thirteen books, Sookie interacts with social minorities, confronts issues of race and othering, and ultimately grows into a more knowledgeable person because of it.

### **Mixed Couples**

Charlaine Harris chose Sookie Stackhouse, a white, well-meaning, young woman who at first seems fairly unthreatening to the dominant ideology of the south (even with her mind-reading capabilities), to be the protagonist and narrator of *The Southern Vampire Mysteries*. At the beginning of the saga, it appears that the outsiders and threats to the community of Bon Temps are the vampires, and to a lesser extent people of color or members of the LGBTQ community. Even the violent white males who commit crimes are identified as hazards to the community eventually. However, Sookie takes on a new identity when she begins to date Bill, and then dates many other supernatural beings throughout the series, and she becomes part of the biggest danger of all to the mid-south. Law-abiding, churchgoing Sookie Stackhouse becomes part of a mixed couple.

Mixed couples of vampires and humans in Harris' series are treated in many of the ways that inter-racial couples, same-sex couples, and couples from different religious backgrounds\* are treated in history and up until the present day in the south<sup>+</sup>. In fact, perhaps the biggest external conflict in *Dead Until Dark* is that someone is murdering women who have had sexual

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\* For instance Muslims or Catholics dating and planning to marry a partner with a different religion.

<sup>+</sup> It is important to note that these types of couples experience difficulties throughout the United States, and the rest of the world, making treatment of mixed couples not solely a southern problem. However, Harris' books and this paper both focus on southern culture, society, ideologies, and reactions. This is how a southern author chose to represent a social issue in the specific setting of the Deep South, and it is thus analyzed as such.

relations with vampires, and this violence resembles news of Muslim women being killed (even by their families) for attempting to marry non-Muslim men, and to histories of white and black couples in the Jim Crow South. Throughout history, when social groups have been identified and find themselves in America, trying to integrate, one of the first outcomes is the mixing of cultures or races through sexual and romantic relationships. Harris decides to portray the hostility that mixed couples meet using her allegorical ostracized group, the vampires.

Early in *Dead Until Dark*, even Sookie is a bit astounded by the idea that she could date a vampire. When she realizes that her Gran thinks Bill is her date for an event they are all going to together, it “ma[kes] [her] feel a little odd,” because “Gran [i]s so desperate for [Sookie] to have a social life that even a vampire [i]s eligible for [her] attention” and she “ha[s] some feelings that back up that idea” (*Dead Until Dark* 44). She automatically wonders whether vampires can “even do it [have intercourse] like humans” (44). She still feels like it is unnatural to think of humans and vampires combining into a couple, which is a typical effect of the popular deep-southern stance in sex education claiming that romance and sex should be primarily for procreation, to give back to God.

In spite of Sookie’s uneasiness when confronted with the possibility of inter-species dating, she cannot help the strong attraction she feels towards Bill. When she is driving back home with him after he escorted her to the vampire bar, Fangtasia, the two pull over and let their passion for each other take its course. They are interrupted before long when a police car pulls up next to them, and a policeman steps up to their window. They break apart quickly and Sookie feels a little nervous, knowing that “though most police forces loved having vampires join them on the job, there was a lot of prejudice against vampires on the street, especially as part of a mixed couple” (112). In *The Southern Vampire Mysteries*, vampires’ fangs come out when they

become sexually aroused, and this has happened to Bill in the car. He is forced to carefully keep his mouth closed over his fangs while the cop talks to Sookie, hiding his identity because he knows it will get them both into trouble. Even though vampire-human relationships are not against the law in America, they are so distasteful to the majority of the public in the rural south that they might as well be. Sookie faces the choice of hiding her relationship and never living honestly, or of being hated and possibly harmed (or killed) for her romantic choices. In the best case scenario, she and Bill could happily be outsiders, defiant of southern tradition, together. However, even this ideal ignores some of the practical problems engendered by the extremely different natures of the social groups they come from.

During some increasingly rare alone time in *Dead Until Dark*, Sookie reflects on the development of her relationship with Bill:

For the first time the flaws in my relationship with the vampire hopped out of their own hidey-hole and took over my brain. I would never see Bill in the sunlight. I would never fix his breakfast, never meet him for lunch... I could never have a child by Bill ... I'd never call Bill at the office to ask him to stop on the way home for some milk. He'd never join the Rotary, or give a career speech at the high school, or coach Little League Baseball. He'd never go to church with me. (161)

In this passage, Sookie recognizes problems that seem to not come from society's disapproval, but from the personality and nature of Bill and Sookie themselves. However, the things that Sookie wants that Bill cannot give her are very socialized activities and values, which inherently exclude social others and outsiders, and tend to dehumanize them further. Bill cannot help that he must always retire to a coffin during the daytime, but fixing this time disparity would require Sookie to completely reverse her sleep schedule in order to be with him throughout the night. Sookie also seems to want someone involved in the community, who could make a family with her, and definitely someone who could share in her religion. Again, these issues mirror the

problems that real-life mixed couples often encounter: Muslims and Catholics are not supposed to have children with people who do not share their religion, and they would certainly be upset if their partner did not share their faith enough to attend religious ceremonies with them.

Furthermore, the idealistically described southern small-town white woman's dream of having a husband who coaches soccer and gives career speeches might not be so easily realized if she were to marry a black, Middle-Eastern, or Hispanic man. If someone like Sookie were to marry a woman, of course, children would be out of the question, and involvement in the community would again be tense.

