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« Mary Sues, Sluts and Rapists: The Problematic Depiction of Sexuality in P. C. and Kristin Cast's Young Adult Series *The House of Night* »

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Résumé

Cet article analyse la description de la sexualité dans une série de romans pour jeunes adultes sur les vampires intitulée *The House of Night*, co-écrite par P. C. et Kristin Cast. Dans ces romans, les auteures utilisent l'intimité narrative pour encourager les auteurs à s'identifier à la narratrice et héroïne Zoey Redbird alors que ses pouvoirs s'accroissent et qu'elle s'éveille au désir et à l'appétit du sang. Le paratexte des romans évoque la notion d'autonomie féminine tandis que le récit inclut de nombreuses scènes d'insultes à destination des femmes, de violences sexuelles et même de viols. Nous explorerons ici la manière dont les auteures invitent les lecteurs dans l'histoire pour qu'ils adoptent les valeurs du narrateur et la manière dont ils réagissent à ces stratégies.

Mots-clés

fiction pour jeunes adultes, fiction de vampire, intimité narrative, réaction des lecteurs

Abstract

This essay aims at analysing the description of sexuality in the Young Adult vampire series *The House of Night*, written by P. C. and Kristin Cast. In these novels, the authors use narrative intimacy to encourage readers to identify with narrator and heroine Zoey Redbird as she becomes more powerful and awakens to both lust and blood lust. The paratext of the novels centers on the notion of female empowerment, yet the narrative is pervaded by slut shaming, sexual violence and even rape. We will here explore how the authors invite readers into the story, how they encourage readers to adopt the narrator's values, and how readers respond to these strategies.

Keywords

Young Adult fiction, vampire fiction, narrative intimacy, reader response

Co-written by P. C. Cast and her daughter Kristin Cast, *The House of Night* comprises twelve books (2007-2014) and four novellas which have sold over ten million copies worldwide. The first *opus* has over 347,6000 ratings and 12,4000 reviews on www.goodreads.com, and Davis Films acquired the copyrights from the authors in November 2011. Film producer Samuel Hadida explains that the books “have created a world of adolescent growth against a backdrop of supernatural suspense that resonates around the world with young readers immersed in *Twilight* and *Harry Potter*. *House of Night* connects on a profound level—what growing up means today.”¹ *The House of Night* chronicles the coming-of-age adventures of Zoey Redbird, a part Cherokee teenager from Tulsa, who is “Marked” as a vampyre fledgling.² Zoey leaves her human family to attend a vampyre boarding school called the “House of Night”, where she is to continue her education until she either completes the “Change” to fully become a vampyre or die. Her mentor, High Priestess Neferet, guides her into the vampyre society, a matriarchy where vampyres are gifted with affinities for the elements (they can for instance command water, manipulate it and draw power from it) and practice a religion akin to *wicca*, based on the worship of the Goddess Nyx. Zoey is the next High Priestess in training and the Chosen One: with the assistance of a close circle of friends, she protects her new high school from the mean girl in chief, Aphrodite, before saving the world from Neferet, who is helped by the Cherokee fallen angel Kalona then by Darkness itself (embodied in a bull). Alongside her gaining enough power to ensure the victory of good over evil, Zoey awakens to sexual desire, and juggles several relationships with human Heath, fledgling Erik, vampyres Loren and Stark, and Kalona. She learns about love and lust in a world where it is common for a vampyre High Priestess to have polyamorous relationships with both a human consort and a vampyre mate.

This essay aims at understanding the success of vampire Young Adult fiction through an analysis of intratextual and extratextual material. In *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, Nina Auerbach contends that the vampire is an attractive figure for the young adult audience: “Because they [vampires] are always changing, their appeal is dramatically generational [...]; they can be everything we are, while at the same time, they are fearful reminders of the infinite things we are not.”³ Zoey’s story seems to be a tale of empowerment as she becomes the most powerful fledgling in vampyre history, saves the world and learns how to build the committed, loving and sexual relationship she desires. The female authors present her as a role model and encourage the readers to emulate her. However, the discourse surrounding sexuality in the series relies heavily on shame, guilt and judgemental condemnation.

¹ <<http://variety.com/2011/film/news/davis-films-bites-for-night-1118045512/>>, accessed 25 March, 2017.

² Spelling chosen by the authors.

