

Twilight Appeal : The cult of Edward Cullen

Vampire love in Stephenie Meyer's novels and the new film

By Steven D. Greydanus

For a critic, the *Twilight* phenomenon is a little like *The Da Vinci Code* crossed with James Cameron's *Titanic*. An ordinary critique of Stephenie Meyer's wildly popular gothic teen romances of vampire love — the first of which is now a monster hit from director Catherine Hardwicke (*The Nativity Story*) would be pointless.

Not only are the critic's efforts irrelevant to the massive, often '*obsessive*' (according to the self-diagnosis of many devotees), almost entirely female fan base, but the elephant in the room still remains to be addressed. What is it that *Twilight* does so well for its legions of devoted young fans — not to mention their *equally rapt mothers*, some of whom appear to be driven to distraction by Meyer's fantasy life?

One of the best essays on the *Twilight* mystique is that of **Laura Miller** (Salon.com), who argues that Meyer's vampires are '*high school's aristocracy, the coolest kids on campus, the clique that everyone wants to get into*'. Miller sees *Twilight* as '*the 21st century's version of the humble governess who captures the heart of the lord of the manor*', catering to the '*traditional feminine fantasy of being delivered from obscurity by a dazzling, powerful man*'.

Though the class politics are reversed, this is essentially the same salvation fantasy embodied by Rose in *Titanic*, who was likewise **rescued from ordinariness by an extraordinary love**, offered by a wondrous young man with a **poetic soul** standing apart from ordinary society. Yet where Rose's liberation in *Titanic* involved the repudiation of the bourgeois values and hypocrisy represented by her family and fiancé, culminating in the freedom of illicit sex, *Twilight* has been widely claimed to resonate with conservative values.

Rather than pitting noble vampires against mainstream society, *Twilight* is sympathetic to human characters, including the heroine's family and friends at school ; even the vampires' longstanding enemies, a pack of Native American werewolves, are positively depicted. Above all, the dashing vampire Edward Cullen's abstinence from human blood, and his protracted

struggle to resist his desire for the blood of his human beloved Bella Swan, has prompted many to describe *Twilight* — some approvingly, others with consternation, as a **pro-chastity romance**. Reinforcing the point, Meyer — a Mormon housewife and mother of three — has Edward and Bella wait until the fourth volume to get married and only then have sex.

Edward belongs to a **human-abstinent vampire** clan who call themselves ‘*vegetarians*’, meaning that they subsist on animal blood rather than human — a physically sustaining diet to vampires, but thin gruel. Edward compares it to a human living on tofu, but it’s pretty clear that his manifest discomfort around Bella when they first meet in biology class has less to do thematically with vegan meat-lust than with the effort of a chaste adolescent boy to tear his eyes away from his pretty lab partner’s neckline and think about something — anything — other than how much more biological he would like to be with her at that moment.

While the **sexual subtext of the vampire motif is obvious and well known**, it is also **problematic**. Ordinary male-female attraction reflects the innate mutual complementarity of the sexes. Man is made for woman, and woman for man ; each completes the other, a reciprocity fully revealed in the nuptial embrace. While sexual desire can manifest itself in disordered ways, and a healthy sexuality necessarily entails self-mastery and rejection of temptations to indulge our appetites in selfish and sinful ways, both desire and the conjugal union to which it is rightly ordered are good in themselves.

As typically imagined, and certainly as presented in Meyer, **vampirism makes a sickly, twisted metaphor for sexuality**. Nothing like mutual complementarity can exist between humans and vampires — at least, not without completely rewriting vampire nature somehow. Vampires have **nothing to give and everything to take** ; humans have everything to lose and nothing to gain. Humans may complete vampires, but vampires don’t complete humans, any more than a lion completes an impala.

Even Edward and Bella seem aware of this : ‘*And so the lion fell in love with the lamb*’, Edward muses, to which Bella complacently replies ‘*Stupid lamb*’ and Edward adds ‘*Sick, masochistic lion*’. Elsewhere, Edward suggests that Bella’s unswerving devotion to and trust in him merely reflect **his species’ natural advantages over their prey**. ‘*I’m the world’s best predator, aren’t I ?*’ he asks with rhetorical self-loathing. ‘*Everything about me invites you in — my voice, my face, even my smell.*’

Actually, this isn't quite true. At least one aspect of Edward's physicality would seem to compromise his seductive powers : the coldness and hardness of his unliving flesh. In a oft-derided detail, it turns out that Meyer's vampires are not only rock-hard, but glitter like diamonds in sunlight, which is the real reason they avoid it !

Yet it's Edward's beauty, perfection and desirability that *Twilight* emphasizes above all. A typical, much-quoted sample : *'He lay perfectly still in the grass, his shirt open over his sculpted, incandescent chest, his scintillating arms bare. His glistening, pale lavender lids were shut, though of course he didn't sleep. A perfect statue, carved in some unknown stone, smooth like marble, glittering like crystal.'*

Chastity is a precious thing, and the struggle to be chaste is both an inevitable part of a moral life and a legitimate subject for narrative art. In part, this quest for chastity may legitimately form some part of *Twilight's* appeal. At the same time, a narrative that wallows in the intoxicating power of temptation and desire, that returns again and again to rhapsodizing about the beauty of forbidden fruit, may reasonably be felt to be a hindrance rather than an affirmation of self-mastery.

