

## VAMPIRE MEETS GIRL: GENDER ROLES AND THE VAMPIRE'S SIDE OF THE STORY IN *TWILIGHT*, *MIDNIGHT SUN* AND *THE VAMPIRE DIARIES*

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The Monday after *New Moon*, the film based on the second book of the Twilight saga by Stephenie Meyer, opened worldwide, I asked my junior year students in my seventeenth- and eighteenth-century American literature seminar if they had watched it. That in the middle of a discussion about Jonathan Edwards' fear-filling sermons about the dangers and the extreme pain awaiting sinners in Hell. Though the looks on my students' faces said — "This is it, she has lost it after reading so many sermons by wackos," my question was to the point. The Puritans lived in a world where they believed that supernatural happenings could take place anytime, where the Devil was always lurking to stalk them by sending witches or sea monsters, and where miracles might happen (though they were rather called instances of God's providence, reflecting the Puritans' rejection of the Catholic terminology). That there exist men who can transform themselves into wolves or evil creatures feeding on others' blood would not have been a matter of too much wonder for them. Even reputed Puritan divine Cotton Mather, author of over 400 books, had devoted a section of his masterpiece *Magnalia Christi Americana* (The History of Christ's Church in America) to supernatural occurrences. The Puritans' fascination with natural sciences and their interest in the new scientific methods that were being developed at the time did not prevent them from believing in the Occult or the supernatural, just the contrary. The Devil being a constant presence in their daily lives, surely, the Puritans would have had no qualms in attributing vampires' and werewolves' special characteristics to witchcraft or the devil's doings — and put them to the bonfire right away. Because the Puritans would have found it a perfectly logical explanation for the Cullens' mysteriousness and their sometimes bizarre behavior that they were vampires, the Twilight saga thus is heir to an early American tradition of believing in the supernatural.

It is recurrent among twentieth-century rewritings of famous monster stories that the point of view is no longer that of the more or less helpless victim or even that of the rather cold, and unsympathetic (to the monster's plight) omniscient third-person narrator; instead, we are privy the point of view of the so-called monster, whose monstrosity comes to be questioned. In these retellings, the monster appears to be much more human, having feelings and emotions that up to them had been impossible for him to have due to his very characterization as a monster. For instance, *Mary Reilly* by Valerie Martin, through the eyes of the homonymous protagonist, the servant of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, offered a much more humane vision of the physician and his nemesis than Robert Louis Stevenson had provided. *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, the most recent cinematographic adaptation of the popular nineteenth-century novel, brings attention to the story's authorship to claim a version closer to the original, far from other, somewhat sugar-coated and at other times frankly risible representations of Victor Frankenstein's creature as a man with a greenish face and screws from his temples. This Frankenstein's creature is far from being happy with his lot and pledges revenge on his maker for his present anguish. In these contemporary, post-modern retellings, the focus (and thence, the reader's sympathy) is on the monster that cannot prevent his condition, much to his own chagrin, no matter his efforts to put an end to his situation. These are monsters, indeed, but they try their best not to be. They also suffer from pangs of

their consciences, telling them not to kill unnecessarily and, even when forced to kill, they are plagued by remorse and guilt. These monsters are, in way, moved by biological determinism: they try to avoid being what they are, but they miserably fail, because of their very natures — or their genetic makeup, if you wish.

A sequel told from the point of view of a character from the original novel is a rather popular literary development. Well-known examples include *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys (off *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë), *The Wind Done Gone* (off *Gone With the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell), *March* by Geraldine Brooks (off *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott), or *Pemberley* by Emma Tennant (off *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen), just to name a few. In 2008, Stephenie Meyer's work in progress, *Midnight Sun*, was posted all over the Internet, with all the efforts to put a stop to this violation of copyright miserably failing. Eventually, given the multiplicity of pirate versions, Meyer decided to give up writing *Midnight Sun* and instead posted the manuscript in draft form as it was in her own website ([www.stepheniemeyer.com](http://www.stepheniemeyer.com)). What was intended to be the fifth book of the Twilight saga represents Edward's side of the story. It is a very rare gift to have an insight into the male protagonist's thoughts. See *Pride and Prejudice* — we don't know Darcy's true thoughts till the end. This makes *Midnight Sun* so relevant to the study and better comprehension of the Twilight saga. In *Twilight* we see Bella's despair for receiving the cold shoulder from her biology class lab partner during her first days in Forks. It is not until later in the novel when we discover Edward's reasons for such an attitude towards Bella. *Midnight Sun* analyzes Edward's thoughts at meeting his forbidden object of desire.

