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# "I Could Kill You Quite Easily, Bella, Simply by Accident": Violence and Romance in Stephenie Meyer's "Twilight" Saga

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“I Could Kill You Quite Easily, Bella, Simply by Accident.”<sup>1</sup>: Violence and Romance in  
Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* Saga

By

Samantha Oakley

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

Gender and Women’s Studies

Minnesota State University, Mankato

Mankato, Minnesota

May 2012

“I Could Kill You Quite Easily, Bella, Simply by Accident’: Violence and Romance in Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* Saga”

Samantha Oakley

This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the thesis committee.

Dr. helen crump, Advisor

Dr. Maria Bevacqua

Dr. Kirsti Cole

## Abstract

An abstract for the thesis of Samantha Oakley for the Master of Arts in Gender and Women's Studies at Minnesota State University, Mankato, Minnesota.

Title: "‘I Could Kill You Quite Easily, Bella, Simply by Accident’: Violence and Romance in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* Saga"

This thesis argues that Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* saga is an exemplification of rape culture due to its valorization of romantic relationships that are psychologically abusive, violent, and ultimately destructive. In my analysis, I use a postmodern feminist framework to examine the four main books in the series: *Twilight*, *New Moon*, *Eclipse*, and *Breaking Dawn*. Specifically, focusing on how the female protagonist, Bella Swan, is portrayed, I interrogate the interactions with her two love interests, Edward Cullen and Jacob Black. I found that the romantic developments between Bella, Edward, and Jacob are depicted as violent and dangerous affairs that echo non-physically abusive relationships, ignore consent, and rely on implied threats of psychological violence to control Bella. In addition, these destructive aspects of the relationships are romanticized through their normalization, belittlement, and religious sacralization. Due to the series' cultish following, the implications of marketing love as obsessive, violent, and all consuming is damaging to its audience when these relationships are being championed as reflections of true love.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

Since the first book's release in 2005, the *Twilight* saga has become a cultural phenomenon that has taken over the imaginations and behaviors of both its young and older adult readers. This series, which author and creator Stephenie Meyer has revealed came to her in a dream, has broken sales records, produced movie adaptations, and evoked an explosion of fictional works featuring vampires. In 2009, sales from the *Twilight* series accounted for 16% of all book sales (DeBarros). The release of the final book, *Breaking Dawn*, in 2008 broke its publisher's first-day release records by selling 1.3 million copies (Memmott). In addition to the staggering number of books sold, the series has also spawned a growing franchise that includes five movies, apparel, hair products, wall decals, Barbie dolls, jewelry, and other various products. Supporting this gargantuan *Twilight* industry is the series' cult like fan base.

The most well-known aspect of *Twilight* fans is their tendency to split into two teams. These teams reflect the driving dynamic of the *Twilight* series, which is the love triangle between Bella Swan, Jacob Black, and Edward Cullen. Fans of the series designate themselves according to which male love interest they prefer: Team Edward or Team Jacob. This dynamic of the fan base has been taken up by the franchise through the promotion of products designated to showcase which team the fan supports. In addition to the divide in the fan base, enthusiasts of the series have also shown a devotion to the series that stretches far outside of the novels through organizing conventions dedicated to the saga, getting tattoos featuring quotes from the novels or cover art from the books, and hosting *Twilight*-themed parties.

Consequently, these books should be examined critically because of how they impact ideals about romantic relationships. *Twilight* has made a massive contribution to the commercialization of love. Jewelers have crafted rings to resemble Bella's engagement and wedding rings that are sold to fans of the series. Wedding dresses have been modeled to resemble Bella's. *Twilight*-themed weddings have also exploded on the scene in the past few years. Google has over 500,000 links to websites offering tips, ideas, and how-to guides for people wanting to fashion their own weddings after Bella and Edward's. The number of people modeling their weddings after Edward and Bella's highlights how much aficionados of the series are modeling real-life relationships after the couple. This desire to mirror Bella and Edward's liaison in real-life demonstrates why a critical reading of this series is important. Caught up in the true love propaganda, fans tend to ignore the various nuances of the Bella-Edward relationship. Consequently, the destructive and abusive tonality of the relationship is valorized as romantic when in real-life the dynamics of the interactions between Bella and Edward are indicative of a victim and her domestic abuser.

In this thesis project, I argue that Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series is detrimental to young women due to the romantic relationship at the center of the novels that exemplifies rape culture, promotes heteronormative ideologies, and glorifies traditional gender roles. My scholarship here fills in the gap of a critical feminist analysis of the series focused on the abusive and destructive relationship that is the main driving plot of the novels. The mass popularity of the *Twilight* saga makes this analysis crucial to



displaying the damaging aspects of Bella and Edward's relationship that are exalted in each novel.

The main focus of the *Twilight* novels is the progress of protagonists Edward and Bella's relationship. Fans of the series are particularly fanatical about Edward and his actions towards Bella. They consider his interactions with Bella to be the epitome of romance and, consequently, "true love." One example of this is seen on the website [bellaandedward.com](http://bellaandedward.com); here readers gather to discuss what they enjoy about the relationship. On a page dedicated to statements by fans about why they love the series, most of the comments revolve around their fascination with Edward. As seen in one fan's statement, "I like the romance. It's the ideal relationship that most girls envision when dreaming about finding that perfect someone. I want my own Edward--minus the shimmering vampire part" ("Why Twilight"). This exalting of Edward, an ultimately abusive character, as the prime example of a romantic partner is what makes a critical analysis of the relationship dynamics imperative. Aspects of the romance portrayed in *Twilight* are bleeding out into concepts and expectations of intimate relationships. The influence this series has can be seen in one fan's statement about how *Twilight* completely changed her view on romance. She writes,

Twilight made me realize what I was missing in my life; Twilight to me is an emotional eye opener, I didn't realize how I cheated myself all these years being with someone I wasn't in love with but because I'd been with him for so long it was all I knew.[...] Twilight made me realize how I craved feeling loved. [...] Edward represents what a perfect man should

be, and although I know this is a fictional story I realized I was loved deprived and I needed to reevaluate my relationship and myself and seek to find my soul mate if such a thing does exist. (“Why Twilight”)

Many similar statements exist about true love and measuring romantic partners against Edward Cullen as a standard. It is this cultish following that makes the implications of marketing a romantic relationship that is obsessive, violent, and all consuming damaging to its audience, especially when it is championed as “pure” love.