Harris recognized the repercussions that would come with allowing her beloved protagonist to be involved with Bill, and later with vampire Eric Northman, werewolf Alcide Herveaux, and were-tiger John Quinn. When Sookie's boss, Sam Merlotte, tells her she "has no future with [Bill]" and that he hates "to see [her] take a wrong turn," his words are both unpleasant and somewhat true (125, 126). After all, the vampires at least will live forever, never aging, and Sookie will eventually grow old and die.\* Not to mention that marriage between vampires and humans is illegal in America, as it probably would be between humans and were-people if their existence had been publicized. The law might not be able to stop serious, long-term relationships of mixed couples from happening, but just like it did for so long with same-sex marriage in the real world, it can outlaw a legal union. However, even with all of the known consequences and professed futility of Sookie's circumstances, Harris wanted to portray the reality of integration. 'Forbidden' romances are a very real, sensitive subject in a world where community values, religious beliefs, laws, and unofficial social rules try to govern peoples' feelings. Sookie admits to readers in *Club Dead* that she "had never supposed [her] romance

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\* Later in the series, it is revealed that Sookie is 1/8 fairy, and this is how she acquired her telepathy. This also means she will age more slowly and live a little longer than most humans, but she is still mostly human herself and is definitely mortal.

[with Bill] would go smoothly” because “it was an interspecies relationship, after all” (*Club Dead* 119). However, even while her reason was alerting her of the sad truth that their relationship would have to be finite, when he was gone, she felt an “aching chasm” that she “hadn’t ever imagined” (119). Harris makes it clear that Sookie has indeed fallen in love, and found true love, even if it was not the safest, easiest, conventional thing to do, and even if it did not last. Many of her loving relationships in *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* were irrational, as many mixed romantic relationships often are outside of the fantasy world.

Harris confronts readers with the reality that, even with the presence of extreme passion, forbidden love might not be able to last in the south because there is simply too much adversity and difference keeping the couple apart. The traditionalist tendency for white families to keep the social other from entering their lineage through marriage or reproduction motivates resistance towards mixed couples. This idea of keeping the gene pool free of any people of color, foreigners, homosexuals, and non-Christians pervades history as well as literature. *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* takes the threat to the next level by posing the fantastical social issue of vampires being perceived in the south as beings who want to live in human communities, to ‘corrupt’ young women (and men) with passionate sexual practices, and to steal away the futures of those humans who fall in love with them.

### **Sex as Taboo**

Sex permeates the covers of the *True Blood* seasons, causing *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* to be immediately associated with sex and promiscuity. The presence of sex in television and literature can help attract audiences and amplify the excitement of the story being told because it allows readers and viewers to gain intimacy with a subject that they may feel is

off-limits in real life. But more than that, Harris' choice to make her books mildly pornographic openly confronts the southern discomfort with sex, and the problems that arise from teaching that sexual curiosity, experimentation, and intercourse are taboo and sinful.

While the unspoken rule in places like Bon Temps seems to be that sex should be between man and wife, for reproduction, and should be very private and standard without any creative trials of the straightforward activity, it seems that this kind of intercourse is rarely found in *The Southern Vampire Mysteries*. This is largely attributed to the presence of vampires, who are blamed for bringing out the sinful and sexual nature of any community they move into. In some cases, it does make sense to classify vampires as hyper-sexual beings. After all, their blood increases human sexual prowess and they are allegedly naturally better at performing than humans are. The vampires in Harris' series are also very open about their desires and their practices. They encourage "men and women" called fangbangers to "hang around with vampires and enjoy being bitten" (*Dead Until Dark* 22). This is seen as a real threat to society because many people spread and believe the rumors that fangbangers "want to be bitten too much, and sooner or later they get that one bite too many," and given the knowledge readers have of how vampires certainly *can* be villainous (just as humans can), it is probably sometimes true (22).

Jason, Sookie's older brother, certainly believes in the dangers of sharing a bed with a member of the undead. Knowing the news will shock Gran and Sookie, he tells them that there is a prostitute "in Monroe [who] specializes in vampires," and that "she keeps a guy standing by with a stake in case one gets carried away" (23). In *The Southern Vampire Mysteries*, for vampires, biting and sucking blood during intercourse is a catalyst for the most optimal orgasm. It is also a blatant reminder of the dangers of open-minded, unashamed sex that vampires are introducing—this new way of physical interaction has the capacity to tear to shreds and swallow

up the traditionalist, modest, Christian way of dealing with sexuality that has consistently been taught in the south. When Sookie travels with Bill to Fangtasia in *Dead Until Dark*, she witnesses several human fangbangers come up to Bill and ask him if he would like to suck their blood. Sookie's upbringing of considering sex as taboo (especially in public places) causes a feeling of "disgust" to come over her as she realized that "these people, men and women, wanted to be intimate with a vampire, and they weren't shy about it" (104-105). Sookie's disgust comes from years of hearing that offering sex openly and being unashamed of sexual desires is wrong or unnatural, as well as from her own lack of experience with any sort of sexual experimentation. This is similar to her occasional disgust for vampire nature (i.e. vampires' frequent violence and forthright habits), which comes from hearing others continually saying that it is wrong and abnormal, as well as from her total lack of exposure to vampires until she is twenty-five. However, disgust is still not the main emotion that Sookie feels when she thinks about sex and Bill. In fact, when she meets him, he becomes the only person she has really wanted sexually in her whole life. He creates a new longing inside of her that she has not felt before, and she begins to understand sex as something that is not so sinful at all, but rather something beautiful.

