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**How Monsters can be more Human than Humans:  
Analyzing the Humanity of Antiheroic, Supernatural Beings  
with Nietzschean Morals and a Gothic Lens**

So, a vampire, a ghost, and a werewolf share a flat in London... what sounds like the beginning of a bad joke is actually an introduction to *Being Human*, a British television program created by Toby Whithouse that explores human psychology by way of three supernatural protagonists striving to achieve humanity. Whithouse's program, which focuses on the afterlives of Mitchell, an on-the-wagon vampire; George, a reluctant werewolf; and Annie, a ghost haunting the flat in which she died, is reminiscent of gothic literature, not only because of the supernatural elements of the show but also for the suggestion that man, or monster, cannot only be good or evil. This idea of psychological complexity refutes the good versus evil dichotomy and instead recognizes a norm of immorality and of moral ambiguity. This shift from in paradigm for psychological analysis mirrors the shift from heroic to antiheroic culture described by the literary critic Victor Brombert in his book, *Unheroic Modes*. Antiheroes, Brombert says, are figures who defy the standards of classical heroism and demolish unachievable ideals perpetuated by traditional heroes. As supernatural antiheroes in *Being Human*, Mitchell, George, and Annie defy the apparent paradox of 'human' monsters and affirm that 'human' refers not to a species, but to an indestructible potential for salvation in a morally ambiguous existence.

John Mitchell, the vampire in *Being Human*, was tortured by an internal struggle between his addiction to blood and his determination to stop killing. Mitchell, who was born over a hundred years before *Being Human* is set, became a vampire while fighting in World War I when another vampire, Herrick, bit him instead of killing him. Condemned to live as a "parasite" of the

human race, Mitchell followed Herrick, killing and drinking until he could no longer cope with the weight of his murders (Whithouse 3.01). After leaving Herrick, Mitchell gave up killing and began working in a hospital so that he could steal blood from its stores. He found traces of the humanity he desired by living with George and Annie, but was always plagued by the inevitability he perceived of his next murder. At the end of “Season 3” of *Being Human*, after massacring a train car of civilians the season before, lying to his friends, and suffering for his mistakes, Mitchell begged George to help him end the eternal cycle of murder and penance he followed (Whithouse). When George finally agreed to assist in Mitchell’s suicide, he stabbed Mitchell with a wooden stake and released Mitchell from his purgatory with the words: “I’m doing this because I love you” (Whithouse, 3.6).

George Sands, another of the three protagonists of *Being Human*, hated and feared the werewolf within him at the beginning of the show because he believed it distanced him from humans and prevented him from every living a normal life. While traveling in Scotland with his fiancé, George was attacked and bitten by a werewolf. Though George survived his injuries, he walked away with physical and psychological scarring that brought his old life to a close. When George learned about the consequences of his attack, he fled, abandoning his parents and his fiancé, and began his afterlife. Until he met Mitchell, George lived as a vagabond, avoiding any connections with people because he believed he was nothing more than a monster. At the end of “Season 1”, however, George stopped trying to separate himself from the wolf and instead recognized that he was both. Though he continued to struggle with his paranormal life and with unintentionally turning Nina, his girlfriend, into a werewolf, George began to accept the duality of his nature by reintegrating himself with humanity and through his relationships with Mitchell, Annie, and Nina (Whithouse).

Though as a ghost, Annie Sawyer is the least threatening of *Being Human's* protagonists, she is also distanced the most from humanity by her inability to be seen or to truly interact with the living. Before Mitchell and George moved into the London flat they later shared with Annie, the pair was not aware that the house was haunted, only that one of the previous tenants died in a fall down the stairs. When Annie, Mitchell, and George first met, all three were surprised, but none more so than Annie because, as a vampire and a werewolf, they were able to see, talk, and touch her. The addition of Mitchell and George into Annie's life provided her with the friendship and romance that her death ripped away from her. Despite her continued struggle with the circumstances of her murder and with her separation from the living, Annie was able to see most easily that she, Mitchell, and George have found salvation in the afterlife and some semblance of humanity through their relationships (Whithouse).