In the literature review chapter of this thesis, I discuss how Meyer’s series utilizes the idea of “pure” love to create a fantasy existence that draws in readers. The fantasy life these novels present to the readers is one completely free from the everyday responsibilities and worries most people face. The appeal of this fantasy overrides the toxic aspects of Edward and Bella’s relationship by making Bella’s reward for her submission greater than keeping her independence. For Bella, Edward is the embodiment of a fantasy lifestyle. Yet, nothing about the lifestyle Bella longs for over the course of four novels depends on her own autonomy. Instead, it completely revolves around Edward.

Edward offers the epitome of a worry-free existence. He is immortal, wealthy, strong, and attractive. He and his family are also considered unique among vampires due to their decision not to feed from humans. All this combines to create the idea that he is an extraordinary person, so when he immediately becomes fascinated with Bella, the implication is that she too is special because of his interest. This desire to feel special is projected onto the readers through their connection with Bella. These connections are

formed through descriptions of Bella with which the female readership find it easy to identify. Identification with Bella is further implicated through all four novels first-person narratives from her point of view.

The connection between Bella and the readers makes her achieving a relationship with Edward even more desirable. Aside from making its audience feel special, the fantasy that Edward offers goes much further. As stated earlier, he offers a lifestyle free from average concerns and worries. Bella stands to inherit this lifestyle if she manages to form a lasting bond with him. Edward's extreme wealth is portrayed throughout the novels and guarantees Bella a life free from the worry of income, debt, and poverty. This wealth is ensured to extend to Bella through Edward constantly trying to give her expensive things.

He also offers a seemingly safe and protected existence. One of Bella's most repetitive character quirks in the novels is her clumsiness. Bella is constantly described as tripping, dropping things, or accidentally injuring herself. Her constant bad luck, which often puts her into dangerous situations, is one of the running jokes in the series and typically features Edward rushing to her rescue. Since Bella is portrayed as a magnet for dangerous situations, Edward's overbearing tendencies are portrayed as wanting to ensure she remains safe. This is continuous throughout all four books where Edward typically utters, writes, or has items engraved with the phrase "Be Safe" to Bella. He is also constantly represented as saving her from various dangers that extend beyond the supernatural.

Finally, Edward's immortality offers Bella extreme beauty forever and a life free from an average death. (I say average because Meyer's vampires can still die, but only if their bodies are ripped to pieces and the remains burned.) His ability to pass on his vampirism, thereby ensuring a life free from aging, disease, and natural death, leads to an ultimate romantic ending to their relationship. Readers are left with the image of Bella and Edward literally living happily ever after.

#### Key Concepts, Plots, and Characters

Throughout this project, I refer to the *Twilight* saga as an exemplification of rape culture. The definition of rape culture that I employ in this thesis is taken from Emilie Buchwald, Pamela R. Fletcher, and Martha Roth's compilation of essays titled *Transforming a Rape Culture*. This text describes rape culture as "a complex set of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent. In a rape culture women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women *as the norm*" (ii). It is also a culture that condones, eroticizes, and trivializes sexual violence against women. I apply this term to the *Twilight* series because of its trivialization and eroticization of violence against Bella. Throughout all four novels, there is an inordinate amount of violence perpetrated against Bella; yet every one of those scenes is treated with a disturbing amount of levity, thus minimizing the impact on Bella.

In my methods chapter, I discuss my process and reason for coding these scenes in such a way.

Another term I use throughout my analysis is “pure” love. I use this phrase to indicate two specific things about how the relationship is perceived and promoted. First, I employ it to indicate how the relationship is marketed to its audience as the ultimate true love story of two innocents. Second, I engage the term to direct attention to the religious facets of the novels that promote the idea of Edward and Bella’s relationship as sanctified by God and therefore “pure.”

### Summary of the *Twilight* Saga

The first novel in the series, titled *Twilight*, acts as the “how they met” book. The story opens with Bella Swan moving to live with her father in the small town of Forks, Washington, where she meets Edward Cullen. From there, the plot begins to focus entirely on Bella and Edward forming a relationship. *Twilight* also acts as an introduction to most of the main characters in the series. Jacob Black plays a very minor role in this novel, serving primarily to introduce the idea of vampires into the storyline. The majority of this story centers on Edward’s fascination with Bella and her slow discovery that he is a vampire. The very last section of the book introduces James, Victoria, and Laurent. These three act to illuminate the different kinds of vampires in the series. James, Victoria, and Laurent are cast as vampires who feed off and kill humans. James attempts to kill Bella, but is killed by the Cullens. At the end of the novel, Jacob hints at the conflict

between the Cullen family and the Quileute tribe by delivering a warning to Bella to stay away from Edward. This insinuates the plot of the next book, *New Moon*.

*New Moon* is the story where the love triangle between Edward, Bella, and Jacob first appears. It is also the only book where Edward is not a main feature of the plot. At the beginning of the story, Edward breaks off his relationship with Bella. He assumes that she will be safer if he is not around, so the entire Cullen family leaves Forks. The result is that most of the novel is dedicated to Bella mourning that Edward is no longer with her. During this time, Bella also begins forming a friendship with Jacob, and the werewolves make their first appearance into the series. Most of the time Bella spends with Jacob is centered on her performing potentially life-threatening tasks because she has discovered that if she does something dangerous she can hear Edward's voice in her head. One of Bella's stunts leads to Edward believing that she is dead, causing him to attempt suicide. Bella rushes to stop Edward, which results in their reunion. This section introduces the Volturi to the series. Like James, Victoria, and Laurent, the Volturi act as the Cullen family's opposites, reiterating the virtuous character of the Cullens. However, Jacob once again closes the story by declaring that he and Bella can no longer be friends, effectively setting up the main conflict for *Eclipse*.

*Eclipse* focuses on Bella being coerced to choose between her friendship with Jacob and her relationship with Edward. This novel also concentrates on the return of Victoria. In *New Moon*, Victoria never had any page time. Instead, her presence near Forks was only as a shadowy figure. However, she is portrayed as the main antagonist in *Eclipse*. She builds her own vampire army in quest for vengeance against Bella and the

Cullens for killing James, her mate, in *Twilight*. This eventually results in the Cullens and werewolf pack joining forces to defeat her. The final portion of the story focuses on Bella accepting Edward's wedding proposal, effectively choosing him over Jacob. Again, the novel ends with Jacob fleeing Forks after getting the wedding invitation. This sets up the beginning of the next book, *Breaking Dawn*.