³ Nina AUERBACH, *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995, 5-6.

Inviting the readers into the story

In *Reading Like a Girl: Narrative Intimacy in Contemporary American Young Adult Literature*, Sara K. Day explores the “desire on the part of many adolescent women readers to identify so strongly with characters that the line between fictional story and real reading experience can be blurred or disregarded entirely”⁴ and deciphers narrative strategies used by YA authors to respond to this desire. She defines “narrative intimacy” as the construction of “narrator-reader relationships that reflect, model, and reimagine intimate interpersonal relationships through the disclosure of information and the experience of the story as a space that the narrator invites the reader to share.”⁵ The narrative voice of *The House of Night* aims to build this gendered intimacy by focusing on Zoey’s perception solely (until volume 6); the first person narration further facilitates the readers’ access to her mindscape. The narrator uses rhetorical questions and frequent interjections such as “ok” “yes!” or “hell no”, thereby adding an oral touch to her writing. Parentheses often express Zoey’s afterthoughts, and both narration and dialogues are written in slang to address the target readership more efficiently—as we can understand from the Acknowledgements to *Marked*, where P. C. Cast thanks her daughter “for making sure we sound like teenagers.”⁶ Narrative intimacy is moreover facilitated by the format of the series: in each new *opus*, past events are recapitulated for the readers, be it via a conversation between two characters, a speech made by Zoey to her cat (in *Chosen*), or a direct address to the readers, although they are never named as such:

The caw! caw! cawing! of one stupid crow kept me up all night. (Well, more accurately, all day – ‘cause, you know, I’m a vampyre fledgling and we have the whole issue of day and night being turned around.) Anyway, I got zero sleep last night/day. But my crappy nonsleep is currently the easiest thing to deal with since life really sucks when your friends are pissed at you. I should know. I’m Zoey Redbird, currently the undisputed Queen of Making My Friends Pissed Land.⁷

The use of the pronoun “you” suggests that Zoey is conscious of the existence of an extradiegetic instance to whom she can turn when her intradiegetic friends refuse to talk to her. These strategies focus on the implied reader, the model reader constructed by the text; however, P. C. and Kristin Cast go to great lengths to also involve their real readers in the world of their series. P. C. Cast published *The Fledgling Handbook 101*,⁸ which presents the readers with information about the House of Night as if they were students, and the House of Night website enables one to enroll (*i.e.* to sign up for the newsletter), upload their photograph to add a vampyric tattoo, download their Tulsa passport (*i.e.* a shopping guide of the city), read Zoey’s year book, identify

⁴ Sara K. DAY, *Reading Like a Girl: Narrative Intimacy in Contemporary American Young Adult Literature*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013, 3.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ P. C. and Kristin CAST, *Marked* (House of Night #1), New York: St Martin’s Press, 2009 (2007).

⁷ P. C. and Kristin CAST, *Untamed* (House of Night #4), New York: St Martin’s Press, 2008.

⁸ P. C. CAST and Kim DONER, *The Fledgling Handbook 101*, New York: St Martin’s Press, 2014.

their own affinity or find rituals and spells.⁹

Not only do the authors and the multimedia platforms encourage their readers to identify as House of Night students, but they also turn real people into characters. In the Acknowledgements to *Chosen*, Kristin Cast writes: “Thank you to all my students who are always begging me to put them in these books and kill them off. Y’all are great comedic fodder.”¹⁰ The real readers become literally part of the narrative fabric of the series. During their interviews, the Casts present Zoey and her friends as role models, asserting their wish for their readers to draw strength from the series: “Shouldn’t we empower our young adults through free speech and education versus crippling them with guilt and shame?”¹¹ Such statement blurs even more the frontiers between reader, narrator and author. Fictional Zoey is presented as a model for real life authors and readers.

