

Shapeshifters in Love, Part I: The Allure of the Shapeshifting Hero

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The first article in a two-part series

Paranormal romance is king right now. With authors like Christine Feehan, Laurell K. Hamilton, and Sherrilyn Kenyon consistently hitting the bestseller list, publishers and agents are scrambling to find paranormal manuscripts.

In her class “Learn What You Write,” best-selling author Cathy Clamp (*Moon’s Web*, *Touch of Evil*) defines paranormal this way: “The key element of a paranormal is *legend*. Werewolves are legend, and so are vampires, pixies, fairies, doxies, living mummies, etc. A paranormal is PARA or “resembling or imitating” NORMAL “real life.” ... While it can be set in the future, the past or the present, the key is that everything ELSE is normal, except for the addition of this one element.” In the paranormal romance, frequently, that *one element* is a shapeshifting hero.

A *shapeshifter* is a being that can change from one form to another – and back again. The most common type of shifter is the human-to animal variety, sometimes called weres, but the possibilities are endless. Vampires and werewolves are very common right now, but the term shapeshifter also includes ghosts, wereleopards, thunderbirds, gargoyles, selkies, dryads, kitsune, and others.*

Stories about shapeshifters are nothing new; they have been around as long as storytelling itself. So what

is it about these heroes that is so compelling to romance readers today?

Old Mythology, New Twist

In the Foreword to *The Werewolf Book: The Encyclopedia of Shapeshifting Beings*, Dr. Franklin Ruel tells us that the first depiction of a wolf-man was inscribed on the wall of a cave — pre-dating the written word. Shapeshifting stories are found in mythologies from around the world, indicating that the allure of the shifter is universal. It speaks to something in *all* humans, regardless of culture.



Some say that these human-animal stories sprang from our primitive roots, when humans and animals lived in close proximity, living off the land together. Others say it is because humans, at their most basic, *are* animals. Unfettered by the restrictions of culture, civilization and social structure, who knows how wild we could be?

Zeus from Greek mythology, King Nebuchadnezzar in the *Book of Daniel*, Beorn in *The Hobbit*, Gregor Samsa in Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*, the Animagi in the *Harry Potter* books – shapeshifters can be found in almost every genre of literature. But, although tales of shapeshifters are well documented throughout the canon, the shapeshifters found in paranormal romance are light years away from their literary cousins.

In her 2001 article, “What is it About Werewolves?” Susan Krinard (*To*

Tame A Wolf, Star-Crossed) said that she “sought to create a new mythology of werewolves, leaving behind the old assumptions about curses, full moons and invariably evil killers.” While our shapeshifting hero may be a monster, he is not evil. He is a sexy beast: dark, menacing, deadly, but, in the end, *redeemed by love*.

The Best of Both Worlds

What pet owner doesn’t bask in the adoration of her beloved dog or cat? A pet’s unswerving, even fierce, devotion is one of the things that endear it to us. A real man may be unfaithful, but animals never cheat, right? The belief that animals are more honest and loyal than humans is a compelling one. Doesn’t it follow that a hero with an animal side would have more of these qualities than a regular man?

When speaking of the werewolf hero, Krinard says, “He’s dangerous, but if he’s anything like a real wolf, he’s also a devoted mate and father, exceptionally loyal and affectionate to his own. He’ll fight to the death to protect those he loves. He’s very territorial, and doesn’t let others into his circle easily – but once you’re there, you’re there forever.” The best of the animal in a human body.

Ideal Love

Built into the mythology of the two most common shapeshifting heroes, the werewolf and the vampire, is the concept of “ideal love” – the kind of love and devotion that most women dream of from a young age: loyal, devoted, steadfast, and never-ending.

With werewolves comes the idea of a “mate for life” – it is one of the most well-known traits of wolves in the wild. With divorce rates over 50%,



human love matches come without such guarantees. It is no coincidence that wolf-shifters are so popular in romances. With human males, there is no assurance that the relationship will last; in fact statistics prove otherwise. With the wolf-man, fidelity is built into his make-up.

Vampire lovers bring the idea of “eternal love.” In the January issue of *RWR*, best-selling paranormal romance writer Maggie Shayne (*Immortality, Darker Than Midnight*) says, “He’s damned, doomed to a life of darkness and outliving everyone he loves.” There is only one woman who can ease his pain: the heroine. And when he finds her, he will love her *forever*. Shayne says, “Eternal love is irresistible, and immortal love is, by definition, eternal.”