### **Sex as a Learned Behavior**

Bill Compton's ability to introduce new feelings and ideas about sex into Sookie's head addresses the pervasive southern fear that social outsiders will come into a community and teach unguarded, exploratory sex that is supposed to be for pleasure (and not for reproduction). Before any vampires came to Bon Temps, Sookie was a virgin\* who used terms like "bottom" and "beddable man," which showed her innocence and aversion to explicit sexuality (*Dead Until Dark* 14, 25). She grew up being warned against "many childhood taboos about the night and the

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\* Because she was always turned off from human men due to the fact that she could read their thoughts.

darkness and things that went bump,” which for a pretty young woman just as surely referred to sex as it did violence (91). However, when Bill, Eric, and other supernatural beings suddenly arrive in her life, Sookie’s innocence does not last long. When Bill kisses her, her “breathing speed[s] up, and [she] begin[s] to want other things to happen” (58). Though she has had the opportunity, Sookie has never wanted ‘other things to happen’ with any man before, making Sookie’s experience a prime example of sexual desire as a learned behavior, brought to Bon Temps by an outsider group.

Soon, other things do indeed begin to happen as Harris writes the first of several sex scenes in *The Southern Vampire Mysteries*: Sookie tells Bill “I don’t know much,” and he replies “don’t worry. I know a lot,” just before “his hands beg[in] drifting over [her], touching [her] in places [she has] never been touched” (144). Sookie feels pain and pleasure as she moves from innocence to experience, but does not feel shame about her body or her desires, which is more characteristic of the vampiric stance on sexuality than the rural southern, human one. Charlaine Harris made vampires a kind of foil for the conservative southerners who view pleasurable sex as taboo. In *Club Dead*, Sookie realizes that “vampires seem, as a whole, to be extremely tolerant of any sexual preference,” attributing this to the fact that “there aren’t that many taboos when you’ve been alive a few hundred years” (*Club Dead* 182). Harris backed this view up in our interview, explaining vampire’s tolerance of sex based on their years and years of getting used to it, getting comfortable with it, and finding joy in it. It seems implied that those who are afraid of and even disgusted by experimental sex are exposed to it in a certain state of ignorance. Even after Sookie has been in a sexual relationship with Bill for a while, she becomes “suddenly disgusted with [her]self” in *Club Dead* when she reflects that she has “had thoughts

about Alcide, and more than thoughts about Eric” while she was in a relationship with Bill\* (191). She speculates that perhaps hanging around with vampires too much has influenced her to have bad morals, but really her morals are not bad, she has just gained a level of experience that now causes her to see the world in more than one way. Sookie becomes more curious and more open to her sexuality during the novels, just as she becomes more interested in and sympathetic with the lives of other people, living in different social groups with different circumstances than the ones with which she is familiar. Sex for Sookie is a new avenue for open-mindedness, which in a large way is what her journey is all about.

### **The Mixed Morality of Sex for Both Vampires and Humans**

Looking more closely at *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* reveals that vampires did not need to come to Bon Temps for Sookie to encounter people who were interested in unconventional sex for pleasure, sex associated with violence, and sex that could prove extremely dangerous for women like her. In fact, the fear of the social other exposing innocent women in the good, southern town to deviant sexual practices and teaching them sin is demonstrated by Harris to be unfounded, ridiculous, and overtly hypocritical. In *Dead Until Dark*, it is a human murderer who is killing and raping the corpses of women who have slept with vampires, and in *Living Dead in Dallas* it is humans who host an orgy. Yet when Sookie encounters three wild vampires with no wish to assimilate near the beginning of *Dead Until Dark*, she feels “sick” at their flamboyant display of sexuality while she is present (*Dead Until Dark* 66). It should become more apparent to Sookie that vampires are not the only ones that engage in perverted, or even in non-traditional sex. After Sookie found her co-worker Dawn’s

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\* Noting that Bill’s unfaithfulness to Sookie earlier in *Club Dead*, when he secretly left her for a sexual relationship with his maker, Lorena, was “no excuse” for her unfaithfulness.

murdered body, a local young man and neighbor of Dawn tells Sookie that Dawn ““liked men to—like, bite and hit her”” (79). Sookie herself has a “funny uncle,” or “an adult male relative who molests... the children in the family,” and this uncle used to touch her as a little girl (158). Sookie’s brother Jason responds to this scarring fact by telling Sookie to ““get over it”” (164). Sookie encounters the threat of rape from a human male a second time in *Living Dead in Dallas* when she is captured in a basement of a church by the Fellowship of the Sun, and the human guard, Gabe, attacks her. Before Gabe can penetrate Sookie, the vampire, Godfrey, who is also in the underground cell, kills him. Thus the hypocrisy of thinking that unorthodox sex for pleasure is only a desire learned from vampires is revealed. After all, orgies and BDSM are not standard procedure used primarily for reproduction. Even more importantly, the absolute hypocrisy of thinking that only vampire sex can be violent, malicious, and perverted is a message impossible to ignore when analyzing *The Southern Vampire Mysteries*.

However, to make things even more complicated, Harris did not allow readers to cast Gabe the rapist as the villain and Godfrey the savior as the hero in such a neat binary. Godfrey is a vampire who has joined the Fellowship of the Sun of his own freewill in preparation to take his own life because ““he is a child molester and a serial killer, so many times over you couldn’t even count”” (*Living Dead in Dallas* 170). Godfrey could not stop engaging in sexual activities with children and draining them of blood before he joined the Fellowship, and when Sookie learns this, even though she is intensely grateful to him for saving her from rape, she knows that it would be wrong to release him back into the world.