Mitchell, George, and Annie can be classified as gothic protagonists because of their supernatural existences and, especially in the case of Mitchell, because of the ambiguity of their statuses as heroes or as villains. According to the author Robert Hume, gothic literature is often incorrectly simplified to supernatural creatures, haunted houses, and other such clichéd horror motifs (Hume 282). Though gothic literature can include these elements, they alone fail to encompass the entirety of the genre and to express the complexity of character pivotal to the success of gothic works. Chronologically, gothic writing followed romantic literature and, while romantic authors sought to maintain a separation between the reader and the character's emotions, the goal of gothic literature was to evoke emotion from readers (Hume 284). Common themes in gothic writing did include supernatural protagonists, like Frankenstein's monster or Mr. Hyde, but these characters were designed not to frighten readers but to maintain a fantastical and distant atmosphere that prevented readers from over-identifying with the protagonists (Hume

286). These characters were psychologically complex and morally ambiguous “hero-villain[s]” who demonstrated the impossibility of separating good and evil in man (Hume 287). As a modern analog from *Being Human*, Mitchell is a “hero-villain” because he cannot be condemned entirely for failing to control his blood addiction because of the turmoil bloodlust caused him and his struggles to control himself. He was never only evil or only good, and the belief that a man can split himself evenly between these two extremes was the fatal flaw of the protagonist in the classic gothic novel, the *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

Unlike the protagonists of *Being Human* who accept the moral ambiguity of their existences, Dr. Jekyll, the protagonist of Robert Louis Stevenson’s novel, the *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, believed that he could isolate and remove the darkness within him. The novel spans the events beginning with Dr. Jekyll’s attempt to separate the inhuman, brutish parts of his psyche into another identity – Mr. Hyde – and concludes when Jekyll’s secrets are revealed after his death (Saposnik 717). When Jekyll took a potion he invented and released Hyde, his dark counterpart would roam London and commit violent crimes. Soon, though, Hyde began to overwhelm Jekyll, causing the scientist to transform without the potion. Jekyll and Hyde’s story ends when Hyde supersedes Jekyll entirely and kills himself to avoid repercussions for his crimes. Jekyll was bound to fail because the doctor did not understand that his soul was more than two behavioral extremes and could not simply be divided into good and evil (Saposnik 721). When he created Hyde, Jekyll ignored “the inescapable conclusion that man must dwell in uncomfortable but necessary harmony with his multiple selves” and instead sought to take away the pressure to choose to be good (Saposnik 724). Mitchell, George, and Annie all carried on through their supernatural lives by choosing to be together and to try to be human, but Jekyll

believed that he could ignore the infinite complexities of his psyche and make himself only good without any inner conflict.

In order to make a fair judgment of the morality of all gothic protagonists, including the central characters in *Being Human*, a set of standards outlined by the philosophies of Friedrich Nietzsche can be used. In one of his books, Nietzsche introduces the phrase: “beyond good and evil”. This quotation was later used in conjunction with Nietzsche’s other writings by the philosopher Brian Leiter to create a system of judgment he calls “Nietzschean values” (Leiter 261, 263, 267). Nietzschean values operate on a principal understanding that there is no ideal norm, rather a norm of immorality and of natural limitation for people and for the world (Leiter 262; Hume 299). This value system differentiates between a good versus bad paradigm and a good versus evil paradigm, where good versus bad judges a person himself while good versus evil judges a person’s actions (Leiter 263-4). The good versus evil paradigm is used in making character judgments by Nietzschean standards, and the application of this paradigm is of critical importance for supernatural characters like Mitchell, George, and Annie. The good versus bad system would immediately condemn these protagonists for their monstrous natures, but the good versus evil system emphasizes who they choose to be and how they choose to act. Another key element of being good by Nietzschean standards requires both self-affirmation and societal affirmation (Leiter 266). Because societal affirmation may never be given to gothic protagonists or Whithouse’s characters, for Mitchell, George, and Annie, self-affirmation, belief in their own humanity and goodness, must be enough.