*Breaking Dawn* is the final installment in the series and features the first time a substantial portion of the series is told from a character's point-of-view other than Bella's. (The epilogue of *Eclipse* was written from Jacob's.) The novel is split into three sections; in the middle section of the book, the narration switches from Bella's first-person perspective to Jacob's. Part one of the novel focuses on Bella and Edward's marriage and honeymoon. Sex plays a large part in this section as Bella's main objective becomes attempting to get Edward to sleep with her again. Edward is resistant to sleeping with Bella after the first time because he left bruises all over her. This section ends with the revelation that Bella is pregnant. Part two focuses on Bella's pregnancy. The main conflict in this portion of the novel comes from those who want Bella to abort the baby and those who do not. Most of the characters are for Bella having an abortion after it is discovered that the baby is killing her. Edward threatens to over-ride her decision to keep the child, so Bella calls Rosalie, who acts as her bodyguard against the characters who would force her to have an abortion. This section ends with Bella having the child, Edward turning her into a vampire, and Jacob imprinting on Renesmee, Bella's baby. Imprinting is essentially the term used to describe the effect of werewolves discovering their soul-mates. Part three of the book switches back to Bella's perspective. It focuses

primarily on Bella enjoying her new found vampirism. The main conflict of the plot centers on the Volturi wanting to kill Renesmee because they were misinformed that she had been a human child who was turned into a vampire. Things are resolved after it is proven that Renesmee was never mortal. The book ends with the Cullens essentially living happily ever after.

In my contextual, critical literary analysis of the *Twilight* series in chapter four, I look at how this happily-ever-after Bella strives for throughout the novels is completely anti-feminist. I situate it as anti-feminist because this ending is completely dependent on Bella's subservience to Edward. This is problematic in that it implies that happiness and love can only be achieved through diminishing women's self-worth and autonomy. My critical analysis of the books will interrogate how Bella's identity and sense of value are entirely reliant on her romantic involvement with Edward. However, the main portion of my analysis in chapter four focuses on illustrating how Edward and Bella's relationship is a depiction of rape culture through its extolling of Edward's abusive, violent, and manipulative behaviors towards Bella. In addition, I concentrate on how the inclusion of Jacob, to create a love triangle, further illustrates how the series exemplifies rape culture.



## Chapter Two: Methodology

In the last few years, the *Twilight* series has developed a large fan base of young and older adult readers. As stated in my introduction, the most well-known trait of *Twilight* fans is their propensity to divide into teams based on whichever male love interest they prefer. *Twilight* enthusiasts' obsession with and valorization of these romances are problematic because of the violent undertones the relationships carry. My research for this project works to highlight how *Twilight*'s depictions of romantic relationships are an exemplification of rape culture. I collected data for this study by analyzing and coding the four original novels in the *Twilight* saga: *Twilight*, *New Moon*, *Eclipse*, and *Breaking Dawn*. In addition to these four books, Meyer also released a novella in 2010 titled *The Short Second Life of Bree Tanner*. I chose to exclude this story from my research because it only peripherally involves Bella Swan, Edward Cullen, and Jacob Black. Instead, it follows the minor character Bree Tanner, who is briefly seen toward the end of *Eclipse*, as she makes her way towards Forks with a group of other vampires.

I began this research project by performing a close reading of the novels where I recorded and counted three specific repeating events throughout the series. The first is the number of times that violence, either implied or actual, is directed at Bella from Edward. Second, I recorded moments where Jacob's interactions with Bella reflect rape culture. Finally, I noted each scene depicting Bella losing control of her body or her decisions. The numerous times these occurrences take place draw attention to how they function in the storyline to normalize, excuse, or belittle violence against women.

Marking every instance where both implied and actual violence is aimed at Bella from Edward highlights how pervasive the abusive aspect of their relationship is. In order to determine what interactions constitute violence, I referenced texts concentrating on intimate partner violence, stalking, and rape culture. (Rape culture is any society where sexual violence is condoned, belittled, normalized, or expected.) The three works that I primarily referenced for my criteria are Orit Kamir's text on stalking narratives titled *Every Breath You Take*, Maureen Outlaw's article on intimate partner violence titled "No One Type of Intimate Partner Abuse", and Nicola Gavey's book on rape culture titled *Just Sex?: the Cultural Scaffolding of Rape*.

Reading through the series, I found that the most prominent display of abuse is the implied. These are scenes where Edward uses emotional manipulation or threats of violence to control Bella. Examples of this include exchanges where Bella's actions, or lack of actions, send Edward into a barely contained rage. In these interactions, Edward is described as resisting his impulse for violence only through the sheer force of his will. I marked these scenes because they normalize and romanticize violence towards women through indicating that physical abuse is an expected reaction for displeasing a romantic partner, which is only prevented by good control.

Interactions depicting actual physical violence between Bella and Edward are less recurring. In total, there are four scenes where Edward physically injures Bella. These moments are justified in the novels as accidents where Edward forgot, or could not control, his super-human strength. I note these scenes because they work to excuse violence through romanticizing these instances as displays of Edward's grand passion for

Bella. For example, Bella is described as covered in bruises after having sex with Edward in *Breaking Dawn*. Her injuries are excused through a combination of Edward's remorse at having hurt her and Bella's reverence of the injuries as signs of his passion.

The second repeating event that I recorded throughout the series focuses on Bella's relationship with Jacob. In these scenes, I marked instances where their interactions exemplified rape culture. This involves moments where Jacob forces sexual contact onto Bella or declares that he knows her desires better than she does. I also noted cases where Jacob is commended for ignoring Bella's lack of consent and Bella's emotional responses to the unwanted contact are belittled. My purpose in recording these scenes is to highlight instances where violence against women is made into a joke, normalized, or excused.

Finally, I recorded the number of times Bella has her agency eliminated in the novels. Primarily, this involves moments where Bella loses control of her physical body or has her decisions dictated by another character. My purpose in marking these scenes is to highlight how they are used to justify Edward's manipulation and control over Bella's actions. For example, her persistent clumsiness is employed to excuse Edward's stalking under the guise that he just wants to ensure her safety.

In total, I found that Edward's displays of violence towards Bella are the most prevalent in *Twilight* (ninety-seven) and *Eclipse* (forty-two), which centered primarily on cementing Bella and Edward's relationship. The numbers decreased dramatically from *Twilight* to *New Moon* (seven) due to Edward's character only appearing in the very beginning and end of the novel. Similarly, *Breaking Dawn's* numbers (twenty-one) are

lower due to the novel's focus on Bella and Edward's baby and a large portion of the plot being from Jacob's point-of-view, rather than Bella's perspective, and concentrating on her romantic relationships. Corresponding with this is the number of scenes featuring Bella's loss of agency in the series (a total of 133 instances). In regards to the number of scenes where Jacob's interactions with Bella normalize rape culture, the highest is *Eclipse* (twelve) due to the plots focus on Jacob's pursuit of Bella. *New Moon* features the second highest number (three) as this is the novel that reveals Jacob's romantic interest in Bella. *Twilight* did not reveal any scenes where Jacob's actions connected to rape culture primarily because he plays an extremely minor role in the novel, only appearing briefly three times. Finally, in *Breaking Dawn* I was only able to find one scene since Jacob's interests dramatically shift away from his pursuit of Bella and transfer to her baby.

