

Teen Wolf
Jeff Davis

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MTV's *Teen Wolf* (2011-) is nothing if not aware of its own unbelievable premise. In the penultimate episode of the series' first season, Kate Argent explains to her niece Allison that "there are werewolves running around in the world. Everything's a joke to me!" Indeed, the acclaimed series never loses sight of the fact that, no matter how powerful the acting, nor how creative the directing, it is a show about teen werewolves. As such, its creator, writers, and actors infuse humor into even the most dramatic and gruesome of moments.

Creator Jeff Davis loosely based his *Teen Wolf* on the 1985 film of the same name. Like the original film, Davis's version centers on a high school student named Scott, a social outcast longing to get a girlfriend and to excel in sports, whose newfound werewolf abilities boost him up his school's social ladder. But Davis's series takes on a life of its own, crafting a complex mythology that develops over the course of its five (and counting) seasons. Each season resolves a central mystery. The conflict largely revolves around the principal wolf pack, their human friends, a family of werewolf hunters, rival packs, and an assortment of supernatural creatures that have been underexplored in American television – including failed werewolves, banshees, oni, druids, mythical beasts, and demons.

From its beginning, *Teen Wolf* adapts and expands conventional werewolf lore. After being bitten by a werewolf in the pilot, Scott McCall discovers he has suddenly developed preternatural hearing, heightened olfactory senses, accelerated healing powers, and increased speed, agility, and strength. In keeping with the series' self-referential humor, Scott's best friend, Stiles, attempts to solve the mystery of his friend's new condition. 'It's a specific kind of infection,' he jokes. 'I think it's called lycanthropy.' Later, Stiles addresses the role of silver in werewolf mythology, quipping 'if you see me in shop class trying to melt all the silver I can find, it's 'cause Friday's a full moon.' After the pair stumble over a patch of wolfsbane, Stiles

admonishes Scott for never having seen *The Wolf Man* (1941): ‘the original, classic werewolf movie.’ Stiles draws his knowledge of the deadly plant directly from this prototype for the cinematic werewolf, and as it turns out, he is correct. Not so when it comes to silver bullets, which Derek Hale – a member of a storied local werewolf family – brushes off as just legend. Among *Teen Wolf*’s many contributions to werewolf mythology, the hunters use assault rifles loaded with wolfsbane bullets rather than silver and shoot exploding arrows from crossbows. Furthermore, the familiar mechanisms by which humans are turned into werewolves are thrown into question throughout the series. Rather than having to avoid being bitten by any werewolf, the human characters come to realize that only a bite – or even a scratch – from an alpha werewolf infects its victim. In this way, *Teen Wolf* establishes its own unique lore and escalates the consequences for its characters, werewolf and human alike.

Many episodes feature cold opens in the style of classic horror films, and the characters often experience macabre hallucinations and transformations that are visually akin to scenes from *American Horror Story*. But *Teen Wolf* truly surpasses other genre favorites – the *Twilight* series, *The Vampire Diaries*, and even the groundbreaking *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* – in its focus on the lives of its young adult protagonists. Literary and cinematic lycanthropy often functions as a metaphor for uncontrollable masculinity, the men fighting their animal urges at the height of the full moon. At first blush, *Teen Wolf* seems no exception. Derek teaches Scott to control the shift, and in turn, Scott trains his own protégé, Liam. These young men fear hurting the people closest to them. However, *Teen Wolf* revises the masculinity metaphor in several important ways. For instance, star athlete Danny is openly gay, beloved by his peers and his teachers. The matter-of-course inclusion of gay characters leads the lacrosse coach to question Scott’s sexuality on several occasions. In one moment, Scott talks around his lycanthropy to Coach Finstock, leaving the coach to mistakenly believe that his student struggles with same-sex desires. This interaction undercuts tropes regarding homosocial behavior and heteronormative masculinity and points to the self-aware quality of the series overall.

Moreover, the series explores the growing pains of all its teenagers, werewolf or otherwise. In so doing, *Teen Wolf* skirts gendered stereotypes. A twist on teen drama tropes, Jackson the jock is articulate and perceptive. But despite his affluence, intelligence, and popularity, Jackson wants werewolf powers because he sees himself as weak and inadequate. Likewise, his counterpart Lydia quickly sheds her “mean girl” persona to reveal a math genius

and a loyal friend, but she, too, is troubled. In fact, some of the most compelling scenes from the early seasons show both Jackson and Lydia facing psychological torments resulting from their insecurities. More villain than victim, Aunt Kate is a skilled fighter, certainly not the average girl-in-a-horror-movie type. Meanwhile, Mrs. Argent vacillates between brave and criminal, motivated by her motherly concerns. But perhaps the most important and innovative woman is Allison Argent, who first appears as Scott's girlfriend. Scion of an ancient hunting family, Allison spends the first three seasons struggling with questions of what it means to be strong and to be a woman. Reeling from a close call with a powerful werewolf, Allison gives voice to her anxieties. 'I felt utterly weak. Like I needed somebody to come in and rescue me. I hate that feeling. I want to feel stronger than that.' Moving beyond the role of love interest, Allison becomes a strong heroine, but she remains achingly vulnerable.

Despite the almost campy notion of a revamp of an '80s werewolf comedy, *Teen Wolf* presents its characters and their problems not only sensitively, but as faithful to real life. The series stands out in the genre for its meaningful inclusion of parents, especially Sheriff Stilinski, Melissa McCall, and Chris Argent, and other adult mentors like Deaton, Scott's boss at the veterinary clinic. Naturally, the parents appear in scenes dealing with school conferences, homework, failing grades, and groundings, but they also play pivotal roles in later narrative arcs, especially as they become more privy to the details of their children's lives. When the teens are at a loss, they instinctively reach out to their parents and mentors. After Scott is devastated by his breakup with Allison, his mother reassures him that he will fall in love again. 'It will happen. But until then, be your own anchor.' Contra to the 'eternal love' theme of vampire serials, Scott and Allison split so that they might develop independence. Allison discovers the value of love, strength, community, and sacrifice, while Scott learns responsibility, growing into a leader and the series' moral center.

At its strongest, *Teen Wolf* works continually to develop its central characters. As the romantic leading lady descends into darkness, Stiles evolves from comic-relief sidekick to hero in his own right. The series achieves these transformations in part because it follows the characters as they grapple with the traumatic events befalling their small California town, Beacon Hills. Facing a foe that neither she nor the others understand, Allison declares, 'we're just a bunch of teenagers, we can't handle this.' Indeed, Scott, Allison, Stiles, Lydia, and the others confront difficulties that they cannot always surmount, despite their supernatural abilities.

They struggle. They learn from their mistakes. They are not invincible. But as Scott reminds us in the latest season, they succeed as a group. ‘When we’re all together again, when we were a pack. We can do this.’ *Teen Wolf* overturns the image of the lone ‘Spartan warrior’ werewolf, drawing together social outcasts, popular kids, and fully realized characters to create community. Beyond twisted storylines or showy special effects, *Teen Wolf* excels when it balances its supernatural mythos with a focus on the relationships among the series’ beloved characters.