One of the reasons why Edward is so appealing to the millions of *Twilight* fans (or Twi-hards, as they are also called) is that he is mysterious, larger than life, he can resist seemingly unendurable temptation (especially in *Eclipse* in the chapter "Compromise"). In *Eclipse*, in the chapter "Fire and Ice," we get an insight into Edward's head when Jacob, frustrated that it is always Edward listening to his most inner thoughts, aware of the workings of his mind (and, by extension, of the whole werewolf pack's collective mind), demands from Edward that, just for a night, he tells him what's going on in his mind. Though there might be some editing on the part of Edward, readers and Jacob now learn that, for all of Edward's boast of confidence about his hold on Bella, he also has his moments of doubt. This is all the more interesting when Bella herself begins to fancy herself in love with Jacob when she willingly kisses him before Jacob goes to take part in the battle against Victoria's army of newborns. *Midnight Sun* goes beyond this retelling and offers Edward's thoughts and feelings first-hand, without mediation, interference or self-censorship. *Midnight Sun* was to take a step further beyond into Edward's mind.<sup>1</sup> Far from being regarded as an aborted project, it is interesting to analyse *Midnight Sun* in regards to the four official Twilight series books. That the director of the *Twilight* movie, Catherine Hardwicke, filmed a scene from Edward's point of view according to *Midnight Sun* (though this scene did not make it to the theatrical version of the movie, it was included in the two-disc edition DVD), testifies to the importance of *Midnight Sun* to the Twilight saga.

While especially in the U.S. the Harry Potter books have often been accused of apology of witchcraft and of spreading an anti-Christian worldview, *Twilight* has been supported by the most conservative American groups, which have found nothing to worry about in a human's love for a vampire up to the point of being very willing to risk her immortal soul to follow him and for spending "eternity" with him,

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<sup>1</sup> Meyer has again explored the mind of the vampire in her 2010 novella *The Second Brief Life of Bree Tanner*, based on *Eclipse*, the third book in the Twilight saga.

even if it means kissing goodbye to Heaven. Whereas Rowlings' texts have been thoroughly examined for hints of black witchcraft even though she is not known to have any inkling to Wiccan beliefs, Meyer's books have not been so much widely examined for traces of Mormonism, despite Meyer's well-publicized condition as a member of the Church of the Latter Saints. Yet, for all of the praise that the chastity ideal and the no premarital sex advocacy of "Twilight" have encountered among conservative groups, feminists have not taken long in finding fault with Bella and Edward's relationship and the gender roles the saga puts forward. The protagonists' relationship is from the very beginning fraught with misunderstandings based on lack of communication, hardly a positive role model.

Many have characterized Edward and Bella's as an abusive relationship, moreover, for here physical danger and sexual violence to the female body are presented as appealing and titillating even, a charge brought to many different cultural creations, going from *Gone With the Wind* to the movie *Captivity* much more recently.<sup>2</sup> In *Twilight*, its attackers contend, we see the same feeling of being sexually aroused by danger or by the threat of physical harm inflicted on the female protagonist. According to professor Gina Barreca,

the big thing that really makes *Twilight* a really bad book is that fear should never be an aphrodisiac. The idea that you fear your lover should not make him sexier and that is a big part of these books. ... It distresses me to see that in any form, whether or not it's supernatural. It's a damaging fantasy. ... It's the idea that she feels as if she is in a dangerous relationship and she doesn't know how to get out of it and that finally, however much in danger you feel, love has to conquer. ... No, when you feel yourself in danger, you have to go away, put yourself in another novel."<sup>3</sup>