To analyze these findings, I used Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Lina Leavy's idea that "feminist researchers may use content analysis to examine the extent to which women's issues or feminist perspectives are explored in a particular medium" (231). Adopting this concept of qualitative feminist content analysis, I examined the marked scenes, finding that they valorize violence, obsession, and lack of female agency as demonstrations of "pure" love. I use the term "pure" love for two reasons. The first is to emphasize the religious and abstinence-only rhetoric that is heavily utilized in the novels. The second is to stress how Bella and Edward's relationship is portrayed, and marketed, as an innocent and virtuous form of love that ignores the abusive tonality of the rapport between them. Bella and Edward's abusive relationship expressed in this light

underscores the damaging effects such narratives can have on the fans' concept of what a romantic relationship should entail. In addition, the series' overt abstinence-only message in combination with the characterization of Bella and the underlying abusive tonality of her relationship with Edward creates a truly disturbing morality tale for young women.

In addition, I support my findings throughout this project using a postmodern feminist framework. I argue that postmodern feminist thought is important when analyzing these texts because it "offers a method of deconstructing totalizing categories" and challenges "cultural narratives about femininity and masculinity that may otherwise go unchallenged" (Leavy 92). Through deconstructing *Twilight's* use of masculinity and femininity in connection to the relationships formed in the novels, I am able to further analyze the power structures at play in relation to their social implications. Two scholarly texts in particular are used to frame my analysis in regards to the social implications of power and sexuality.

The first text I use to frame the social implications of *Twilight's* romantic relationships is Michael Foucault's *The History of Sexuality: Volume I*. Specifically, I employ Foucault's theories in part five of the text titled "Right of Death and Power over Life" to deconstruct how the novels become about a fight for control over Bella's body. According to Foucault, "the mechanisms of power are addressed to the body, to life, to what causes it to proliferate, to what reinforces the species, its stamina, its ability to dominate, or its capacity for being used" (147). In my analysis of the text, I examine how this exertion of power over the body and life connects to Edward and Jacob's fighting over Bella. Using Foucault's theory, I argue that this love triangle is not really about the

desire to form a romantic attachment with Bella; rather it is about who gets rights over her sexuality and reproductive power.

*Transforming a Rape Culture* by editors Emilie Buchwald, Pamela R. Fletcher, and Martha Roth is the second text I use to frame my analysis of *Twilight* as an exemplification of rape culture. This text is an interdisciplinary compilation of essays written on the impact of sexual violence in various social settings. The editors of this work state that “we as a society claim to deplore the sexual violence that is so markedly characteristic of our time, yet we rear our sons and daughters in such ignorance of their sexuality that many confuse pleasure with pain and domination” (2). In my analysis, I interrogate how the *Twilight* series confuses not only sexuality, but also ideas of love and affection with violence and domination. To achieve this, I utilize essays on the rhetoric of sexual violence in literature, religion, and intimate relationships to highlight how the violent aspects of the romances are justified, normalized, or belittled throughout the novels.

Finally, the social position of the reader in relation to the text influences the interpretation; therefore, it is pertinent that I position myself within the research. Believing that there can be a separation between the reader and the actual novels is a fallacy, as the ideologies and experiences of the reader play into how texts are interpreted. The target audience of this series is white, heterosexual females between the ages of twelve and eighteen. I am situated outside of this target audience only by age range. However, within the political aspects of the books, I am firmly outside of the ideologies that the novels push. I am a feminist carrying a Bachelor’s degree in English

Literature and a Master's student in a Gender and Women's Studies program. With this in mind, my reading of the books carries an analysis based on gender and literary theory, along with the political ideologies of being pro-choice and against abstinence-only rhetoric. My interpretation of the novels is meant to be a call for a much needed critical look into the political aspects of a series that has gained a widespread fanatical fan base and, consequently, an overwhelming influence within contemporary culture. My analysis of the series acts as a way to bring attention to the potentially detrimental effects this series has on its readership and ideas of romance within the context of reality.

### Chapter Three: Literature Review

This thesis project aims to interrogate the destructive representations of romance and the passive female protagonist found in Stephanie Meyer's young adult series titled *Twilight*. To accomplish this goal, the following literature review discusses scholarly works that examine three specific topics: vampirism in literature, young adult literature, and depictions of rape culture. I will use these three bodies of knowledge to frame and analyze the relationships between Bella, Edward, and Jacob to highlight how their interactions exemplify rape culture. Under the vampirism in literature subheading, I provide a discussion of scholarly works that explore how vampire mythology evolves in connection to changes in cultural value. This section also scrutinizes vampirism's correlation to violence and sexuality within the context of gender and power relations, which leads into my next body of knowledge, depictions of rape culture. The scholarship under this body of knowledge includes texts written on the pervasiveness of violence against women in contemporary culture. In particular, this section reviews notable works by prominent scholars writing on the normalization and eroticization of violence against women. My final body of knowledge focuses on texts that investigate relevant critical studies on young adult literature, the typical tropes found within the genre, and their connections with institutional constructions of socialization among the genre's teenage readers.



## Vampirism in Literature

Paranormal elements play a critical role in the *Twilight* series as the majority of character and plot conflicts center on these aspects. In my analysis and discussion chapter, I hypothesize that the supernatural facets of these novels excuse the violent undertones of the romantic relationships. Particularly, Edward's vampirism is utilized throughout the books to excuse his abusive behavior towards Bella. Many scholars have interrogated vampirism's function in literature as metaphor for social taboos, patriarchal fears, and sexual violence. Establishing a historical foundation of vampirism's history within literature is imperative to understanding how the mythology has changed to reflect Western culture's shifting morals, fears, and concepts of sexuality. Matthew Beresford's *From Demons to Dracula: the Creation of the Modern Vampire Myth* and Carol A. Senf's *The Vampire in 19<sup>th</sup> Century English Literature* are the two primary texts I use to build a historical framework of the vampire figure.

Beresford's *From Demons to Dracula*, is a cultural study of the historical morphology of vampire mythology. He begins with the origins of the vampire, stating that the mythology "can be traced back as far as ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome" (Beresford 19). Beresford then continues chronologically through history, describing the appearance of vampirism in legends, literature, mass media, and folklore. Unlike Senf's text, Beresford's work is an expansive interrogation of the vampire that takes into account its appearances outside of literature. For instance, Beresford goes into depictions of real people who have impacted representations of the vampire. Such as the notorious Vlad III the Impaler and Countess Elizabeth Bathory, both of whom inspired vampiric

folklore for their excessive cruelty and the vast number of people they killed. With its interdisciplinary focus, this text is useful in tracing the trajectory of vampirism from its early uses in the nineteenth century to its integration into various aspects of North American and European culture.