Again, readers are faced with the mixed morality inherent in *The Southern Vampire Mysteries*, this time through the avenue of sex. First of all, Godfrey has elements of both good and bad within him. Secondly, humans engage in both mutually beneficial sex—done

consensually, with respect—and harmful sex— which is forced on others, and includes unwanted violence. In the same vein, there are some vampires in the series who are not respectful or kind in their sexual relations, but this certainly does not mean that all of the species are violent, sexual deviants who cannot be trusted. Lastly, sex itself is not in general good or bad. It is not inherently sinful, although the ways that some individuals (regardless of species, race, class, gender, etc.) choose to practice it can sometimes make it more or less so. When Sookie goes to the human orgy in *Bon Temps*, for instance, she thinks to herself: “this was the most joyless excuse for sex I had ever seen: sex separated from mind and spirit, from love or affection” (257). Looking back to Harris’ announced intent to use her books to represent the experience of coming out as a member of the LGBTQ community, it seems that Sookie is capturing a very important message here, which might be subversive to popular ideology in much of the south. Sex itself should not be taboo, because it can be beautiful—regardless of who is doing it together and how—as long as there is a shared and communicated feeling of pleasure, love, like, respect, or fulfillment that is driving the act.

### **Biological Sex and Gender Roles\***

In many ways, vampires seem to have brought a call for open-mindedness into the south and into Sookie’s life in Charlaine Harris’ books. In the case of overcoming sexism, however, Sookie is left more to her own devices as she develops and strengthens through the course of the novels.

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\* This section of analysis relies on the school of Feminist Criticism (FC), which dates from the 1960’s and looks at the inherent issues of male power at play in literature. Within FC is the idea that “in every domain where patriarchy reigns [arguably all of Western civilization], woman is other: she is marginalized, defined by her difference from male norms and values” (Brizee, et al). The goal of FC is to point out the injustices found in literature in order to move towards gender equality and work within the parameters of Third Wave Feminism, which posits that no traits are inherently male or female, so that individuals with different genitalia can claim equal amounts of power, responsibility, compassion, etc.

## Female Entrapment in the Body

One of the main tropes that Sookie must surmount as a female protagonist is the literary motif of women being trapped in and obsessed with their own bodies, and much less capable of transcending those bodies than many male characters are. This entrapment in the body is not so much a literal, physical impediment, but is actually a mental one; females feel reliant on their bodies due to social understandings of femininity and socialized principles of their gender (Hurley 119). Sookie exemplifies her lived problem of feeling tied to her body—specifically her attractive, sexualized body—to be a worthy woman and to achieve whatever power she can. At the very beginning of book one, when Sookie is explaining her telepathy to readers, she justifies why she does not “get out” on dates much: “it’s not because I’m not pretty. I am. I’m blond and blue-eyed and twenty-five, and my legs are strong and my bosom is substantial, and I have a waspy waistline. I look good in the warm-weather waitress outfit Sam picked for us” (*Dead Until Dark* 1). She makes sure the audience knows that it is a mental reason, and not a physical reason, that has kept her from succeeding in finding romance thus far, because like many modern women, she is taught to be defensive about her appearance as one of her most important traits. Thus Harris sets up the problem of physical appearance and outward beauty in the very first pages, while also informing readers that Sookie is more attractive than the average woman.

Sookie’s gift of being physically beautiful leads to the most predominant way that Harris demonstrates Sookie’s entrapment in the socialized femininity that focuses on her body. Throughout the *Southern Vampire Mysteries*, there are constant scenes of Sookie primping when she is getting ready to go out or to encounter a male. When she prepares to go to Fangtasia with Bill in *Dead Until Dark*, Sookie’s “tan glowed and [her] boobs showed. [She] wore red enamel

earrings and red high-heeled screw-me shoes. [She] had a little red straw purse. [She] put on light makeup and wore [her] wavy hair loose down [her] back” (97). She has worked hard to look good, and especially to look good in the eyes of a male, who would want to see her breasts and would prefer her hair down (even though she is more comfortable with it up). But Sookie seems to feel accomplished when Bill sees her and she gets “the tribute of a moment of stunned silence” (98). She continues to do a lot for male attention in *Living Dead in Dallas* when she dresses up in a sexualizing outfit for a trip with Bill to please him, or when she primps herself after being injured before he can see her body in such an imperfect state (25, 44-45). In *Club Dead*, she gets her hair and makeup done professionally and dresses up in fancy, revealing dresses to go to the supernatural club in Mississippi with Alcide, at one point contemplating whether she should mess up her outfit with a coat or “freeze [her] butt off” to look better (*Club Dead* 157).

It is hard to blame Sookie for her materialistic, superficial fixation on her appearance and her sexual desirability. Because she has always been able to read the minds of the men around her, she knows that a lot of times what men\* are thinking is about whether ““you dye your hair, or...that your butt’s not pretty, or... what your boobs look like”” (*Dead Until Dark* 33). This is not to say that men are never objectified in the south as well, but when Sookie cites JB DuRone, the main male figure who has a great body but no brains, he is definitely the exception and not the rule. Most males are acknowledged for their position of power, their interesting past, and their personality before their looks, and Harris chooses to portray—via Sookie’s telepathy—that females are not judged equally.

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\* Like those she had occasionally tried to date before any vampires arrived in Bon Temps.