When the shapeshifting hero meets his mate, the one woman who is his match, his heart belongs to her forever.

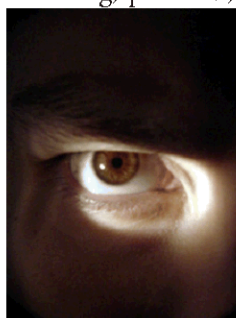
The Uber-Alpha, The Dark Hero, The Ultimate Bad Boy

While women might be offended by alpha-male dominance from a human partner, we can revel in it in the shapeshifting hero. After all, he can’t help it; he’s part animal. Being Alpha isn’t a matter of arrogance. It’s. Who. He. Is.

The shapeshifting hero doesn’t have to follow the rules. He’s from way beyond the “wrong side of the tracks”; he’s not 100% human. He’s dangerous, an actual predator; he’s uncivilized, *just like we want him to be*.

In her article, “The Dark Hero,” Suzanne McMinn (*Deep Blue, The Beast Within*) writes, “The paranormal romance is the perfect vehicle for the dark hero... [He] may feel cursed, isolated, destroyed, or rejected. He’s a werewolf, a ghost, an alien, a vampire. The “normal” world is lost to him, a strange universe where he exists only on the sidelines, forever pressing his nose against the candy store window, never to be let inside...until the love of a good woman saves him.”

Although in real life, we all know that you can’t change a man, there’s no harm in indulging in the fantasy. The shapeshifting hero is strong, powerful, brave — but *she* is the one who will save *him*—from his loneliness, if nothing else. What’s more, she is the **ONLY** one who can do it. There is something about her, possibly unnoticed by everyone else, that makes her special — perfect, for the shapeshifting hero. That is a powerful romantic fantasy.



Bodice Ripper For the Modern Woman

According to nationally renowned sex therapist Wendy Maltz (*Private Thoughts: Exploring the Power of Women’s Sexual Fantasies*), the number one sexual fantasy among women is the “rape fantasy.” Whether we cop to it or not, many women have fantasies of being dominated, of having a strong man take away her control — and also her responsibility. Maltz’ words are telling, “They want to play the innocent...who gets taken advantage of by the devious, predator-like man.” Sound like anyone we know?

However, the kick-ass heroines of today’s romances wouldn’t stand for the high-handed treatment their sisters endured in the bodice rippers of old. The Regency Rake, Marauding Pirate, Savage Warrior, Untamed Barbarian, even the Business Tycoon/Magnate — although model alpha males, these are not the heroes for the kick-ass heroine. They are all the precursors to the paranormal hero. In today’s politically correct world of independent, take-charge women, who can match them? Who is “man enough” to dominate them? Perhaps only a hero who is more than a man and not human at all.

But can he be tamed? Krinard says,

“The question we face with a shapeshifter hero is: how do we control him? Can he be controlled at all, or will his wild side predominate?” At its most basic level, the allure of the shapeshifting hero is that he is clearly a fantasy. As such, we can indulge in the idea of being dominated and having our control taken away. McMinn says, “The [Dark Hero]...plays into the fantasy of loving a frightening man. Do we want to love a frightening man in real life? Probably not. But in books, we can live that fantasy — and still remain in our real, safe world at the same time.”

Strong Enough to Be Her Man

I think, in the end, it comes down to the changes in our society that have allowed women unparalleled independence and power. Today’s women are strong, intelligent, capable and self-sufficient; they want heroines who reflect those qualities. It is becoming harder and harder to find real men who are a match for them.

The true allure of the shapeshifting hero to romance readers today is that he *needs* a strong woman. Not only strong, she must be “persistent, determined, smart, and brave” (McMinn). The shapeshifting hero respects the heroine’s strength, and is not unmanned by her independence. She is the woman he has been waiting for. The *one* who is different enough, special enough, to tame his savage soul. He is the one who is strong enough for her to lean on, and to let her stand on her own.

Sigh What’s not to love?

*In Part II, I will talk about the specific types of shapeshifters and their individual mythologies.

Jeanne loves shapeshifters. In her book, Animal Dreams (August 2006, Loose Id), both the hero and heroine are shifters — but neither werewolf nor vampire. Jeanne is a member of LARA, FF&P RWAOL, and is a founding member of Passionate Ink, the special interest chapter for erotic romance writers. Please visit her website at www.jannelaws.com.