In comparison, Carol Senf's text, *The Vampire in 19<sup>th</sup> Century English Literature*, offers an in-depth analysis of the classic European renditions of vampirism in literature, such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and juxtaposes it with references to modern day mutations. Early on in the work, Senf notes "that vampires have become more attractive" (3) in their contemporary renditions. However, this attractiveness has come at the cost of devaluation, of not getting taken seriously within the scope of more realistic written works. Senf states that in the nineteenth century, the vampire "was treated seriously by the writers who chose to use it" (11). It was also a figure that inspired fear and horror, which the current literary mutations of the creature do not. Noting the shift away from the horror renditions of vampires is important as images of the being become frequently portrayed as romantic fantasies, which is seen in *Twilight*. Other renditions of the vampire as a sexual icon are seen in contemporary popular fiction, such as Charlaine Harris' Sookie Stackhouse series, Laurell K. Hamilton's Anita Blake series, and numerous paranormal romance books featuring vampire love interests. In response, the vampire figure declines as a serious literary device as it becomes rooted deeper into the culturally devalued genres of romance, young adult, and fantasy.

In addition, Senf's text is a useful tool for deciphering classic themes in vampire fiction. She discusses both the cultural and historical time period surrounding each

novel's publication. For instance, in Senf's discussion of Stoker's *Dracula*, she states that Dracula was a terrifying figure in Victorian society because his implied mission was the seduction of women that "cause[d] them to abandon passivity and to become sexually aggressive and demanding. This altered behavior was perceived by the other characters as a defiance of religious tenets, social custom, and traditional masculine authority" (60). In this analysis, the vampire was utilized to reflect patriarchal fear of traditional masculine gender roles getting cast aside. Sexuality still plays a large role in the vampire mythology seen in contemporary literature. However, applying this analysis to the *Twilight* series, we see that Meyer's vampires act in opposition to Stoker's. Instead of causing aggressive sexual behavior in women, Meyer's vampires act to control female sexuality and force them into a state of passivity. Edward's constant refusal to have sex with Bella combined with his demand that she remain completely still when he kisses her, or else he might accidentally kill her, is one example of this.

The vampire's shift towards sexual paragon and romantic hero is disturbing when taking into account that traditional renditions of the figure were metaphors for sexual violence. James Twitchell's essay "The Vampire Myth" analyzes how classic versions of the vampire, such as Stoker's *Dracula*, were analogies for rape. Specifically, Twitchell examines scenes depicting vampires taking their victim's blood as symbolic of sexual assault. He states that these moments are "more complex because as the vampire takes blood, he is also inseminating his victim with evil. A rape scene is played out through the gauze of fantasy" (Twitchell 112). Twitchell goes on to explain how the vampire myth is

saturated with sexual excitement based on violence. This sexual excitement is in relation to the control the vampire has over its victim both before and during the bite.

Expanding on the vampire's connection to sex in relation to religious taboos is Wayne Bartlett and Flavia Idriceanu's essay "Beauty and the Beast." In this article, Bartlett and Idriceanu examine how the sexuality inherent in the vampire myth formed out of Christianity's unease with eroticism. The figure of the vampire emerged out of this apprehension as "an extension of the image of the Devil" (165) and was positioned to create a fear of going against the dictates of purity and sexuality in Christianity. Using Bartlett and Idriceanu's argument in connection to the *Twilight* series highlights the changes of the vampire's sexuality within contemporary culture. Meyer goes through a lot of effort to ensure Edward is not associated with the devil. Instead, the language used to describe him is more closely associated with divinity. Meyer's own religious background plays a noticeable role in the morals promoted in the series, especially in connection to sex. Edward's view of sexuality is a large step away from the vampire's symbolic connection to the devil and sexual taboos. Instead of acting as a figure controlled by his sexuality, Edward treats sex as dangerous and is valorized for his abstinence. This form of the vampire, placed within the current events surrounding abstinence-only education, is used as a tool to promote control over sexuality based on religious ideologies.

Elaborating on earlier shifts of the vampire figure away from its portrayals as a wholly evil being, Jules Zanger's essay "Metaphor into Metonymy: The Vampire Next Door" describes how the vampire has lost many of the attributes that made it a purely

inhuman creature, thus allowing for greater empathy from readers. Specifically, these attributes consist of shape-shifting, flying, and enthrallment. Additionally, Zanger explains that “the new [vampire] tends to be communal, rather than solitary as was Dracula” (18). The elimination of these characteristics shifted the vampire away from representing a magical being and into a mutation that closely resembles humans.

Zanger argues that the vampire figure’s transition to becoming more human has caused the mythology to lose its metaphoric status and instead has changed into a metonym. She notes that “with each demythologizing transformation, the new vampire moves more firmly in the direction of that single perceptual domain we call the ‘human,’ into greater contiguity with us as readers” (Zanger 20). Then this new vampire functions to conceal or “misdirect our attention from his most salient characteristic as murderer” (20). Through this concealment of the vampire figure under a new cloak of humanity, he has become both a more terrifying creature as well as a more relatable one. This relatability has also led to the creation of the vampire as a romantic and altruistic being we see in most of the recent adaptations in contemporary literature.

Susanna Clements’ book *The Vampire Defanged* is an examination of these recent adaptations of the vampire. In the chapter titled “Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* Saga: The Vampire as Teenage Heartthrob,” Clements examines why the vampire figure has been completely flipped to the exact opposite of the demonic figure. In the *Twilight* saga the vampire has been morphed into not only a romantic hero, but also a being that is often described within religious connotations similar to the angelic. However, this transformation only applies to the Cullen family and other vampires that abstain from

human blood. Vampires such as the Volturi, who drink from humans, revert back to resembling the demonic. Physical manifestations of this difference appear most noticeably in their eye color. (Volturi are described as having red eyes, while the Cullens' are golden.) Clements also states that the vampire's shift away from the wholly demonic appears in Edward's fear "about Bella's losing her soul" (105) if she turns into a vampire. Edward frets multiple times throughout the books over not just Bella's soul, but his own as well. While Clements discusses the obvious examples of religion in the books, she fails to conduct an in-depth analysis of the more obscure over-tones of the series, such as the popular lion and the lamb analogy and the parallel between the bible's Jacob and Ephraim with the characters in *Twilight*.