Harris emphasizes the way that males view the female body in each book. In *Dead Until Dark*, when Bill sees Sookie wearing something revealing, he says “it’s hard to get used to young ladies with so few clothes on” (55). His paternalistic diction might come from his old-fashioned sensibilities (having been raised before the Civil War), but it is objectifying, controlling, and hypocritical in this context, especially when Sookie later lets readers know that Bill “would want [her] to dress up a little” and “look extra pretty” when they go out together (*Living Dead in Dallas* 23). There is definitely a recurring double-standard in *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* of men not liking their women to dress scantily or act promiscuously, but still enjoying the benefits when women do open up sexually. Further on in *Living Dead in Dallas*, Sookie has just escaped the Fellowship of the Sun after Gabe attempted to rape her, and though she is trying to find Bill, whom she is still dating, vampire Eric Northman finds her first. Eric is helping Bill and Sookie in Dallas, so he takes Sookie to her hotel room to begin fixing her very serious wounds. Sookie is feeling dirty, tired, and rather disgusting from all the blood and sweat. Eric apparently picks up on her mood and says “I’ll bet you are a treat naked,” which Sookie interprets as a kind way “to boost [her] spirits,” and she responds “You know it. I’m just as tasty as a big éclair” (186). Perhaps this could be read as playful flirting by an audience looking to be entertained and excited about sexual tension, but it is in fact sexual harassment, no matter how easily Sookie responded. Sookie has not even recovered from the shock of almost being raped, and she is in the company of a man who has consistently made her feel ill at ease while trying to have sexual encounters with her, even though she is dating Bill. The fact that she can take a compliment from him about his desire for her naked body with appreciation, and that readers are entertained by this is in itself a way of critiquing the problems of female entrapment in the body. Sookie is not just a big dessert, waiting to pleasure men, and willing to be bitten, squeezed, and

squashed to sate their appetites, yet something about the way she views the world tells her to play along with this role assignment.

*Club Dead* is certainly a peak for Sookie's giving into playing the role of an object—in her case a sexualized body—that can be pleasing for males. When she enters the supernatural club with Alcide, someone “thought [she] looked like a high-priced whore, but [she] decided that was a compliment, at least for the night” (*Club Dead* 88-89). When Sookie narrates with playful sentences like this, she seems to demean herself and her own sex. In these cases, although Sookie is the protagonist of the story, she is being used by Harris to demonstrate a problem rather than a solution. Readers cannot always rely on the direct words of a text—even when narrated by the hero or heroine—to preach lessons verbatim, but must be smart and discerning. This allows audiences to differentiate between passages that suggest positive ideas and passages that illustrate what is wrong—what needs to be investigated and changed in the world around us—as the above excerpt does by alluding to the degrading way many women view themselves based on appearances. On Sookie's second visit to Club Dead, she runs into a high school friend and is persuaded to participate in a sexual dance routine that they had learned from MTV as teenagers. When Sookie describes the scene, she says: “I assume the rise of communal lust I felt in Josephine's that night was similar [to a stripper bar]. I didn't like being the object of it—but yet, I discovered I felt a certain flood of power...In a perverse way, we were having an ‘I am woman, hear me roar’ moment” (166). This scene is an earnest reflection of how it feels for Sookie to be a southern woman acting out the learned idea that she needs to sexualize her body to feel powerful, and being proud about it because it enables her to become the center of attention—the leader of a group of men—for a short while. This is a reality that Harris brings to the forefront of her books, but it is by no means something that she advocates for. This becomes apparent when

Harris gives Sookie so many beautiful opportunities to have ‘I am woman [or even ‘I am Sookie’], hear me roar’ moments at other points in the series.

But still, Sookie must face her own bodily entrapment and realize how she has enabled it before she can develop further into an opponent of reactionary sexism. Sookie has somewhat of an epiphany at the end of *Club Dead*, when she is back at home in Bon Temps, severely injured from supernatural violence. A female vampire co-owner of Fangtasia with Eric, named Pam, has come by to help Sookie out and Sookie learns that Eric and Bill are about to stop by. Although her injuries nearly prevent it, Sookie gets up to primp yet again, but in front of the mirror she begins thinking:

There was no point putting on makeup over the bruises. There was no way I could cover them. In fact, I wonder why I’d gotten up from the couch to put myself through this much pain. I looked in the mirror and told myself I was an idiot to make any preparation for their arrival. I was just plain primping. Given my overall misery (mental and physical), my behavior was ridiculous. I was sorry I had felt the impulse, and even sorrier Pam had witnessed it (285).

In our interview, Harris notes that “Sookie is southern enough to wear makeup every day, and to try to look her best in public,” but that sometimes that can be “like trying to be something you are not.” She asserts that Sookie should not “have to try to prettify her wounds,” but rather “she can stand up to them, even display them” (Harris 4). Sookie herself realizes the truth of this in the above passage, and she begins to feel shame that she has been playing the role of a gorgeous, delicate plaything or pleasure object during the course of a series that is about her. The falsity of social understandings of femininity as body- and aesthetic- centric are revealed when Harris repeatedly tells of other amazing, heroic things a female can do. Analytical readers will know that the imperfect, torn skin that Sookie wants to conceal with makeup is a sign of her fight to grow and develop and experience new, dangerous people and ideas in a region where pretty,

working-class girls like her are held back from such adventures. But while southern gender roles—which usually remain old-fashioned and traditional—may try to hold her back, this passage is a huge example for Sookie beginning to reclaim her place as heroine of the novels, and to reclaim agency of her own life.

