

# Hopelessly Devoted:

What *Twilight* Reveals about Love and Obsession

In the fall semester of 2007, I was living every English teacher's dream. My best students, my worst students, my serious students, my most flighty students were absorbed, engrossed, virtually inhaling thick, grown-up-looking books. Every day during our silent reading time, they would turn page after page. When silent reading time ended, I allowed five more minutes, let them linger over that last paragraph while I waited patiently at the front of the class to begin our day's lesson. In one of my honors classes, I counted seven students reading the books that had become a phenomenon. They had intriguing titles: *Twilight*, *New Moon*, *Eclipse* (Meyer). Their covers were slick, glossy invitations designed in starkly contrasting black and white and red. One of them even featured nearly glowing hands cradling an apple, just begging a would-be reader to take a bite. I bit.

## The *Twilight* Phenomenon

*Twilight* follows a predictable pattern. A female protagonist, Bella, moves to a new town, Forks, Washington, to live with her father and becomes instantly smitten with the most handsome and most mysterious boy in her new school, Edward. The twist? Edward and his equally beautiful siblings are vampires. When she is alone with Edward for the first time in the sunlight, Bella sees him in his sunlit, glittering glory. At the same time, he reveals his struggle

against the primal desire to kill her, as well as the superhuman speed and strength that would allow him to do so. "Common sense [tells her she] should be terrified," but Bella finds herself "relieved to finally understand" the cause of Edward's mysterious, often aloof behavior toward her (Meyer, *Twilight* 272).

Later in the same chapter, Bella and Edward "declare" themselves to each other (Meyer, *Twilight* 274), and Bella decides that she will give up her humanity to live in Edward's world. Forever. Surprisingly, she never wavers after making this decision. Not only does she refuse to consider any other boy who falls for her (and they all do), but she also withdraws from her father and her new friends in favor of Edward's company. Moreover, Bella doesn't consider the beautiful parts of being human long enough to absorb how gruesome and dark and lonely Edward's existence is.

In investigating the phenomenon of this novel, I framed my reading around the following questions: what is so powerful about this work to my students, especially the girls? What is it about the vampire as

character that is so appealing?

What does this series say to the young people who read it? Through study of editorial and reader reviews, analysis of the novels themselves (*Twilight* in particular), and research on vampire mythology and gender roles in adolescent novels, I attempt to make sense of the love affair between my students and these books.

As a high school English

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teacher who has witnessed the phenomenal success of the *Twilight* novels in my own classroom and in popular media over the last several years, I recognize how powerful these texts are. My students, like thousands of others all over the country, love them, carry them around for weeks at a time, read them, re-read them. Yet, I worry about their merely absorbing the plot, images, and themes of these texts without taking a critical look. If our students are willing to spend so much time and energy on a novel, whether it is a novel that an adult would have selected for them or not, then we must take their efforts seriously. We cannot expect kids to read with an adult perspective, but we can encourage opportunities for them to question and probe into the characters and narratives that have become the objects of their obsession.

*Twilight* can be read as a novel with a predictable plot that reinforces passivity in young women and aggression in young men. Bella, the quintessential damsel in distress, is more than eager to allow Edward complete control over her safety, and indeed, her future. On the other hand, one can read Edward as a postmodern hero, the literary “bad boy” who reveals what it means to be human in an ironic blurring of the boundaries between good and evil. In this view, *Twilight* is the ultimate morality tale, encouraging abstinence and romance, rather than hasty lust. Either way, *Twilight* complicates the genre of both the vampire narrative and adolescent romance, offering readers a traditional love story on one level and a fresh perspective on relationships on another.

### What Readers and Critics Say

In studying the editorial reviews, I found many critics praising *Twilight* as not only a vampire novel, but “a sweet and innocent love story” in which Bella’s and Edward’s love is “as spiritual as physical although they never have intimate relations” (Blasingame 629). In the *New York Times*’ review of *Eclipse*, Bella is a “relentlessly intense heroine” at the center of a “steamy occult romantic thriller” (Schillinger, para. 2, 11). While the tone of the article is generally ironic, remarking in conversational prose the juxtaposition of the dangerous supernatural world and the superficiality of high school drama, it, like most editorial reviews, ignores the lingering philosophical issues surrounding Bella’s willingness to give up her humanity for an existence as an outlaw and outcast.