Judging from the reviews of the series, narrative intimacy is effective, as readers discuss Zoey and her friends in terms of relatability, as seen by comments such as: “Zoey is a wonderful role model”¹² or “I related to her right away.”¹³ Even when they do not identify with her, they often address her directly in their comments, as if she were a real person and not a fictional character, or as if they were themselves part of the stories: “Zo, just because you’re a goddamn prude it doesn’t mean everyone else should be, and you shouldn’t try to lecture your female readers on their sexuality. Just because you’re ashamed of sexuality, it doesn’t mean that’s a good thing because you happened to be a main character.”¹⁴ Whether they see themselves in her or not, they usually identify her as a spokesperson for P. C. Cast. This is mainly shown by the use of the term “Mary Sue” that recurs in the reviews. In her blog post “Who is Mary Sue?”, Kat Feete explains that “a Mary Sue is a character that the author identifies with so strongly that the story is warped by it”, and advises readers and authors to watch out for “excessive trauma, unbelievable perfection, reams of explanation for any faults, and minor characters who regularly step up to defend the main character from criticism.”¹⁵ Her description definitely fits Zoey: although she is not perfect, she is close enough that her goddess herself manifests her approval by marking her with a new tattoo each time she is pleased with her, enabling anyone to identify her at first sight as a model.

The narrative devices used by the Casts and the readers’ responses suggest that the implied reader of the story is someone who identifies with Zoey and shares her values, and that

⁹ <<http://www.houseofnightseries.com>>, accessed on 25 March, 2017.

¹⁰ P. C. and Kristin CAST, *Chosen* (House of Night #3), New York: St Martin’s Press, 2008.

¹¹ P. C. Cast Interview, <<http://www.ekristinanderson.com/?p=1408>>, accessed on 10 October 2017.

¹² Review by Shannon, May 20, 2008, <www.goodreads.com>, accessed on 12 September 2016.

¹³ Review by Maria Begar, May 15, 2016, <www.amazon.com>, accessed on 12 September 2016.

¹⁴ 13 Review by Mel, November 1, 2010, <www.goodreads.com>, accessed on 12 September 2016.

¹⁵ “There’s Zoey Redbird, one of the most prolific Mary-Sue self-inserts I have come across to date” (review by Dinkleberries, January 13, 2015, <www.amazon.com>, accessed on 15 October 2016) ; “she’s a Mary Sue” (review by Insomniac, <<https://blogginghouseofnight.wordpress.com/>>, accessed on 15 October, 2017). Kat Feete, “Who is Mary Sue?”, <<http://fmwriters.com/Visionback/Issue30/marysue.htm>> , accessed on 15 October, 2017.

the real reader should do the same, rather than take critical distance with the narrative voice. This reliance on readerly identification is problematic, especially when it comes to how the novels tackle the question of sexuality.

Slut shaming and moral judgement

One of the striking traits of the *House of Night* series is the pervasive presence of slut shaming, a phenomenon described by the English Oxford Dictionary as “the action or fact of stigmatizing a woman for engaging in behavior judged to be promiscuous or sexually provocative.” The terms “ho,” “skank” or “slut” repeatedly crop up in the text and become an integral part of some characters’ names—such as “Aphrodite the Ho.” They may come from male characters after a painful break up, but mainly appear in conversations between female protagonists. Analyzing the role of the slut in teenage identity building in *Fast Girls: Teenage Tribes and the Myth of the Slut*, Emily White argues that “the slut becomes a way for the adolescent mind to draw a map. She’s the place on the map marked by a danger sign, where legions of boys have been lost at sea. She’s the place where the girl should never wander, for fear of becoming an outcast.”¹⁶ In *The House of Night*, the slut is clearly presented as the counter model that should be rejected by characters and readers alike. Zoey’s first and only mention of her sister in the course of the whole series consists in telling her mother that she is promiscuous: “Did you know that your oldest daughter has turned into a sneaky, spoiled slut who’s screwed half of the football team?”¹⁷ After that, the nameless sister is erased from the text, suggesting that Zoey’s entering the House of Night aims to distanciate her from such loose morals. Zoey’s first encounter with students in the halls of her new school also leads to sexual comments that shame the girls: she witnesses Aphrodite trying to impose fellatio on Erik, using his bloodlust to obtain his consent. The narrator passes judgmental remarks on Aphrodite (“She sounded almost desperate”, *Marked*, 66) and on an act which she depicts as degrading for girls with “brains”:

Yes, I was aware of the whole oral sex thing. I doubt if there’s a teenager alive in America today who isn’t aware that most of the adult public think we’re giving guys blow jobs like they used to give guys gum (or maybe more appropriately suckers). Okay, that’s just bullshit, and it’s always made me mad. Of course there are girls who think it’s “cool” to give guys head. Uh, they’re wrong. Those of us with functioning brains know it’s not cool to be used like that.¹⁸

With the first person plural, she associates the readers in her condemnation of the girls who decide to perform fellatio in a consensual act; moreover, her choice of the expression “used like that” negates the fact that the person being used is here Erik and not Aphrodite. The narrator

¹⁶ Emily WHITE, *Fast Girls: Teenage Tribes and the Myth of the Slut*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002, 21.