### **Expected Gender Roles in the South**

The southern gender roles in question are included in *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* in many ways that do not just involve girls and women feeling entrapped in the body, but that demonstrate the expected dynamic between males and females. Harris depicts this relationship as one that is still very sexist in the Deep South, and since she has grown up all over the region, it is fair to say that she is somewhat of an expert on how gender roles manifest themselves day-to-day. From Portia, the successful local female lawyer who was depressed because she “was educated and made good money, but never had a date” to Arelen’s little boy, Coby, who defensively and threateningly tells Sookie that her ““special friend,”” meaning Bill, ““better be nice to [her],”” men take on a leadership role, in charge of protecting and initiating or terminating romantic relationships, while women are supposed to wait until men give the command and serve their will (*Dead Until Dark* 216, 234).

Sookie herself faces a lot of judgment due to her social status, telling readers: “possibly, I don’t look very bright. But I think it’s more that people (and vampires) assume that if you’re pretty and blond and have a low-paying job, you are ipso facto dumb” (*Living Dead in Dallas* 84). It is interesting that this type of discrimination does not rely on race or species—Sookie is a white, human (as far as anyone knows), local of Bon Temps, and yet she is still written off and not treated equally due to her biological sex. After Sookie and Jason’s Gran dies, the two siblings

only have each other as family, so when Jason comes by the house that Sookie now owns at lunchtime, she feels bad knowing that “Gran would have had a huge meal on the table” (219). Sookie gets by serving him “meatloaf sandwiches and potato salad (though [she] didn’t tell him it was from the store),” but she seems to feel as if she is not upholding some agreed upon duty—namely, the standard, southern feminine duty of providing a hot meal and a clean house for working males.

This exaggerated role of housewife for women is again illustrated in *Club Dead* when Alcide first comes to Sookie’s house preparing to be her protective escort for her trip to Mississippi, and she offers him something to eat. Sookie, mixed up in the supernatural so much lately, imagines that “this was the way life was supposed to be, for normal people. It was morning, time to get up and work, time for a woman to cook breakfast for a man, if he had to go out and earn. This big rough man was eating real food. He almost certainly had a pickup truck sitting out in front of [her] house” (*Club Dead* 58). As Alcide finishes and the two begin to talk about their trip, Sookie thinks of him as “a proper man” because of his large muscles and his capacity to grow facial hair extremely quickly (58). When Sam Merlotte, Sookie’s boss, calls and expresses his worry and fear for Sookie going to Mississippi to treat with vampires by herself, Alcide suggests that Sookie should “tell [Sam] a man’s going with [her],” as if that will make up for any fear of danger (64). Sookie is used to a paternalistic environment, and she has not been exposed to much feminist thought through education. However, Sookie becomes an empowered woman through experience, in a more free and real way than many who have studied feminism but still become subject to taking on the role of a server and pleaser of men. Her vision of a female as a wife or sister who stays at home to cook hardy meals for the men, who are workers and protectors and doers, becomes completely subverted due to Sookie’s larger role in

*The Southern Vampire Mysteries*. What she was taught about being a lady in the south is one thing, and the person she becomes through her circumstances and actions is another—Sookie is not just a wife or a girlfriend or a server, she is a heroine and a savior, and she grows stronger in her own identity with every book.

### **Role of Savior**

*The Southern Vampire Mysteries* series, being about murder mysteries and supernatural beings, provides many occasions for violence and for life-threatening situations in which people either die or are saved. Although other characters save Sookie from time to time, she is often able to save herself and she is the main character that helps others out of the danger they are in. Revisiting the scene at the very beginning of *Dead Until Dark* when Sookie rescues Bill from the drainers in the parking lot, Bill at first says thank you rather grudgingly, and Sookie thinks to herself that “he wasn’t thrilled about being rescued by a woman,” which is “typical guy” behavior (*Dead Until Dark* 11). This sets the standard for the rest of the series, as males are consistently resistant to let females take their place as rescuers and protectors. When Sookie is working one night and serves a man at Merlotte’s who slides his hand up her shorts to molest her casually, Rene\* grabs the offender’s wrist and tells him to leave the bar. Sookie tells Rene that he should have let her handle it, but ends up thanking him anyways, giving into the roles that Bon Temps has dictated men and women should have when a threat comes into town (42). The real threat is actually Rene himself, though, and having the villain of the novel be the one to act out these patriarchal gender roles, which Sookie is already resistant to, emphasizes their negative presence and illegitimacy in a modern setting. Sookie handles the most dangerous, action-filled

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\* Rene, of course, later turns out to be the murderer of women in *Dead Until Dark*.

part of *Dead Until Dark* on her own when Rene chases her through Bon Temps' graveyard in an attempt to murder her and she is able to overcome him physically, knocking him out with the help of her mind-reading skills. After this, readers would expect that a certain amount of recognition would be admitted to the flaws in the typical gender roles of victim and rescuer. However, when Jason sees his injured sister in the hospital, he reminds her of the way it should have been, saying “thank you, but it's got me down that you stood in for me when it came time to fight” (285). Sookie is at least fiercely resistant to this description of the event in her head, but she does not contradict her brother out loud.

It is not until the second book in the series that Sookie begins to become a bit more vocal about her confidence in herself to be a savior figure. When she and Bill get off of a plane they took to Dallas (with Bill packed in his coffin in the luggage compartment until they land), Sookie must protect herself from a Fellowship of the Sun leader who tries to pull her away before Bill is out of his coffin. Sookie asserts that she will not let “anyone haul [her] off somewhere [she] do[esn't] want to go...without a good fight,” and she struggles against the man enough to stall him until Bill can get up (*Living Dead in Dallas* 70). When Bill arises, the man runs away, and when Sookie is safe again, Bill asks about her flight. Sookie informs him that she “was sitting on the row with the emergency exit,” and was told “to switch if [she] didn't think [she] could handle that,” but that she thought she could handle an emergency and decided to stay in the position of authority and leadership—the type of place typically reserved for males in more conservative, sexist communities.