However, this article is still a valuable resource because of Clements' consideration of the traits Meyer ascribes to her vampires. Clements contends, "Meyer portrays the nature of the vampire as the ideal -- as something higher than human, rather than lower" (106). With this in mind, she explores how Meyer has made her main character's vampirism angelic and incorporated the concept of free-will into the mythology. Free-will is seen in Meyer's vampires having the choice of feeding off of humans or living off of animals. This is unlike the traditional mythology which portrays vampires as having little choice in whether or not they live off of humans. In connection to this, Clements states that Meyer offers her vampires the rare opportunity to be judged "by their actions rather than by their natures" (108). This new-found free-will that vampires are written with has opened the door to their portrayal as romantic heroes in contemporary literature.

### Depictions of Rape Culture

Rape culture is defined as “a complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women” (Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth ii). It is any society that condones or trivializes sexual violence through its attitudes, norms, media, and commonly held practices. *Transforming a Rape Culture* frames my analysis of the *Twilight* saga’s romances as exemplifications of rape culture. This text is an interdisciplinary collection of scholarly essays on the pervasiveness of sexual violence in contemporary North American culture. Utilizing articles written on the rhetoric of violence and consent, I interrogate the pervasive undertones of sexual violence in *Twilight*.

One particular essay I use from this anthology is Joan H. Timmerman’s “Religion and Violence: The Persistence of Ambivalence.” Due to the extreme religious overtones throughout the *Twilight* series, it is important to look at how violence against women is linked to religion. In this article, Timmerman identifies two roles that religion plays within society. The first is “to give meaning to familiar aspects of life by a process of sacralization” (203), and the second function is to provide “meaning far beyond the realities we know around us” (203). These two things give purpose to the concept of life and death in people’s everyday lives. Yet, Timmerman notes, “it is clear, though almost incredible, that a deep preference for violence over pleasure characterizes the patriarchal roots of the original religious traditions” (205). She defends this view through descriptions of the lack of moral outrage at acts of violence from religious institutions and their support and valorization of male-dominated rituals. Primarily, this occurs

through the church's misguided belief that congregation members do not commit sexual violence. Timmerman links this lack of concern over violence within religion to the connection of sexuality with violence that "is new and unique to the American experience" (204). She goes on to state that "while religion has not been actively responsible for this marriage of sexual arousal and violence, it has, by default, enabled it" (204). This enabling is depicted through the religious overtones in Meyer's series that reflect her Mormon religious values. In these books, violence, domination, sexuality, and religion are all interlocking in their depiction within the context of Bella and Edward's relationship.

In addition to *Transforming a Rape Culture*, I use Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* as another foundational text for this body of knowledge. *The History of Sexuality* is a prominent text in the discussion of the social construction of sexuality and how it is influenced and controlled by various systems of domination. The most relevant section that I use in my analysis is part five, "Right of Death and Power Over Life." In this particular section, Foucault discusses how reproduction and sexuality have been controlled in society. Through his interrogation of the control over sexuality and reproduction exerted over women, I begin to interpret the motivation behind the male characters' (specifically Jacob and Edward) control over Bella's body and sexuality in the *Twilight* series. Foucault states that "the right which was formulated as the 'power of life and death' was in reality the right to *take* life or *let* live" (136); he describes how this right is held by male figures. In Meyer's saga, this right over life and death is shown throughout in Edward's decisions concerning Bella's body. For example, a very literal



depiction of this is shown in the last novel when Edward holds control over Bella's life. He is the one who ultimately decides whether she gets perpetual life as a vampire or continues to die as a human. This also links into control over her sexuality and, in the end, her reproductive ability. These theories of the link between power and sexuality work as a framework for analyzing the series as a representation of rape culture.

Stalking is one of the primary forms of control and manipulation found in the *Twilight* series. Edward is constantly following or watching Bella's movements throughout the series. This connects to rape culture as it is a form of non-psychical violence that is valorized in the story. As a reference for an analysis of literature featuring stalking narratives, I use *Every Breath You Take* by Orit Kamir. In this book, Kamir discusses the development of stalking narratives in connection to the historical moments in which they were published and the laws on stalking that were enforced at the time. Taking a look at different stalking stories that developed in relationship to cultural discourses, Kamir examines how such stories function within patriarchal systems to enforce gender roles. Throughout the book, Kamir refers to various vampire archetypes in relation to her analysis of stalker stories in literature and film. In her analysis of the stalking and incorporation of serial killers shown in literature, Kamir states that, "like a werewolf and a vampire, the protagonist attacks those he believes he loves most" (154). She also states that the men within these stalker narratives follow and watch their prey "as a means of bonding with them, of finding the recognition and love that he feels he is due" (154). These analyses of stalker stories and the motivations of both the perpetrator and the victim are vital to my analysis of Edward's stalking of Bella. Motivation for

Edward's stalking is promoted as a romantic gesture within the context of the series. The combination of Edward's vampirism and Bella portrayed as a character that needs constant protection reinforces the romanticization of the stalker themes in the novels, since the stalker (Edward) is positioned as the protector as well. In relation to this, Kamir states that, "as a male stalker, the vampire disciplines humans, especially women, into obeying patriarchal ideology" (78). This disciplining of women into obeying traditional gender norms comes through Edward's constant surveillance of Bella. This surveillance works to control Bella through dictating her movement according to what Edward tells her to do, for she fears losing his affection if she does not listen.

In connection to Kamir's discussion of stalkers in popular media and literature, I also use Stephen J. Morewitz's essay titled "Characteristics of Stalking Victims and Offenders" to support of my analysis of Edward as a stalker. Morewitz uses data collected from surveying a large sample of restraining orders to describe typical characteristics of stalkers. He discovered that, "in male-to-female stalking, men use stalking to control, punish, and instill fear in the women" (28). In response to this finding, Morewitz states that "male dominance and female submission to power differentials underlie much of the social dynamics in these interactions" (37-38). Morewitz's discussion of the characteristics in stalking is important for emphasizing the obsessive and abusive pattern Edward's character displays throughout the books under the intentional appearance of being romantic and protective.

Since the violence of Edward and Bella's relationship is masked under the guise of a supernatural narrative and the non-physical representation of violence, it often gets

overlooked as merely a part of escapist literature. The reader's romanticized interpretation fails to take into account the social dynamics at work within this depiction of an obsessive and abusive relationship. It also fails to attend to the ways that the series is promoted as abstinence and pro-life literature with characters getting valorized as morally up-right. In his book *Power Plays, Power Works* cultural critic John Fiske analyzes how power is embodied within culture. In the chapter titled "The Body of Violence," Fiske states, "Violence works in diverse ways; homogenizing it into a singular concept-- 'the problem of violence'-- does nothing to help us understand it" (125). Thus, Fiske argues for analysis of the many systems of power at work within the different formations and representations of violence. In his analysis of depictions of violence within American culture, Fiske notes that "symbolic violence is [...] an incarnation of unequal social relations: its structuring principles and motivations are social, not individual" (125). Fiske contends that violence should not be seen as an individual act but analyzed within the context of the culture in which the individual is situated. This view of images of violence supports the claim for a more intersectional look at how violence is portrayed within media. Fiske states that "violent images are always part of social conditions: they may, when sexist or racist, serve to exacerbate inequality" (135). Therefore, using his analysis of how violence is depicted in power-knowledge relationships as a framework, I examine the power dynamics within Bella and Edward's relationship.