¹⁷ P. C. CAST, *Marked*, *op. cit.*, 22.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 67.

thereby puts responsibility on the female character for the sexual act about to be forcibly performed on an unwilling male. This scene leads Zoey to immediately dislike the other girl, who turns out to be, unsurprisingly, the main antagonist of the first volume. When she starts going out with Erik, the heroine wants to make sure he does not mistake her for his previous girlfriend:

One reason [it hadn't gone very far with him] was that despite recent evidence to the contrary, I didn't usually act like a slut. Another reason was that I was still way too aware that I'd accidentally watch Aphrodite, Erik's very ex-girlfriend, on her knees in front of him trying to give him a blow job, and didn't want there to be any confusion on Erik's part that I was definitely not a stank slut like Aphrodite the Ho.¹⁹

It is noteworthy that, even though Aphrodite goes from Zoey's enemy to frienemy to friend, and redeems herself in the eyes of the Goddess, the nickname "Aphrodite the Ho" endures, suggesting that the stigma of a bad reputation follows you for life.

Zoey's proneness to judge others is paralleled with self-deprecation or doubt when it comes to her multiple love interests. She starts questioning herself when she kisses Erik after drinking Heath's blood: "Was I becoming a vampyre slut? What was next? Would no male of any species (which might even include Damien) be safe around me?"²⁰ Yet she has a tendency to downplay what would, according to the standards she holds other characters to, be described as sluttish behavior. When she is not joking about seducing her gay friend, she even goes so far as to blame her boyfriend for her own wish to explore what she might have with other male characters:

Erik had seemed so perfect for me; he's who everyone thought I should be with. Then why have I always liked other guys, too, and that's even before he started acting all insanely possessive? It wasn't just Heath I'd been drawn to, but Loren and then Stark. The only thing I could think was that *something must be missing with Erik*, or else I was just turning into a nasty skank. I mean, really. I didn't *feel* like a nasty skank. I felt like a girl who liked more than one guy.²¹

This might be an attempt at righting the balance and countering the double standard held for men and women in the matter of their numbers of sex partners or love interests, but laying the blame at anyone's door when it comes to one's awakening to amorous and sexual life offers a problematic model—especially so as slut-shaming seems to be endorsed by the narrative itself. Indeed, the characterization and narrative arcs of the novels seem to condone Zoey's judgment, as all the characters she condemns for being promiscuous are on the side of evil in the battle between good and evil. This is the case for pre-atonement Aphrodite; Zoey's human ex-best friend Kayla starts smoking pot and drinking, and tries to seduce Heath by wearing a "Boob

¹⁹ P. C. CAST, *Betrayed*, *op. cit.*, 148

²⁰ P. C. CAST, *Marked*, *op. cit.*, 212.

²¹ P. C. CAST, *Hunted*, 238. (emphasis mine)

Shirt”;²² Erin, who was part of Zoey’s original circle, abandons her friends to date an evil vampire, and dies in *Redeemed* after undressing for him in a fountain on the school grounds;²³ Neferet’s sycophants are “easy to pick out. The boys were super scruffy and slouchy, and the girls wore more eyeliner than clothes.”²⁴ Neferet herself is never called a slut, but she has multiple lovers, undresses in public, and the text suggests that she has sexual encounters with Darkness embodied in a white bull: “The bull’s tongue snaked out. He licked Neferet’s naked flesh, causing her to gasp in exquisite pain as her body trembled with excitement.”²⁵ The authors use bestial metaphors to pathologize sexuality; Neferet embodies an epitome of depravity and she serves as a deterrent for the young adult readers.