By the third novel in Harris' series, Sookie does not just express herself more confidently about her ability to be the heroine of the story, but she also takes on the whole job of savior knowingly. Sookie has to go into the mansion where Russell Edgington, the vampire king of

Mississippi, and all of his followers reside, and try to save Bill from his captivity during sunlight hours, while the vampires sleep. Alcide is gone, after having achieved his part of the mission, but Sookie at first longs for him to be back, thinking that his toughness would enable him to “manage everything better than [she] would” (*Club Dead* 195). The reality, though, is that only she can save Bill during this brief window of opportunity. Therefore, Sookie remembers what her grandmother would have told her: “women could do whatever they had to do;” and she succeeds in her wild rescue mission, saving the pathetically weak Bill and killing a ferocious vampire woman to do it (205). It becomes more and more apparent as Sookie takes on more responsibility as a main character—and not just as a supporting character like ‘wife’ or ‘sister’—that the main thing holding her back from claiming her place as heroine and savior is her education about gender roles learned during her upbringing. When she ignores the way males and females are ‘supposed to be’ in the south, she is able to become more powerful and reclaim her own agency to start relationships, end them, decide her own lifestyle and future, and fulfill the role of heroine in *The Southern Vampire Mysteries*, which are after all commonly referred to as “The Sookie Stackhouse Novels.”

### **Females Re-Claiming Agency**

When Sookie continually gets involved in romantic relationships with different supernatural, physically powerful males, Harris must tirelessly address the threat of men taking away Sookie’s agency due to their natural inclination to be in charge. Bill’s desire to own Sookie first arises because he wants to protect her from other vampires who may want to suck her blood or participate in sexual activities with her. Sookie questions him after he claims ownership over her, saying, ““you told those other vampires that I belonged to you... what did that mean?””

(*Dead Until Dark* 95). Bill tells Sookie that it “means if they try to feed on [her], [Bill will] kill them,” but also that Sookie is “[his] human” (95). Sookie has a relatively calm reaction to his attempted possession in this first book, being glad that she is in less danger, but also acknowledging that he has claimed her as his without asking for her approval—which could lead to a complete loss of agency and of self. In *Living Dead in Dallas*, Sookie’s response becomes more fierce when Bill advises her to “go to Eric” if anything bad happens to him (*Living Dead in Dallas* 291). Bill is demeaning Sookie to an idle object, unable to think or stand up and act well enough to protect herself, by passing her along from one male vampire guardian to the next. Sookie does not simply accept his attempt to pass her off, however. She says: “if anything happens to you, I don’t have to go to anyone. I’m my own person. I get to make up my mind what I want to do,” reminding Bill, the readers, and perhaps even herself that she started this series on her own, she is her own heroine and main character, and she can get through it without partnering with a male defender (291). Of course, there are many times in *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* when it feels like Sookie is in fact jumping from one strong, supernatural boyfriend to the next and not authentically carrying out her supposed belief that she is her own person. However, there are also times when Sookie makes it clear that she does not need these romances, but that she chooses them and is capable of knowing when to let go.

At the end of *Club Dead*, while Bill and Eric are visiting the severely wounded Sookie, who can hardly speak coherently, and recounting their time in Mississippi, Bill asks “my Sookie hid a corpse?” (*Club Dead* 269). This leads to an argument, where Eric points out (no doubt due to Bill’s unfaithfulness) that Bill should not “be too sure about that possessive pronoun,” causing Bill to aggressively claim Sookie as his own once again. From the couch, Sookie sticks her middle finger up at Bill, and though it shocks him, it seems all too appropriate to the

analytical reader, as it does to Eric, who says “I think Sookie is trying to tell us she belongs to herself” (269). Eventually, Sookie kicks both of these males— who want power and ownership over her—out of her house, choosing to be alone. Although this choice leads to less entertainment value, because both of the forbidden, sexually forward male love interests are currently incapable of accessing the attractive, seducible female, it is a powerful move on Charlaine Harris’ part to show a woman’s agency. If there is one thing Sookie deserves to learn when she is forced to deal with the reality of the supernatural world and the dangers of social injustice, it is that she is not just a pretty woman waiting for a handsome, strong male leader to guide her through the adversity. This series is not a romance, and Sookie’s role in life is not a ‘girlfriend’ or a ‘wife.’ At the end of the entire *Southern Vampire Mysteries*, Sookie does not accept Bill or Eric back as her lover, but ends up in a fledgling relationship with her boss, Sam Merlotte. Harris makes it clear that Sookie will be fine if the relationship does not work out in the long run, wanting to emphasize Sookie’s happiness as an individual who has experienced a lot of growth, and not just as part of a couple. Harris’ heroine certainly had to grow to become comfortable with the possibility of a single life, but Sookie did it, and she was able to completely take hold of her own agency along the way.

## **Conclusion**

After the release of her last book, *Dead Ever After* (2013), Harris got a lot of criticism from fans, who were disappointed that the books did not have a more romantic ending. Harris addressed this controversial choice for the ending in our interview, saying:

Sookie is a lot braver than I am. I wanted her to be active in her own defense, not to cower while waiting for a man to save her. It’s part of that strength that she makes her own choices about her life. I did not know how many relationships she would have when I began the series, but I did know who

she would end up deciding was the best chance she has for happiness. I wanted to make it clear that she would be okay no matter how that relationship worked out. For one thing, she knows she can stand on her own. For another, she's an eternal optimist. This was not an ending a lot of people wanted to acknowledge, apparently (Harris 3).