Feminist readings of the Twilight saga denounced that jealousy is regarded as a sign of love (and not as a flaw), that rough sex can be pleasurable even though it can be harmful, that giving up one's dreams, aspirations, lifestyle... becomes a positive choice for American teenage girls. It all ends up presenting a picture of love as full of sacrifices and personal renunciations for women. Even more harmful, being more than willing to make costly personal sacrifices (even renouncing to one's family), and losing friends in the process (that is, getting isolated socially) are seen as indicators of love—forgetting that one of the very signs of wife-beating includes the victim's isolation from those who might help her out. All in all, the Twilight saga endorses traditional values such as no premarital sex, early marriage...

If feminists have complained about the kind of relationships portrayed in "Twilight" or women's roles in the saga, vampire purists have also criticized what they have deemed an "unrealistic" and sugar-coated portrayal of vampires, where they can go outdoors in broad daylight or are vegetarians, these being things that go beyond our understanding view of vampires in common parlance. Still, offering a much more sympathetic (and we would even dare to say, human) side to supernatural beings is no new literary development with whose originality we could credit Meyer. The protagonist of *The Vampire Diaries* (first published in the 1990s and conveniently reissued in 2009 after the success of *Twilight*, with three more novels being added to the former four-novel saga), Its protagonist, Elena Gilbert, is the most popular girl but now she feels she does not belong. Similarly, Bella Swan feels a bit alienated from her high school

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<sup>2</sup> Curiously enough, fan fiction writers, fond of re-writing their favorite texts into new contexts and situations, have also perceived the similarities between *Gone With the Wind* and *Twilight* by creating cross-overs between the two texts.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Kathleen Megan, "Fear As An Aphrodisiac" *Hartford Courant* November 18, 2009 [http://articles.courant.com/2009-11-18/news/09111712259486\\_1\\_young-girls-dangerous-twilight-books](http://articles.courant.com/2009-11-18/news/09111712259486_1_young-girls-dangerous-twilight-books) accessed March 17, 2010.

mates, and though she is popular, this is new to her, and she cannot quite get used to, suddenly, being hot stuff. Stefan soon feels a hunger for Elena he will not indulge in ... Does this ring a bell? *The Vampire Diaries* present Stefan's thoughts more readily, from the very beginning of the first book, *The Awakening*. We are privy to his thoughts, his feelings, his memories and even his Powers.

The portrayals of Stefan and Edward are heavily dependent on the description of the dark hero. This dark hero was a stock character in nineteenth-century American fiction, peopling such works as Augusta Jane Evans' very popular Civil War novels *Macaria* or *St. Elmo*, Mr. Rochester in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Mr. Darcy in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and even Margaret Mitchell's Rhett Butler (off *Gone With the Wind*) can be considered a continuator of such a trend. But if these dark heroes are to be redeemed, this is to be achieved only through the love they feel. Stefan "was a sucker for maidens who needed to be rescued," very much like Edward, he is afraid of hurting Elena though he vows he will never and he is determined not to make her give up sunlight. It is interesting that where in *Twilight* we had a religious interpretation of vampirism and Edward does not want Bella to renounce to her immortal soul, in *The Vampire Diaries* what is most difficult to give up, in Stefan's view, is not the salvation of one's soul but sunlight and all this involves — such as fulfilling his public duties as citizen of Renaissance Italy. Civic duty then replaces religious concerns. Far from traditional depictions of vampires as ruthless, cold bloodsuckers, avid of blood and new victims and careless about the consequences of their actions, these postmodern vampires are not 100% comfortable in their own skin and, therefore, do not want to turn the women they love into vampires. These vampires who miss human life and sometimes reject their condition do not want to make more vampires.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to the appeal of the dark hero description, female models presented the *Twilight* saga are far from being so attractive. The female role models Bella can aspire to fulfill in the *Twilight* saga are quite limited. Following the path of her mother involves a personal sacrifice, for her mother has rejected the comforts of her own home to travel with her new husband, in the process having to renounce to her daughter too. Her mother will not do as a good female role model — she is presented as a sort of surrogate daughter for Bella, who has to take care and protect her constantly from real life events in general terms or from vampires in particular. Her girl friends are her best friends in Forks until she becomes Edward's girlfriend, when she promptly forgets all her other friends.