The first-person narration frames the perception of sexuality and lays emphasis on immoral promiscuous behaviors. The narrator’s choice of words heightens the sexual demands placed on girls whose honor has to be protected: “I’ve only had detention once so far, and that wasn’t my fault. Really. Some turd boy told me to suck his cock. What was I supposed to do? Cry? Giggle? Pout? *Umm... no...* So instead I bitch-slapped him (although I prefer just using the word smacked), and I got detention for it.”²⁶ These words are addressed to the readers only, as Zoey is talking to herself: the authors perpetuate the misogynistic connotations of the term “bitch”, which suggests that they aim to influence their audience into sharing their moralistic stance. The study of the readers’ responses as available on various media platforms demonstrates that they strongly react to these discourses on sexuality. Cyna, a reviewer for the blog *You’re Killing Us*, expresses her outrage: “The worst part is, this is *canon*. This isn’t about interrogating or subverting or disavowing this kind of internalized misogyny. No, *Marked* revels in it, it agrees with everything Zoey and her friends are saying, and goes to great lengths to prove them right. Any girl Zoey doesn’t like? A ‘slut,’ ‘hag,’ ho,’ ‘cow,’ or ‘bitch.’ Canon!”²⁷ Some reviewers judge Zoey in return as if she were real whereas others signal that they felt judged by the narrator upon reading: “Have you or have you not always wanted to know are you a good girl or a bad girl? A blushing virgin or a streetwalker? Mother Theresa or Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*? You can know now! Just take the newest test: An Ultimate Slut Test by ~~Cosmopolitan~~ *Cosmopolitan*—me—Zoey Redbird.”²⁸ These shaming discourses convey a sense of danger, turning sex into a weapon that might put one’s reputation in jeopardy. Even more problematic than these comments, however, are the multiple instances of sexual violence that pervade the text, with little to no

²² P. C. CAST, *Marked*, *op. cit.*, 199.

²³ P. C. CAST, *Hidden*, 114-115.

²⁴ P. C. Cast, *Revealed*, 232.

²⁵ P. C. Cast, *Awakened*, 263.

²⁶ P. C. CAST, *Marked*, *op. cit.*, 124.

²⁷ Cyna, review of *The House of Night* on the blog *You’re Killing Us*, <<http://yourekillings.us/?p=32>>, accessed on 25 October 2016.

²⁸ Review by Avis, April 25, 2014, <www.goodreads.com>, accessed on 25 October 2016.

commentary.²⁹

Sex as a dangerous territory

In *Disturbing the Universe*, Roberta S. Trites contends that Young Adult authors are concerned with educating their readers about the morality of sex:

Some YA novels seem more preoccupied with influencing how adolescent readers will behave when they are not reading than describing human sexuality honestly. Such novels tend to be heavy-handed in their moralism and demonstrate relatively clearly the effect of adult authors asserting authority over adolescent readers. [...] As a topic, then, sexuality in YA novels often includes a lesson for the reader to learn, and the topic also illustrates how language controls our perceptions of a bodily function. In other words, sexuality is inseparable from language; it is influenced by and even constructed by the words that people think and say.³⁰

Readerly identification with the narrative voice and the values it conveys is therefore of the essence in YA series such as *The House of Night*. The text frequently stages male characters as predators, which implicitly defines women as preys in a story that claims to be about female empowerment. It starts with Zoey's offhand comment about the men of the People of Faith, whom she describes as "beady eyed pedophile husbands."³¹ Both Erik and Loren have stalker tendencies, both Erik and Auroch try to kiss girls without their consent; drunk human boys try to climb the wall surrounding the House of Night to "get a look at some vampyre pussy";³² Nefert, deeply scarred after being raped by her father, rejects all human men because "their thoughts are obsessed with our bodies—with possessing us—even though their fear is so strong it almost has a scent: sour breath, sweat, and insatiable desire."³³ The text entrenches the gender divide through essentializing masculinity and femininity; women are characterized as objects of male desire and pleasure. Zoey tends to downplay sexual violence when it emanates from a male character she loves, without explaining the reasons for her forgiveness, giving the impression that she even condones it. She first gets mad when Stark, her lover, acts aggressively towards her, but then relents: "What the hell was I making such a big deal about? So, he's gotten carried away, grabbed my wrists, bit me, and not jumped the second I told him how high. He was a *guy*."

²⁹ This essay focuses on heterosexual relationships. Even though the narrator repeatedly wishes that homosexuals would find more acceptance, the stereotypical way in which queer characters are evoked raises too many questions to be addressed here. Stevie Rae says about Damien: "he's gay, so I don't really think he counts as a guy" (*Marked*, 91); he is frequently called "Queen Damien" or "Miss Congeniality," and fortunately (according to Zoey) isn't "a swishy girly-guy" (*Marked*, 91). As for lesbians, there are the girls who are "way into religious aspects of the Goddess worship and spend most of their time in Nyx's Temple" and "the moronic party girls who think it's cool to make out with each other, but usually only if some cute guys are watching" (*Marked*, 107-108). The implications behind such statements deserve more space than this study can provide.