Editorial reviewers see this novel as a suspenseful, action-packed page-turner that is sure to capture the attention of readers of all ages. The problem here, though, is that the readers who are the target audience of this book are teenagers—specifically teenage girls. Some reviewers acknowledge the pervasive sensual imagery in the novel, particularly the way that readers are expected to respond to the characters’ “palpable” love “viscerally” (*Booklist* 58). However, in these professional reviews, the most disturbing aspects of Edward’s character are described even as they are tempered with gushing praise for the love story between the two characters. *Publisher’s Weekly* asserts that “the sense of danger inherent in [Bella’s and Edward’s] love, and Edward’s inner struggle [are] the perfect metaphor for the sexual tension that accompanies adolescence” (207). That kind of description would grab the attention of many adolescent readers, even if that love story involves a nearly one-hundred-year-old vampire, a teenage girl, and a relationship based on physical attraction that borders on abuse.

Absent from any reviews of this novel are excerpts from the text that provide vivid descriptions of characters’ moods and emotions that are particularly disturbing, not to mention particularly revealing. Early in *Twilight* Edward asserts his protective power over Bella against her will. In one scene, Bella falls faint at the sight of blood in biology class (insert ironic chuckle here), and Edward insists he drive her home. In Meyer’s prose, Edward is described in superlatives. In this instance, he is “outraged,” “indignant,” and “threatening,” “gripping a fistful of [Bella’s] jacket” and “yanking” her toward him (Meyer, *Twilight* 104-105). Bella, as the first-person narrator, describes herself “staggering,” being “ignored,” and “finally freed” once she relents to Edward’s demands (Meyer, *Twilight* 105). To me, this does not seem like the beginnings of a romantic love affair. Rather, Edward and Bella’s mutual magnetic attraction is based on physical appearance and

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proximity. When he is near, Bella can only concentrate on his beauty. He, likewise, finds her equally mysterious and fascinating, since she seems immune to his mind-reading powers.

For many readers, this is enough. Edward is so beautiful, so mysterious, so deliciously unattainable that his age (almost 80) and his dietary needs (the blood of living creatures) only makes him that much more appealing to readers. And Bella, who already feels isolated and different from her cell-phone-using, prom-attending peers, would of course be attracted to an equally aloof boy. Perhaps readers long for the freedom Bella enjoys once she falls in love with Edward.

With him, Bella believes she has found her true love and can choose her own path, independent of her parents, her friends, and even her species, but the price she pays for it is a willingness to participate at least to some extent in a traditional version of gender-separated power roles: from the very beginning of their relationship, it is clear that Edward is in control, both physically and emotionally.

Additionally, this novel expects that the reader will accept that the kind of power and passion that emanates from Edward's and Bella's relationship is the only logical progression of their relationship. Still, there is something beautiful about a creature who defies his very nature to remain devoted to a very human relationship. From the Cullens' choice to remain "vegetarian" (they kill animals only) to Edward's continuing sacrifices to cater to Bella's needs, the vampires in this novel seem even more human than their actual human counterparts. Edward *chooses* how he will be—he forges his own path in the absence of any kind of strict morality or adherence to religious dogma.

### **What's Wrong with a Little Obsession?**

Obviously, a guy like Edward can only exist in a dream world, but what does this kind of prevailing dream world reveal about young women in the twenty-first century? In one way, Bella is clumsy,

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goofy, and incomplete until she meets Edward. In that regard, she is a reincarnate from the protagonists in 1950s novels who primped for twenty pages just to attend a dance with the object of their affection. On the other hand, though, Edward is no ordinary boy (he's no ordinary monster, either), and Bella represents a uniquely modern young woman. She arrives in Forks already isolated from humanity. School is irrelevant; she has already learned every lesson presented in the school episodes. Her parents are grossly inadequate; Bella has come to Forks so that her mother can follow her new husband to baseball training camp, and her father can barely cook himself a meal

or wash his own laundry.

Even though many women in my generation were raised in the wake of first-wave feminism in which girls are not relegated to the home and are encouraged to pursue careers and interests independently, plots centering around girls who dream about boys asking them on dates, reciprocating their affection, and eventually living happily ever after are so pervasive in popular narrative that many don't recognize the stereotypes they represent. In discussing *Twilight* with some of my female students, I found that many saw nothing surprising or questionable about Bella's and Edward's relationship. It seemed normal to them that a girl would alter almost every area of her life for a boyfriend. Once we began discussing Bella's complete willingness to succumb to Edward's every mood, some actually did see parallels between this novel and the traditional, predictable romantic plots in other books they have read, and they began to notice (if not yet to question) the use of such a paradigm in literature intended for young women. However, because Edward and Bella's relationship is the stuff of fantasy, not real life, their characters provide opportunity for more than literal interpretation. Encouraging students to situate a novel like *Twilight* within the genres of both young adult literature and vampire tales as a whole can lead to deeper reflection and richer discussion that examines significant symbolism and

metaphoric meaning. In other words, this isn't just an entertaining read.