In "Rape Stories: Material Rhetoric and the Trauma of Representation," Wendy S. Hesford examines various rape narratives written by women. Primarily focusing on rape

revenge stories, Hesford notes that while these stories may “challenge dominant rape scripts that construe women as helpless and rewrite women as agents of aggression and anger” (15), they often do not challenge the idea of women as victims. One particularly helpful quote within this essay is Hesford’s conclusion: “American mass media tends to focus on victims’ and perpetrators’ psychological states rather than on the sociological, political, and material forces that facilitate and sustain violence” (17). This concentration on the psyche is one explanation for why the abusive undertones of the *Twilight* series are often overlooked. Since the books are told from the first-person perspective of Bella, the reader is fully engulfed in her thoughts. The first-person narrative acts as a device to defuse the potential of any psychological damage (prompted by the violent and controlling aspects of Edward) that the reader might interpret if the story were written in third person. Instead, the reader is forced to view Bella’s emotions, and since she is written as seeing these qualities as attractive and shows no emotional harm through the actions, the reader is inclined to see the abusive actions through this light as well.

Finally, in her essay “The Violence of Rhetoric: Considerations on Representation and Gender” Teresa De Lauretis interrogates how language engenders violence through the characterization of violence as masculine and the objects on which violence is perpetrated as typically feminine. To illustrate this point, De Lauretis gives the example of how the “expression ‘the rape of nature,’[...] at once defines nature as feminine, and rape as violence done to a feminine other” (42). De Lauretis goes on to contend that sexuality is always seen as male, stating, “Even when it is located [...] in the woman’s body, sexuality is an attribute or property of the male” (37). One useful section of De

Lauretis's discussion of language and violence is her analysis of how rhetoric is used within mythical literature. De Lauretis states that "the mythical subject is constructed as human being and as male; he is the active principle of culture, the establisher of distinction, the creator of differences" (43). This examination of how language functions within literature and engenders violence proves critical in analyzing Meyer's uses of violent rhetoric in writing scenes surrounding Bella and Edward's relationship.

Jessica Benjamin takes up De Lauretis's argument that any object on which violence is inflicted becomes feminine and expands it into a psychoanalytic argument about the objectification of women on a societal level. In her book *The Bonds of Love*, Benjamin states that domination and submission function on both a psychological and societal level for both men and women. In her chapter titled "Gender and Domination," Benjamin claims that "subordination of all aspects of life to the instrumental principles of the public world also subverts the very values of private life, and thus threatens the maternal aspects of recognition" (185). For Benjamin, this implied threat to the maternal aspects of the private sphere relates to conservatives who wish to reinstate an idealized concept of motherhood as understood within the nuclear family. This concept relies on the idea that there is an "unbreachable line between public and private values [that] rests on the tacit assumption that women will continue to preserve and protect personal life" (197). Benjamin also discusses this idea of motherhood and the gender polarity of the private and public spheres as stemming from works on a fantasy of "separate yet equal" that denies that this "is still a relationship of domination" (198). This examination of separate spheres and the idealization of pure motherhood as illustrating "the all-giving

woman who finds fulfillment in her home and children” is reflected in the *Twilight* saga (Benjamin 208). Issues of family are a constant theme throughout the novels, but it is the final book that pushes the idea of subordinated females within the concept of motherhood. In this last novel, Bella plays the role of the self-sacrificing woman who joyfully enters the private sphere through her decision not to pursue a college education because she wants to get married. Then, to drive this point even further, she becomes pregnant right away, and despite the life-threatening pregnancy, she willfully sacrifices her life to have the baby and then again sacrifices her human life to Edward to become a vampire.

### Young Adult Literature

Portrayals of gender, sex, and romance often vary depending on the genre of the novel. In lieu of this, the scholarly texts I use to frame my analysis concentrate on critiquing the way young adult literature depicts romantic relationships, sexuality, and its female characters’ autonomy. Framing my interrogation of the *Twilight* saga’s descriptions of sex, with its young adult audience in mind, is Anna Silver’s article “Twilight Is Not Good for Maidens.” Silver analyzes *Twilight* using reactions to the novels from both critics and fans posted in popular media outlets. Taking excerpts from online forums and popular magazines, Silver argues that the series’ overt religious and abstinence messages have received varied reactions. One issue Silver identifies in relation to these messages is the controversial depictions of the female characters. She found that the series promotes the idea that “only within marriage and motherhood [...] can women

find true equality with men and, more largely, truly become themselves” (132). Silver expands on this through the anti-abortion message depicted in the last novel, contending that Bella’s refusal to get an abortion even though the fetus is killing her pushes the idea that a “good mother [...] is willing to sacrifice herself for her family” (131). She also notes that the rhetoric of the novels implies that “the only context in which sex is safe [...] is marriage” (129). By critiquing these scenes revolving around sex, marriage, and motherhood, Silver argues that the series insinuates that a healthy adult identity is only “formed within the context of the family” (127). This formation of identity, along with Silver’s discussion of Meyer’s own beliefs, affects the values the *Twilight* saga promotes, making this a valuable resource to analyze how social constructions and institutions influence representations of gender, sex, power, and violence marketed towards young adults.

Extending the discussion of female representation outside of the *Twilight* series is Beth Younger’s article “Pleasure, Pain, and the Power of Being Thin: Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature.” In this essay, Younger examines how body images and messages concerning the body are depicted in young adult literature. Critiquing several popular novels in the genre, Younger’s analysis suggests that “young adult fiction reflects girls’ lives back to them, and this literature contains many representations of young women that reinforce negative body-image stereotypes” (46). The negative body messages she found linked ultra-thinness to a healthy sexuality and condemned overweight characters’ inability to conform to this thinness by stripping their sexual autonomy. In Younger’s analysis of one over-weight character from Judy Bloom’s

*Forever*, she notes that the character is depicted as “unable to control her body’s size or her sexual experiences” (50). She goes on to state that the character’s failure to control her body correlates to the removal of her agency concerning sexuality. This examination of the messages sent through depictions of the female character’s body in the young adult genre is useful because of *Twilight*’s focus on Bella’s body. Like the over-weight characters Younger discusses, Bella’s sexual autonomy is stripped from her because of her inability to control her body. However, Bella’s failure to control her body does not center around weight but on an excessive clumsiness. This clumsiness is used to justify Edward assuming control over not only her sexuality, but also her other movements.

