

*Penny Dreadful*

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*Penny Dreadful* (2014- ), Showtime and Sky Atlantic's Gothic drama, takes its name from the cheap serials published during the Victorian period and the characters are drawn from the pages of Gothic novels. The first season's plot is an adaptation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). The action centres Sir Malcom Murray (Timothy Dalton) and Vanessa Ives (Eva Green) and their attempts to save Mina Murray from Dracula. They are aided by Frankenstein (Harry Treadaway), Ethan Chandler (Josh Hartnett) and Sembene (Danny Sapani), Sir Malcom's Senegalese man servant. The action is enhanced by the presence of Frankenstein's Monster (Rory Kinnear) and Dorian Grey (Reeve Carney). Yet if, to paraphrase Christopher Craft, Stoker's protagonists are the Crew of Light, in *Penny Dreadful* they are a Crew of Darkness and the line between good and evil is blurred. Ethan, functioning as an inverse Quincey Morris, embodies this. In *Dracula*, Quincey is presented as disarmingly open – wooing Lucy Westenra with stories of his adventures – and the perfect example of American masculinity, emerging from the New World unfettered by the weight of history. In contrast, Ethan states that he has “such sins at my [his] back it would kill me to turn around” (S1:Ep4). He enters the story dressed as a gun-slingin' cowboy replete with chaps and Texan accent who performs sharpshooting exploits for English crowds. But this persona is entirely fake – even down to the accent – and he is in fact an educated man estranged from his father. Having become a soldier and taken part in the Indian wars, he is haunted by the slaughter of the Native Americans. He is also a werewolf.

Throughout the first season's hunt for Mina and Dracula, Ethan's true nature is slowly revealed. Something is slaughtering the residents of London and consuming their flesh. In 'Resurrection' (S1:Ep3), Ethan is shown to have an affinity with wolves. Whilst searching London Zoo, Sir Malcom and his compatriots are confronted by a pack of wolves – a reference to Stoker's novel in which Bersicker, a wolf of London Zoo, escapes. Ethan lowers himself to the wolves' level, calming them so that they do not attack. However, it is not until the end of the first season that Ethan's lycanthropy is confirmed. Having been apprehended

by two men, employed by his father to bring him home in chains if necessary, Ethan transforms into a werewolf under the full moon. He is able to escape capture, though in the process he slaughters the inhabitants of the Mariner's Inn, drawing the attention of Inspector Bartholomew Rusk (Douglas Hodge). Ethan is unable to remember his actions while transformed waking the next day covered in blood and consumed by guilt.

Despite his blood-soaked history, Ethan's propensity for compassion emerges repeatedly. He prevents Sir Malcom from beating a young vampire who is kept restrained in the cellar of Sir Malcom's home and he critiques Frankenstein's later experiments on this vampire as vivisection in which the vampire is a 'rat' (S1:Ep4). Ethan also finds the sight of terriers ripping apart rats for sport unsettling (S1:Ep4). The presence of the rats and the correlation between them and the vampire echoes the expulsion of rats from Carfax Abbey in *Dracula*. However, whereas in the novel this only confirms the degeneracy of the Count, Ethan's reaction draws attention to the cruelty of the human protagonists. Though a werewolf, Ethan is often the most human character. It is Ethan's kindness that in part fuels his role in the second season of *Penny Dreadful*.

Having vanquished Dracula, the narrative follows the attempts of a coven of witches led by the charismatic Evelyn Poole (Helen McCrory) to corrupt Vanessa. Ethan is integral in preventing this from occurring. He and Vanessa seek refuge from the witches at the Cut-Wife's cottage, once owned by Vanessa's mentor (S2:Ep7). Here the audience is witness to another transformation. Whereas Ethan's earlier transformation was limited by an enclosed space, in this scene he roams the moors silhouetted against the full moon. This confirms that he is an anthropoid werewolf. The source material for Ethan's lycanthropy is not Victorian texts such as G. W. M. Reynold's penny dreadful *Wagner the Wehrwolf* (1846-1847), which may have been the obvious choice. Instead Ethan's physicality draws from the werewolves of the silver screen. The revelation that Ethan's true name is Ethan Laurence Talbot links him to Lon Chaney Jr.'s character in *The Wolf Man* (1941), who physically resembles in werewolf form.

Following the transformation upon the moors Ethan starts to accept the possibility that lycanthropy may not be entirely malignant. In the opening episode of the second season, Ethan is described by one of the witches as *lupus dei* or the 'Wolf of God' (S2:Ep1). Throughout the war with the witches, this role becomes clearer and Ethan gains the possibility of redemption. Sembene, who has become close to Ethan, asks "Is it [lycanthropy] a blessing, the purpose of which we cannot yet see?" (S2:Ep7). Later Ethan tells Vanessa "We have claws for a reason" and acknowledges that to kill one must become

an “animal that has to survive. A predator” (S2:Ep7). It is Ethan once transformed who is able to kill Evelyn Poole and save his friends. Without a human mind and the guilt, fear and desire that define the state of humanity, he cannot be manipulated by Evelyn Poole and kills her without hesitation.

However at the end of the second season the chains which previously threatened Ethan finally enclose him (S2:Ep10). He confesses to Inspector Rusk and faces the ‘sins at his back’. This decision suggests that his narrative arc has come full circle. The werewolf is hunted as much by humans armed with silver bullets as by the horror of its own existence. The willing death of the werewolf offers the hope of forgiveness. Though the confirmation of a third season suggests that Ethan will return to find further purpose for his claws, the final episode sees him locked in a cage being transported back to American. Ethan’s ability to transform leaves him prey to the same treatment as wolves. The unsympathetic Inspector Rusk takes voyeuristic pleasure in containing Ethan as a wild animal. Yet Ethan’s decision to accept his past suggests he may come to accept his own monstrosity, a recurring theme throughout the series.

### **Episode List for *Penny Dreadful***

- ‘Resurrection’, Season 1, Episode 3.
- ‘Demimonde’, Season 1, Episode 4.
- ‘Fresh Hell’, Season 2, Episode 1.
- ‘Little Scorpion’, Season 2, Episode 7.
- ‘And They Were Enemies’, Season 2, Episode 10.