## The Lure of the Vampire—Then and Now

Vampire narratives intended for young adults reveal issues of humanity, most often sexuality and identity, that mirror some of the problems young adults grapple with today. In *Not Your Mother's Vampire: Vampires in Young Adult Fiction*, Overstreet categorizes notable patterns in vampire fiction, including stories on becoming a vampire, romances with vampires, and the humans involved with vampires.

Overstreet sees Anne Rice's Lestat novels, beginning with *Interview with a Vampire*, as pivotal in the rethinking of the vampire character in popular fiction. These characters are seductive and human, so much so that "far from being repulsed by or afraid of creatures that would previously have been considered monsters, we are drawn to them and may even want to become them" (7). In chronicling the myriad examples of vampire novels, ranging from serious to silly, Overstreet acknowledges that vampires, especially the attractive ones inspired by Anne Rice, may in fact represent "everything that most teenagers are not, but might like to be—fearless, attractive, powerful, cool, independent, unsupervised, and intelligent" (13). Clearly combining good looks, rebellious power, and elusive sexuality can be a path to success in reaching a young adult audience. Vampires are characters who have transcended time and death and who continue an existence in which their every choice is their own (Overstreet). They live outside the boundaries of society and are able to construct their own rules and morality, in the tradition of the dark Byronic hero. Many contemporary vampire characters choose compassion, mercy, and love, even in the face of their unquestionable power over the humans around them. They may be hundreds of years old, yet they are modern men who often protect those human characters who are good to them. *Twilight's* Edward is one such Byronic vampire hero.

## They Did What?!

### Love and Sex in the Vampire World

At first, there is a chance that Bella and Edward's relationship doesn't have to be sexual. It is nice to read about Edward's restraint, and we can feel how painful

it is for him to leave Bella in *New Moon*; he may be determined not to harm her, but he can't protect her from other vampires (even his own "family") or the various dangers associated with his way of life. In this manner, the "*Twilight* series so resonates with girls because it perfectly encapsulates the giddiness and the rapture—and the menace—that inherently accompany romance and sex for them" (Flanagan, para. 16). At first, their relationship is about falling in love and almost innocent sensual exploration. Even holding hands is almost too much, and their first kiss is nearly explosive.

In book four, *Breaking Dawn*, Bella and Edward marry and physically consummate their relationship. Although Edward's desire doesn't kill Bella, and although much of the action happens between the lines, the effects of their sexual encounter are obvious. The room is destroyed, and Bella looks as though she has been beaten black and blue. This is more than just a loss of virginity; it is primal, physical sex that finally occurs after "one thousand pages of foreplay" (Flanagan, para. 15). As *Breaking Dawn* progresses, Bella becomes pregnant, and in a gory, vivid birth scene, she delivers a vampire baby while simultaneously "dying," therefore creating an "acceptable" reason for Edward to change her into a vampire. From that point on, the existence of the vampire becomes the "normal" one in the novel. This seems like a perfect place for a happy ending, but even Bella's new immortality does not resolve all the conflict presented within this novel.

What do these books say to young women and young men who read them? On one hand, Bella's life literally ends when she marries Edward, but ironically, that choice is also her ultimate happiness. She realizes her full potential as a character only when she becomes a vampire; her human awkwardness and introversion morph into superpowers in Edward's

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world. Long before she ever becomes a vampire herself, though, Bella rejects humanity, rushing headlong into marriage with Edward. At his insistence, Bella does wait until she graduates high school and turns 18, but she does so with impatience. She doesn't want to age any further before becoming immortal, as Edward's body is frozen at 17.

### **Bella's Other Options?**

Not only does Bella choose Edward and eternal youth near the beginning of the series, but her character's choice is never really complicated by any other options. The other human characters are unsuitable substitutes for Edward, although they would make most adolescent female protagonists more than adequate boyfriends. These are characters that go to class, ask girls on dates, and hold after-school jobs, characters whose descriptions and actions evoke old-fashioned mores and an idealized time in American life (Flanagan).

As *New Moon* opens, Edward, afraid for Bella because of the very real dangers inherent in being a human among vampires (most especially the dreaded Volturi, a vampiric "royal family" who are at once fascinated by and threatened by Edward's family), seeks to protect her by leaving her. In the aftermath, Bella's friendship with Jacob, a Native American from the Quileute tribe, intensifies. As Bella pines for the missing Edward, she refuses to let herself fall in love with Jacob, but Meyer doesn't allow her heroine any chance to sort through a real love triangle. Instead, Jacob's role becomes more complicated by the revelation that he and some of his Quileute peers can morph back and forth into werewolves at will, no full moon necessary.