³⁰ Roberta S. TRITES, *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2008, 85-86.

³¹ P. C. CAST, *Marked*, op. cit., 31.

³² P. C. CAST, *Revealed*, 158.

³³ *Ibidem*, 121.

What was that old saying? *If it has tires or testicles, it's gonna give you problems.*³⁴ This comparison between men and cars is highly sexist, suggesting that violence is inherent to men and therefore it should be expected and accepted.

What is at stake here is not the possibility of violence within the context of consensual sex, but the multiplication of scenes where consent is not asked for – leading to the multiplication of rape scenes. The question of consent is often complex in vampire stories because of the phenomenon called “bloodlust,” whose manifestations may vary according to the fictional universe. The consequences of bloodlust in *The House of Night* are stated clearly in the series: “we all know what happens when a vamp bites someone: the sex receptors in both the ‘victim’ [...] and the vamp were stimulated.”³⁵ There is therefore no doubt, in the eyes of the characters and the readers alike, that biting and blood letting may override a vampyre’s partner unwillingness to engage in a sexual encounter, whatever their original state of mind. The importance of bloodlust is illustrated by the first sexual encounter the readers are offered to witness, when Aphrodite is forcing herself on Erik:

“Stop!” [...]

“You know you don’t really want me to.” [...]

“Yes, I do.” [...] Unbelievably, her fingernail slashed through his jeans, just like it was a knife, and a line of fresh blood appeared, startling in its liquid redness. [...]

“No!” He snapped, putting his hands on her shoulders and trying to push her away from him.

“Oh, quit pretending,” she laughed again, a mean, sarcastic sound.³⁶

Bloodlust metaphorically undermines the rape scene by displacing attention to feeding, which “is often interpreted as metaphorical sex” in vampire fiction.³⁷ Sensual pleasure also derives from the lack of resistance on the part of the victim who is described as “pretending” in this extract. The scene further reverses sexual roles as the knife, standing for the penis, turns Aphrodite into an active male partner. She penetrates Erik with the knife and her laugh downplays the aggressivity of the act.

When older professor and authority figure Loren Blake forces himself on Zoey, bloodlust is used as a metaphor for uncontrolled sexual desire. Rape eventually leads to “amazing pleasure”:

³⁴ P. C. CAST, *Awakened*, 285.

³⁵ P. C. CAST, *Hunted*, 194.

³⁶ P. C. CAST, *Marked*, 65.

³⁷ Deborah Wilson OVERSTREET, *Not Your Mother's Vampire: Vampires in Young Adult Fiction*, Lanham, Maryland : Scarecrow Press, 2006, 25.

Before I realized what he was doing he'd wrenched off my dress. I didn't have a chance to freak out about the fact that he was seeing me I nothing but my bra and panties because he took his thumb and this time sliced it across my breast. I gasped at the sharp pain, and then his lips were on me and he was drinking my blood and the pain was replaced by waves of amazing pleasure so intense that all I could do was moan. Loren tore at his clothes while he drank me, and I helped him. [...] He rolled so that I was under his body. "Now let's finish it. Let me make love to you, baby."
"Yes," I whispered.³⁸

Both Aphrodite and Loren use blood letting as a way to arouse their partners, impeding their ability to truly consent to the sex act. Both are here represented as predators, yet the narrator never comments on the violent dimension of these scenes. Many other passages stage a male character trying to impose himself on a woman: Auroch is stopped as he is pushing himself on Becca; Erik pressures Zoey to have sex after she loses her virginity to Loren... However, none of these scenes is presented as rape, or even as an attempt at it.