The norm of immorality outlined in the Nietzschean value system can also be described as an antiheroic norm, thus classifying Mitchell, George, and Annie as antiheroes. According to the critic Victor Brombert, antiheroes in today’s society are “perturbers and disturbers” who

serve as vehicles for removing larger-than-life heroes from their pedestals and instead presenting readers with protagonists who can fail, recover, and soldier on. These characters are defined as much by their flaws and limitations as they are by their triumphs (Brombert 2, 3). Fyodor Dostoyevsky, a Russian philosopher and writer, associated the term ‘antihero’ with the word ‘paradox’ in his book, *Notes From the Underground*, in order to suggest that an antihero’s morality is a paradoxical union of good and evil (Brombert 3). This paradox of good and evil describes the same moral ambiguity that gothic protagonists encompass and Nietzsche described with the phrase: “beyond good and evil” (Brombert 3; Hume 287; Leiter 261). As antiheroes, Mitchell, George, and Annie meet a societal need for protagonists who are flawed and fallible not only because of their supernatural status but also because of their faults, mistakes, and fears. Mitchell is a murderer, George turned his girlfriend into a werewolf, and Annie is invisible, but each strives to recover from their past and move forward.

Whithouse’s decision to make his protagonists a vampire, a werewolf, and a ghost in *Being Human* is significant both because of the global ubiquity of monsters in folklore and because his characters threaten the distinction between human and monster. Instead of looking at monsters and humans as equal and opposite forces of evil and good, their relationship ought to be considered with the knowledge that “monsters [both] embody all that is dangerous and horrible in human imagination” and represent an extreme negative potential for humanity (Gilmore 1). Monsters exist in every culture because there is no discrimination, racial or otherwise, between the humans who possess a monstrous potential (Gilmore 1-4); Dr. Jekyll was an upstanding Victorian man, Mitchell was a soldier, George was an intelligent but otherwise average citizen, and Annie was a fashion student at university, yet all four became monsters (Stevenson; Whithouse). In many ways, monsters or other supernatural protagonists are

paramount antiheroes both because they are considered innately evil and because, in traditional epics, monsters were the villains persecuted and killed by heroes (Gilmore 5). For every Beowulf or St. George there was a Grendel or a Dragon, but, when these monsters are the protagonists of modern television programs, viewers forgive them their flaws and unashamedly hope they receive happy endings (Gilmore 5; Whithouse). This shift in the role of monsters calls into question who the villains really are: the traditional heroes who hunted and killed, or the vampire, werewolf, and ghost trying to defy their natures and be human?

The question above extends into a pivotal issue *Being Human* poses: Is it possible to be human (*adjective*) but not a human (*noun*)? <sup>1</sup> Aside from the linguistic difference between the two, where the adjective ‘human’ refers to a state of being whereas the noun ‘human’ refers to a species, there is an enormous difference in the moral implications of the two homonyms. Using a gothic lens and the values outlined with the Nietzschean standard, it is the actions of any person that make him good or evil. Thus, no Human 2 is necessarily good, and being Human 2 does not automatically indicate Humanity 1. The distinction between Human 2 and Human 1 is heavily dependent on choice: what people choose to do and choose to reveal. The repulsion that Humans 2<sup>1</sup> show for monsters in folklore and that the protagonists in *Being Human* experience represents the tendency of humans to isolate and persecute those who, due to “religious intolerance, racial hatred, [or] patriarchy ... have become in a sense somehow *less than human*” (Germana 63-4). The choice to persecute and to destroy monsters, however, is in many ways more horrific than the actions of monsters who are driven by their natures.