Within the vampires, she admires Alice, who is a role model for her in that Bella aspires to be a vampire just like her prospective sister-in-law. Also, not only does she want to be like Alice, Alice can help her become what she wants. This role model does not only apply in the traditional sense of role models helping us to model our personalities, dress style, hairdo, etc., so as to resemble that of the person we admire; here, Alice can literally transform Bella into a vampire, thus exerting a powerful influence on her. Emily is a rather good role model — caring, protecting her men, but, still, she poses an ugly face (literally and metaphorically) — the danger that might come from getting involved with werewolves. Still, Emily's choice has involved a danger to her physical integrity. Also, the notion that werewolves "match up" with their partners involves no choice, no free will. The novel is also plagued by other traditional female roles — Bella is almost a dutiful wife to Charlie, quite a Cinderella: she cooks and takes care of the housework, conveniently forgetting that Charlie somehow managed to survive such menial tasks for

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<sup>4</sup> The ones who do want to make new vampires are happy enough with their condition as killers are evil, as seen by the portrayal of Victoria in *Eclipse*.

more than a decade after Bella's mother deserted him. Additionally, not only is Bella looking for a role model for herself in her own process of growing up into adulthood. She has also become a role model herself for million of female readers (teenagers or not). All in all, if the description of the appealing male vampire resonates with echoes of the Victorian novel dark hero and the twentieth-first century sensitive to woman's needs metrosexual man, these stories are problematic when it comes to offering suitable role models for the female protagonist other than the outdated damsel in distress stereotype.

*The Vampire Diaries* series and the Twilight Saga are both of them a celebration of small town America. If "Twilight" is set in Forks, Washington, *The Vampire Diaries* is set in similarly small Fell's Church, Virginia. These vampires are a vindication for the traditional American values of small towns now in the process of getting lost (in contrast to the much more urban vampires of *True Blood*) as well as an embodiment of conservative agendas, more so in the case of "Twilight" with its abhorrence of premarital sex and its endorsement of chastity. They offer conventional views of manhood (as protectors) and womanhood (as beings to be cherished and protected). Female protagonists in these novels are damsels in distress ready to be rescued from the stupidity they have brought upon themselves: Bella wanders alone after dark in the city and has some guys chasing after her, Elena leaves the homecoming dance with a disreputable character and he gets too rough with her .... The appeal of old-fashioned ideals for teenagers, such as chivalry, being a gentleman, getting married before having sex... might be surprising at first glance, but it can be better understood when we bear in mind that these novels also capitalize on the rush of emotions and hormones that control teenagers such as teenage angst, the anxiety about an uncertain future, (college, unstable job market, moving away from home and friends...), alienation, the search for an identity of one's own while conforming to social rules and norms (be them the high school microcosm or society as a whole) ...

The uncanny comes closer to home, maybe even too close for comfort. For instance, *The Faculty* has a student's worst nightmare come true – that your teacher is really a monster. If the premise of *Prom Nights From Hell*, the short story collection co-authored by Stephenie Meyer, Meg Cabot and two other authors, holds true, vampires and other supernatural monsters are about to come a fixture of prom nights and high school dances as much as beautiful dresses and punch. In these stories, high schools can very well be a horror site, as teenage movies have showed over and over again. All in all, by presenting a more understanding and sympathetic view of the vampire, the Twilight series and *The Vampire Diaries* also offer an agenda of their own, whose influence on teenagers remains to be seen other than the rapid rise of the use of Isabella and Edward as two of the most popular baby names in the U.S. right now.

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