Three characters only are identified as rapists in the course of the series: Neferet's father, Kalona and Stark. The High Priestess's story is told in the novella *Neferet's Curse*; her father raped her and refused to express remorse; as a consequence, she killed him and became so full of hatred that she turned into the monstrous Queen Tsi Sgili, ready to destroy the world and rule over its remains. Kalona's story is first told in *Untamed* (chapter 22): the fallen angel was so obsessed with desire that he raped Cherokee women who gave birth to monstrous Raven Mockers, half human half bird creatures. The novels explain that he used to be the Goddess's consort; in the course of the story, he atones and redeems, gaining back his place at the side of Nyx herself. As for Stark, he is caught while attacking Becca in a corridor:

He was holding a girl in what could have been an embrace, had it not been obvious that, just seconds before his teeth had locked on her neck, she'd been trying to get away from him. I watched, horrified, as Stark, oblivious to our presence, continued his attack on her. It didn't matter that the girl was now moaning with sexual pleasure. [...] She was physically feeling pleasure, but her wide, terrified eyes, and the rigidity of her body made it obvious she would fight him if she could. Stark was drinking in huge gulps from her throat. His moans were feral and the hand that wasn't holding her tight against his body was fumbling at the girl's skirt, lifting so that he could situate himself between her legs and –.³⁹

However horrifying Zoey finds this scene, she kisses Stark almost immediately afterwards, then spends the night at his side (albeit in a non-sexual way).⁴⁰

Erin and Shaunee are the only characters to call the attack a rape; yet their conversation with Becca is highly disturbing:

³⁸ P. C. CAST, *Chosen*, 242-243.

³⁹ P. C. CAST, *Hunted*, 194.

⁴⁰ "How could I have kissed a guy who had been attacking someone just minutes before? How could I feel a connection to someone who might be more monster than man?" P. C. CAST, *Hunted*, 201.

“Really, I’m fine. It’s no big deal,” Becca was insisting in a voice that wasn’t shaky and scared anymore, but had suddenly changed to sounding incredibly annoyed.
“No big deal!” Shaunee said. “Of course it was a big deal.”
“The guy attacked you,” Erin said.
“It wasn’t exactly like that,” Becca said, waving her hands dismissively. “We were just messing around. Plus, Stark is really hot.”
Erin snorted. “Yeah, I usually find rapists majorly hot.”
Becca’s eyes narrowed and she looked cold and mean. “Stark is hot, and you’re just jealous that he didn’t want you.”
“Didn’t want me?” Erin said incredulously. “Don’t you mean, didn’t want to molest me? Why are you making excuses for him?”⁴¹

Becca downplays what has happened by using such adjectives such as “cold” and “mean,” which make it more difficult for the reader to identify her as a victim. Indeed, this scene paves the way for the later books, where Becca chooses the side of evil. Stark, on the other hand, finds his way to redemption in Zoey’s forgiveness. Her ability to see the man and not the monster in him enables him to find his humanity back, and he becomes fit to be her Warrior, her life long partner.

The two acknowledged rapists who remain alive find redemption thanks to the women in their lives. The two victims (who had no part in these redemptions), on the contrary, become evil. The text never states that not forgiving your rapist or helping his redemption makes a victim evil. But this equation is suggested by the fact that the only counter model is offered by Zoey, who not only forgives male violence but also helps the perpetrators heal. This tendency to blame the victim if she isn’t able to redeem her rapist sends a very strong message, especially as it is not coupled with a call for critical distance.

Conclusion

The twelve novels of *House of Night* have drawn more than a million ratings and 42,800 reviews for on goodreads.com.⁴² These figures indicate that the series not only reaches a large readership but also touches this readership deeply enough that they choose to interact, or at least to become manifestly active in their reading through reviews and comments on various posts. While the authors present Zoey as a role model, it is difficult to assess the specific influence these books have on readers. The text endorses slut shaming and trivializes sexual violence and rape in a heteronormative framework that uses bloodlust to essentialize gender behaviors. It also perpetuates masochistic stereotypes of men and women as stereotypical predators and prey, thereby countering the authors’ official progressive message of female empowerment. Moreover, *House of Night* builds on narrative intimacy to convey a negative portrayal of female sexuality in Young Adult vampire fiction, following a trend that also includes

⁴¹ P. C. CAST, *Hunted*, 204-205.

⁴² <www.goodreads.com>, last accessed on 3 October, 2016.

Vampire Academy or *Jessica's Guide to Dating on the Dark Side*. As Gina Wisker notes, the figure of the vampire endorses the dichotomy of gender power relationships, expressing the conservative values of a genre that conveys unease regarding teen sexuality.⁴³

⁴³ Jane Wisker, *Contemporary Women's Gothic Fiction*, London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016, 191.

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