In *Being Human*, the scientist, Lucy Jaggat, and Reverend Kamp exemplify the dark potential of humans when they try to isolate and eliminate a gene of evil expressed in

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<sup>1</sup> From here forward, human (*adjective*) will be denoted by Human 1 and human (*noun*) by Human 2.

werewolves. To do so, they trick werewolves like George and Nina into helping them by promising to cure their lycanthropy when, in reality, their cure killed all the werewolves involved in the trials (Germana 65-6 and Whithouse). This blatant disregard for life expressed by a doctor and by a man of God, who ought to be bound by the Hippocratic Oath and by Biblical Ethics, is highlighted by Mitchell when he confronts Lucy. Mitchell accuses her of ignoring that “God created all of us” and, while they are both “covered in other people’s blood... there’s one difference between [him] and [her]... [Lucy] had a choice” (Whithouse 2.8). The scene is particularly loaded because, in the previous episode, Mitchell lost control and massacred an entire box car of people when he learned Lucy was responsible for the deaths of all but two vampires in London (Whithouse). Mitchell’s actions in the box car were as unpardonable as Lucy’s in her laboratory, but Lucy’s crimes were all committed out of a righteous desire to purge evil from the world while Mitchell’s, excluding the boxcar, were motivated by the bloodlust intrinsic to vampires (Whithouse). What Lucy failed to understand was that, by trying to destroy monsters, she forfeited her humanity and revealed the evil within herself (Germana 70). Monsters are made from choices, not from some inherent evil, and every person contains the same destructive potential enhanced in supernatural beings.

If species does have nothing to do with humanity (*adj.*), then Mitchell, George, and Annie all achieved some degree of humanity because of the choices they made. Mitchell’s tragedy was that redemption for his murders ultimately came not from his romance with Annie but from his assisted suicide. After hiding the truth about the “Box Tunnel Massacre” from his friends for a majority of the third season, Mitchell lost both their faith in him and failed by Nietzschean standards when he could no longer affirm his own goodness. Still, the strength that Mitchell showed in the face of his terror and desperation when he chose to stop himself from



killing anybody else, even at the cost of his own life, was his salvation. Mitchell was far from innocent, but he affirmed his humanity by recognizing the evil imbued within him and fighting to save others from it (Whithouse).

George asserted his humanity much earlier in the series when he finally accepted the duality of his existence. At the beginning of *Being Human*, George could not accept that the werewolf was a part of him. He referred to the wolf in the third person to distance himself from the beast as much as possible, and he locked himself away from anybody human in order to protect them and to protect himself (Germana 60; Whithouse). At the end of “Season 1” when the vampire, Herrick, asserted that the trio in *Being Human* will only infect the humans around them, however, George proclaimed mid transformation that his transformation “doesn’t rob [him] of [his] humanity ... It *proves* it” (Whithouse 1.06). With his acceptance of the werewolf, George succeeded by Nietzschean standards through self-affirmation and reconciliation of his dark potential with his propensity for good. By simultaneously claiming the wolf and his humanity, George forced himself to stop letting his lycanthropy cut him off from society and instead to start interacting with humans again.

Annie saved herself by choosing to believe in the validity of her relationships and friendships in the afterlife and to fight for her friends. As *Being Human* progressed, Annie began to understand that her afterlife was more potent and human than anything preceding it. The love Annie had with Owen, which was tainted and shattered upon her realization that he murdered her, paled in comparison to the love she and Mitchell shared in “Season 3”. Living in London and Bristol with George, Nina, and Mitchell, Annie found “friendship and loyalty, sacrifice and courage ... [and] witnessed the very best of being human” (Whithouse 3.01). When Annie chose to stop haunting her house and start defining herself by her connections with the dead rather than

with the living, she embraced the darkness of her new existence and began to find the light in her small refuge of humanity.

So what does it mean to be human? As a neo-gothic television series, *Being Human* succeeds both as an analysis of human psychology and a testament to the antiheroic nature of modern society. With three supernatural protagonists whose very existences deem them monstrous, the series illuminates the importance of choice and the unavoidable ambiguity of good and evil. For Mitchell, George, and Annie, a vampire, a werewolf, and a ghost, humanity arose from the choices they made in the name of love, of sacrifice, and of self-affirmation. Each neo-gothic antihero ultimately proved that human (*adj.*) is entirely independent of human (*n*) by accepting the darker elements tied to their existences and striving to be more than monsters. As Annie said, “humanity isn’t a species, it’s a state of mind. It can’t be defeated, it moves mountains, it saves souls” (Whithouse 3.01).

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