This is all the more problematic in a story in which, unlike normal adolescents wrestling with desire, Edward and Bella dance around an act that is ***inherently monstrous and destructive*** : becoming a vampire. For some young readers, the darkness of this struggle might resonate in part with **distorted adolescent fear of sex** — but on a larger level their temptation speaks to **unhealthy, disordered appetite, like an addict's craving for his drug of choice.** *'Exactly my brand of heroin'* is how Edward describes Bella.

Why is Edward so fascinated with Bella ? It's not immediately clear. Bella describes herself as plain, clumsy and unpopular, and clearly suffers from low self-esteem — though none of these defects figures in the film, where she's played by model-perfect Kristen Stewart. That Edward is merely one of several boys interested in Bella in the first quarter or so of the book, despite her alleged unattractiveness, suggests that the love she is offered may be less about winsomeness than wish fulfilment.

Whatever the cause, **to be desired beyond all reason or control**, even wantonly or destructively, is a **powerful aphrodisiac, flattering both to pride and to self-doubt.** Beyond the allure of forbidden fruit, there is the thrill of *being someone else's forbidden fruit* — of

being desired in spite of it being wrong, or possibly even *because it is wrong*. It's one thing for one available person to attract another, but what an affirmation of one's desirability and worth to be **attracted and pursued by someone who is unavailable**, or to be unavailable oneself and yet be pursued by others. Edward has sworn off human blood, yet he thirsts madly for Bella, and struggles not to give in. It is not unlike the effect of a handsome young priest smitten with an equally nice-looking female parishioner — not a healthy sort of attachment to indulge, even in fantasy.

Edward's extravagant declarations of love aren't just the flattery of an amorous young swain hoping to score, or even the sincere devotion of an ardent suitor looking forward to the eventual consummation of his love. *Twilight* offers a romantic male who loves and adores, not only **without condition**, but even without expectation or hope, asking *nothing* of the heroine now or ever, other than to bask in her presence.

Not only does Edward save Bella, but *Bella also saves Edward*. This is part of another side to Edward's appeal : that of the **tragic, doomed hero**, cut off from normal hopes and fears, isolated in despair — **until Bella's love offers him redemption**. On this point the disordered and destructive side of Edward's thirst is integral, not incidental, to his appeal. He isn't just the bad boy, he's the bad boy *who can be saved if only the good girl loves and trusts him enough*. He really is a romantic addict, dangerously seductive, proudly resentful, drawing Bella in with those most irresistible words : '*Stay away from me for your own good*'.

This warning, of course, only proves how much he needs her — and Bella responds by falling '*unconditionally and irrevocably in love*' with him. It's the ultimate version of that game of trust where you fall backward and the other person has to catch you, except that (a) the falling is all Bella's and the catching all Edward's, and (b) if Edward slips up, Bella's a desiccated corpse, and no coming-back possible.

Making matters worse, as **Gina R. Dalfonzo** ([National Review](#)) notes in a valuable essay, Edward isn't actually the kind of guy you want to trust implicitly. On the contrary, he can be more like a **creepy, controlling abuser** than a loving and respectful beau :

He spies on Bella while she sleeps, eavesdrops on her conversations, reads her classmates' minds, forges her signature, tries to dictate her choice of friends, encourages her to deceive her father, disables her truck, has his family hold her at his house against her will, and enters her house when no one's there — all because, he explains, he wants her to be safe. He warns

Bella how dangerous he is, but gets *'furious'* at anyone else who tries to warn or protect her. He even drags her to the prom against her expressed wishes. ... It gets even worse after the wedding night, when Bella finds herself trying to cover up a multitude of bruises left by the super-strong Edward. That scene, which Meyer treats with appalling lightness — *'This is really nothing'*, Bella tells her remorseful husband, insisting that the experience was *'wonderful and perfect'* — should send a chill down the spine of any parent with a daughter.

By Ashley C. Wyman

After four books and five films, Bella's perennial *damsel in distress* status wears more than thin. Yet one might wonder : what is it in the *Twilight* world that so many girls and even grown-up women find **so compelling that the real world pales** by comparison ?

1 – An unhealthy fascination for bad boys

My first answer is a writer's answer. It's a trend, it's a mood. Everybody is in love with 'bad boys'. This somewhat unhealthy fascination with unwholesome and dangerous relationships, so common in today's literature and cinema is also mixed with a Nightingale syndrome desire to *'be saved'* by a bad boy.

2 – A larger cultural crisis of masculinity

My second answer is a woman's answer. The cult of Edward Cullen largely draws from a very contemporary problem : the present crisis of masculinity. Long gone is the figure of the *knight in shining armour* of more courteous times. Long gone is the *gallant suitor* of Jane Austen's world. Would it be then that Edward somehow **offers women something that real men of today have lost or forgotten** ? Kindness, delicacy, respect, truthfulness, protection ?

What if husbands were kinder to their wives ? What if conscientious loving fathers brought up their sons to **treat women with honour and dignity**, and their daughters to **respect themselves and to expect the same** from others ? In such a world, I suspect the allure of a tortured vampire lover wouldn't glitter half so brightly.

3 – Yearning for the perfect man

My last answer is a Catholic's answer. I think Edward represents the yearning in every woman's heart for the perfect man, a yearning that is only satisfied in the person of Jesus...