

Werewolves and Shapeshifters in Popular Culture: A Thematic Analysis of Recent Depictions
Kimberley McMahon-Coleman and Roslyn Weaver

Jaquelin Elliott, University of Florida

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While the lack of scholarship on shapeshifters is slowly shifting, it nevertheless remains certain that the werewolf has long been a neglected figure of academic interest, especially in the shadow of its monstrous, eternal enemy: the vampire. It is in response to this lack and in the spirit of enriching scholarship on the werewolf and its shapeshifting ilk, that Kimberley McMahon-Coleman and Roslyn Weaver wrote *Werewolves and Other Shapeshifters in Popular Culture*, a slim, but nevertheless rich thematic analysis of contemporary depictions of the shapeshifter up to late 2011. Focusing on key texts mostly from the world of Young Adult media, McMahon-Coleman and Weaver break their analysis down into thematic topics highly relevant to shapeshifter fiction: adolescence, gender, sexuality, race, disability and difference, addiction, and spirituality.

Chapter 1, 'Dear Diary, I Become a Monster Once a Month,' examines shapeshifting texts featuring adolescent protagonists including the *Twilight* Saga, the CW's *The Vampire Diaries*, and MTV's reboot of *Teen Wolf*. McMahon-Coleman and Weaver attribute this popularity to the liminality of adolescence itself, as well as such texts' knack for exploring themes of isolation, sexual anxiety, and the effects of 'teenage angst and body dysmorphia' (15). The complexities of gender roles in shapeshifter texts are further explored in Chapter 2, 'Wolf Boys and Wolf Girls' which McMahon-Coleman and Weaver begin by noting the shift in contemporary media that has transformed the monstrous male lycanthropes of lore into an attractive 'array of sorrowful poetry-reading teenage boys, noble defenders of humans, and confident and alluring men' (42). McMahon-Coleman and Weaver then turn attention to the subject of shapeshifting and femininity, examining menstrual motifs in works like the blood-drenched *Ginger Snaps*, and the importance of gender in reiterations of the *Little Red Riding Hood* narrative. While McMahon-Coleman and Weaver convincingly argue that there is obvious

potential for shapeshifting ‘to step beyond or resist more stereotypical or traditional depictions of male-female roles to inhabit a new space’ (41), they acknowledge that this is, disappointingly, not always the case. They reach a similar conclusion in Chapter 3, ‘Till Death Do Us Part and Beyond,’ noting that while adult texts such as *True Blood* have begun to examine queer paranormal romance, shapeshifter texts, particularly those for young adults, remain overwhelmingly and shockingly heteronormative despite dealing with creatures who inherently break down binaries and stable identities.

Chapter 4, ‘The Alpha Race,’ examines the connections between shapeshifters, race, and class. Calling attention to contemporary texts in which lycanthropy has become ‘genetic,’ McMahon-Coleman and Weaver explore the ways that shapeshifters are constructed as ‘races’ – clearly stand-ins for real-life marginalized racial/ethnic groups. This chapter examines *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*, but the most attention is paid to the *Twilight* saga whose Quileute werewolves have been the focus of much scholarly attention on problematic Native American representation.

Chapter 5, ‘Shapeshifting and the Body’ examines popular texts that link shape-shifting characters to ‘disability, illness, mental health disorders, exclusion, and isolation’ (13), as well as texts that emphasize the pain of the werewolf transformation, such as the *Harry Potter* series. Remus Lupin, whose lycanthropy J. K. Rowling has acknowledged represents HIV, is, McMahon-Coleman and Weaver argue, a sympathetic figure, but, due to the violent nature of Rowling’s werewolves, one who ultimately highlights the problems of conflating marginalized identity and lycanthropy. Chapter 6, ‘Coping, Masking, and Addiction: A Little Drinking Problem’ meanwhile examines the concept of ‘passing’ by analysing Lupin and other shapeshifters and the ways they mask their lycanthropy, as well as the problem of addiction as shapeshifters in fiction often self-medicate in order to cope.

The final chapter, ‘What to Do With Eternity? Shapeshifting and Spirituality’, examines the philosophical/theological questions inherent in representations of the (sometimes eternal) life of shapeshifters and explores texts that draw on religious themes (even if only to subvert them), such as *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, *Twilight*, and *The Chronicles of Narnia*. McMahon-Coleman and Weaver argue that shapeshifter texts provides fertile ground for such examinations of life, death, and secularism, and, further, make a case that shapeshifting itself has parallels with

religious belief as many contemporary texts draw on both Biblical imagery and that of other religions and beliefs to create a kind of hybrid pluralism.

While fascinating and well-written, these final two chapters fall prey to a recurring (though hardly fatal) problem throughout *Werewolves and Other Shapeshifters* – an overreliance on analyses of vampires. While McMahon-Coleman and Weaver acknowledge that vampires and werewolves have been linked in the cultural imaginary since the publication of *Dracula*, they rightly draw a distinction between them. *Dracula* may have been a shapeshifter, but Edward Cullen and the Salvatore brothers (at least in their television incarnation) are not. One cannot help but be disappointed, then, that Edward and the CW's Salvatores are given more space in this book than are characters like Scott McCall or the animagi from *Harry Potter*, particularly when it is clear that McMahon-Coleman and Weaver recognize how under-explored the figure of the shapeshifter has been thus far in academia.

McMahon-Coleman and Weaver note that they 'hope that this book encourages more scholarly attention and dialog about shapeshifting to further enrich those already existing works in this field' (186). This, they accomplish because their work is an excellent contribution to a small, but growing scholarly conversation on the subject of lycanthropes and their like. Overall, McMahon-Coleman and Weaver do a fine job of netting the under-discussed representations of shapeshifters in popular media, and, thus, make their book a vital volume to anyone interested in the shapeshifter. *Werewolves and Other Shapeshifters* serves as a strong and well-argued treatise on why such a lack of writing on werewolves must be remedied. For if we wish to better understand popular culture and its handling of those subjects that leave us feeling vulnerable and human (adolescence, disability, sexuality), then we must look to those creatures who, by their very nature, trouble clear cut boundaries, and possess the ability to transform.