Is there any hope for young men whose friends, sisters, girlfriends read these novels? The young human men who become infatuated with Bella, like Mike and Tyler, are likeable, attractive boys with a balance of coolness and awkwardness that most any teenage girl would find adorable. Instead, Bella must choose between two monsters. Though there is potential at this stage for "the characters [to] grow too big for the box they've been placed in, where they become bold and try to deal with their issues," this never happens (Trimboli). There is no moment in any of the four *Twilight* novels in which "Edward . . . fail[s] at something and discover[s] humility" (Trimboli). Edward

barely has to fight Jacob for Bella's affection, and even though Edward and Jacob, as members of enemy monster species, are sworn enemies, even this complication doesn't really pose much of a conflict to Bella.

### **Bella as a New Woman**

By the end of *Breaking Dawn*, in a *deus ex machina* rivaling those of the best Greek tragedies, Jacob's role in Bella's life is secured. Members of the werewolf pack frequently "imprint" on a member of the opposite sex. This person is essentially the werewolf's "soul mate" and one true love. The Quileute men/werewolves remain faithful to the one on whom they have imprinted, devoting themselves to an eternity of love and protection. Jacob has involuntarily imprinted on Renesmee, Bella and Edward's child. The happy ending that Bella finds at the end of *Breaking Dawn* is complex—oddly postmodern yet optimistic, while simultaneously reinforcing traditional gender and social roles. It may not be the ending that readers could or would literally choose, and Bella's choice to follow Edward into his world may not be the ideal choice or the only choice for her character, but it is one that allows this narrative some kind of peaceful closure. The boundaries between good and evil are not totally erased, but they stretch far beyond the human and supernatural communities of Forks.

In the human world, Bella is faced with dichotomies. She, like many young women I teach, feels the pull to choose education and career *or* raising a family. She can stay in Forks *or* she can go to college. She must choose Edward *or* Jacob. Becoming a vampire, though, releases these dichotomies and expands her choices infinitely. Because Jacob has imprinted on Renesmee, he will be a friend in her life forever. Her father has accepted her choice, though under a thinly disguised sham of ignorance. And let's face it, as a member of the practically immortal un-dead, Bella can attend college dozens of times.

If we view Bella in this manner, then maybe her choice, her taking control of her own future, is the compelling component to this series. It's not hard to imagine, by the end of the series, that perhaps Bella has fallen in love so quickly with Edward because he is the gateway to her destiny. She certainly is a better vampire than human, even disguising the painful initiation process in order to spare Edward and his family the distress of watching her suffer. Once trans-

formed, she becomes the most powerful new vampire any of the Cullen family has ever seen. Watching Bella fall in love with the irresistibly beautiful Edward and convincing him to give her the one thing she decides she wants puts a strong female character at the center of two worlds and makes for a powerful reading experience. In this reading, she is innocent and seductive, naïve and clever: a biblical Eve tempting her own fate and Edward's strict morality. No wonder many are insanely jealous of Bella. Not only does she snare the coolest guy in town, but she does so on her own terms. Now that is a powerful story worthy of a popular culture phenomenon.

## Concluding and Continuing

As a comment on contemporary society, "one of the unintended lessons of *Twilight* is that America has gotten so moribund that it's the undead who come through in the clutch while the living go through their daily paces oblivious" (Wolcott 329). Certainly one interpretation of the novel is that in order to find acceptance and an escape from shallow materialism, one must look outside of society and indeed humanity itself.

On the other hand, from a literal perspective, maybe we are on the brink of a major shift in what teenagers expect from their literary counterparts. Though *Twilight* is filled with brooding existentialists, a relatively uncomplicated plot structure, and creepy imagery, it is certainly a departure from much of the other contemporary young adult literature that is currently being marketed to young women (Glenn). Rather than extol the virtues of materialism, alcoholism, and tawdry, pervasive sex, *Twilight* is ultimately about sacrifice. Bella sacrifices her humanity for a "life" that will give her room to define her own identity and realize her own potential. Edward sacrifices his own instincts for a grueling three novels before he can share eternity with his true love. For many young women, there is something powerful in such a romantic narrative, and there is something powerful in this series that young readers have embraced and are showing little signs of abandoning.

If we look beyond the mass-market selling of materialism disguised as literature that we find in many young adult texts, we may see the beginnings of a subtle shift in the messages and possibilities offered to

young people through books. If so, then it is important to encourage students to read this text critically, to explore it in the context of other popular media, and consider its implications beyond entertainment. It is possible that this novel allows for a questioning of assumptions and an expansion of our current understanding of love, young men, young women, and the ways in which we craft stories about them.

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