It can definitely be said that Sookie is braver than the average woman (or person), who might feel more of a need for a stable romantic relationship and might naturally be more dependent on a partner. However, books and the media are a part of the way that people learn behavior, so if women read about Sookie fighting on her own, being confident enough to be independent, remaining optimistic, and believing in herself, then maybe readers will adopt this level of female confidence as well.

Modern media and popular culture hold a lot of power to depict the world in the eyes of the creator and to suggest, however subtly, its own ideologies and stances on the issues it raises. With her ending, Harris takes the opportunity to assert that Sookie's story is more than just a romance. It is about a young woman raised in the rural south growing as a person—and the way that her growth was catalyzed by and intertwined with the appearance of a social other into her life. Sookie learns to fight for those she cares about, and this leads her to realize new ideologies than the ones she was raised with. When she begins caring for Bill, Eric, Alcide, and Quinn, she fights speciesism (which can be seen as representative of racism and homophobia). When she begins to realize that she deserves romantic happiness, she subverts the typical hatred for mixed couples and the view of sex as sinful. When she cares for herself, she combats sexism and gender stereotyping.

Although Sookie as an individual learns to be compassionate and open-minded about new things during *The Southern Vampire Mysteries*, Harris does not ignore the lived reality of societal pressures that, in the end, often keep traditional communities from accepting new people

or practices. Sookie does not end up with a vampire, but instead she begins dating Sam Merlotte\*. It appears that Bon Temps is not ready to become multi-cultural, because even if America does legally accept vampires, the species is just too different for many people to socially accept them.

Having grown up and lived in the south all her life, Harris has repeatedly encountered its specific values and ideologies. In this urban fantasy series she takes time to reflect on the inflexible nature of these ideologies, and on how controversial difference is dealt with in the region, by employing an allegory of vampires as representative of social outsiders.

This type of reflection led Harris to make a statement on the flawed ways many people look at morality, and how the imprecise, indefinable nature of what is right and wrong leads to so many of the socio-political differences our world has faced throughout history, and continues to face today. *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* presents the fantastical social group of vampires, who have a long history of killing humans and draining their blood because it is their nature and was their only food source before bottled synthetic blood. The series also exhibits humans like Renee, Tom, Mike, and Fellowship of the Sun members, who are dedicated to a tradition and a way of living that does not include mixed couples, vampires, homosexuals, or blacks, and thus they are willing to use violence and commit murders of their own. In either case, the people committing the acts of violence and killing (acts held to be immoral in a categorical imperative approach to morality\*) believe that the ends justify the means in their case. Sookie herself seems to be much more moderate in her approach to morality, only killing in self-defense or defense of

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\* Sam is a shape-shifter, so he can change into an animal at will (usually a collie), but his morals, his diet, and his lifestyle are much more aligned with 'normal people' and human residents of Bon Temps than vampires' are.

\* Immanuel Kant described his Categorical Imperative approach to morality as a universal, un-circumstantial guide to what is right and wrong. His deontological philosophy on morality meant that moral truths were absolute, and thus killing and hurting would always be considered wrong.

those she cares about, but her ideas about what is acceptable in society and what is not still govern how she treats others. Vampires who do not try to assimilate ‘disgust’ her, and humans who are resistant to giving vampires any rights at all become villainous in her narration.

Harris brings to the forefront the interesting idea that perhaps Sookie does not have the right to judge others so generally, and perhaps neither do audiences. The mixed morality of all beings is subtle and complex, but no one makes their decisions on how to think and act without believing that they are right. Harris redefines antagonists and protagonists in *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* because the characters are too complicated to be merely good or bad. Human culprits of the crimes Sookie investigates are often acting in ways that they think will protect their communities or glorify God. Vampires, whom our narrator often works to protect from social injustice, are themselves killers by nature and often appear unable to control their bloodlust, crude sexual urges, or anger, but many of them become friends with Sookie and favorite characters for readers. Lastly, it is sometimes even disturbing to read Sookie’s viewpoint on events, people, or lifestyle choices due to her ingrained lack of faith in the female sex, and aversion to open-minded sex and love, non-conformity, and the more bloody aspects of vampire life. Clearly, all characters come with a background of learned ideals, and thus no character is universally agreed to be perfect. This model is much more true to reality than many books that portray one-dimensional heroes and villains.

Through fantasy elements, Harris depicts a world much like our own southern United States. Social differences are condemned, and those in power (typically white, heterosexual males) are not particular or just in the means they utilize to maintain power. Individuals identified as ‘others’— whether they be people of color, members of the LGBTQ community, immigrants, non-Christians, or vampires— are seen as a threat because their values and ideas

about how to live differ from the ideas of those who are trying to stay in power. Fortunately in Harris' series, as sometimes happens in the real world, an average citizen of the region steps up to confront this structure. The fact that the empowered citizen in this case is an independent female is already part of Harris' progressive message. Even if Sookie's failings teach readers almost as much as her virtues do, Sookie certainly enables us to see clearly that ideas and beliefs about how to live can be extremely varied depending on situation. As society grows and changes, so must attitudes and discussions about life, and decisions about how to live it. Charlaine Harris shows that she is ready to advance the discussion of social justice in her *Southern Vampire Mysteries* by providing readers, not just with entertainment, but with a reminder of the hatred that ostracism and narrow-minded traditionalism has caused in the south for centuries, and with a representation of hope for developing acceptance of the many different perspectives found in modern society.

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