Caroline McKinley’s essay “Beyond Forever” offers an extension of Younger’s analysis of female sexuality as represented in young adult novels. Using twelve contemporary novels within the young adult genre, McKinley explores the motivations behind the protagonists’ decisions to have sex. In her examination of these texts, she finds that most of the characters are motivated to have sex because of self-esteem issues. However, she states that these depictions are part of the characters’ journey to “learning to love themselves and not seek validation through sexual relations” (39). Compared to Younger’s essay, this is a shift away from the tropes involving sex and its connection to body image and self-worth. However, both of these articles hardly mention how the theme of sex and romance become all encompassing in the female protagonists’ lives. McKinley notes that she found one protagonist whose “independent identity becomes so defined by Wes (her boyfriend) that she uncharacteristically considers rejecting a full scholarship to Tulane to maintain this physical closeness and be with him” (40). The



theme of relationships engulfing young adult female protagonists' lives is prevalent within the genre of young adult literature. This theme, mentioned in "Beyond Forever", speaks to a larger issue and challenges the idea that traditional gender norms are being defied. This concept is seen in the *Twilight* series as Edward becomes the center of Bella's life to the point of where she barely sees the point in living without him. *New Moon* highlights this point best as, after Edward breaks up with Bella, she becomes practically catatonic for approximately four months and declares that the only reason she never truly contemplated suicide is because her parents need her.

Finally, framing the connection between identity politics and institutions is Wendy Glenn's article "Gossiping Girls, Insider Boys, A-List Achievement: Examining and Exposing Young Adult Novels Consumed by Conspicuous Consumption." Glenn critiques the role of consumerism and classist ideals within young adult novels in correlation to popularity and power. Using a Marxist lens to analyze three popular series within the genre, Glenn identifies four consistent themes that run throughout each of the series: entitlement, disparity of race and class, empty relationships, and conspicuous consumption. Out of these themes, the ones I found most helpful in my analysis of power relations in the *Twilight* saga are the disparities between class and race and displays of conspicuous consumption. Glenn argues that within these novels the social hierarchy concerning race is reinforced and "evidenced most clearly when the entitled characters interact with those who lack the requisite family name and financial history" (37). She also found that characters of color are "unable to achieve stature" in these novels (38). This relates to the treatment of characters of color found in the *Twilight* series. Within the

*Twilight* hierarchy, the Quileute werewolf pack (who are described as Native American) are portrayed as disadvantaged to the white vampire characters because of their lower class stature and how the all-white vampire protagonists interact with them. Furthermore, this disparity of wealth is consistently brought up as part of the contest for Bella's affection and through off-hand comments by other characters, such as Billy's, Jacob's father, inability to afford another pair of sneakers for him. Glenn notes that the concept that links wealth, race, and desirability ties into "our possession-centric society [that] tells young people that these [white] fictional kids have acquired all that readers should desire" (40), whereas the members of the Quileute tribe are depicted as lacking. This is exceedingly problematic as *Twilight* does not attribute the Quileute tribe's near poverty to a symptom of institutional racism, but instead uses it to reflect the Cullen's boundless amount of possessions, money, and whiteness as the epitome of desirability.

In conclusion, all of the above scholarship functions as a framework for my analysis of Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* saga. These texts allow me to create a feminist critical lens through which to read, identify, and analyze the intersection of literature, vampirism, and rape culture as depicted in *Twilight*.

#### Chapter Four: Analysis and Discussion

The heart of the *Twilight* series is the evolution of the romantic relationship between Bella and Edward. Each novel's main driving factor is typically centered on a conflict in their relationship. *Twilight's* driving plot is centered on the question of whether or not Bella and Edward will get together. *New Moon's* drama comes from Edward leaving Bella and the progress of their reunion. *Eclipse* focuses on the competition between Jacob and Edward over Bella. Lastly, *Breaking Dawn* revolves around Bella and Edward's marriage, honeymoon, and the resulting pregnancy. In each novel there is also an action plot that revolves around the paranormal, but comparatively, the majority of the text is dedicated to Bella and Edward's relationship.

In this thesis, I argue that *Twilight* is an exemplification of rape culture due to its glorification of romantic relationships that are violent, abusive, and condescending. Rape culture is any society where women are inundated with threats and enactments of sexual violence. In addition, this physical and emotional violence is excused, justified, or belittled as a normal part of women's lives. This analysis concentrates on the non-verbal abuse found in rape culture, such as implied threats of violence, stalking, and social abuse. Edward, the primary love interest, epitomizes the normalization and eroticization of these aspects of rape culture. The relationship he forms with Bella is saturated with sexual violence and emotionally abusive undertones. Bella, as first-person narrator, acts not only to excuse these traits, but also to make them desirable through her reassurances of Edward's adoration and love of her. In this light, Bella never acts as an active agent in the novels. Instead, her every movement, both physical and emotional, is used to justify

Edward's actions. Also the series' depiction of a love triangle between Edward, Jacob, and Bella furthers its embodiment of rape culture. Within the love triangle, consent is ignored, and unwanted overtures are congratulated or brushed aside. These portrayals of romance are destructive because they glamorize love as obsessive, all consuming, and controlling. Complicating this portrayal of romance even more are the religious connotations interwoven throughout the novels that sanction this abusive relationship as a "pure" love.

The character Edward is the most detrimental character in Meyer's *Twilight* series and unfortunately one of the most popular. In this portion of my thesis, I interrogate how Edward's interactions with Bella are a romanticization of an abusive relationship that reflects rape culture. As previously stated in chapter three, sex and violence have always been strongly associated with the vampire figure in literature. As James Twitchell points out, violence and sexual excitement are so tightly woven within the vampire figure that rape scenes are played out under the guise of fantasy (112). This connection between desire and violence are intrinsic to Edward's character as one of his largest inner conflicts is with the struggle not to kill Bella. This conflict laces Edward's interactions with undertones of sexual violence. These scenes are disturbing in how they are portrayed in a way that encourages the reader to find Edward's urge to harm Bella attractive because ultimately his desire to keep her safe is stronger. In addition, the audience is prompted to be sympathetic towards Edward because of this dilemma.

This entire scenario is an action in the normalization and excusing of sexual violence as there is a distinct undercurrent that this is "natural" for men and that they

“can’t help it.” Sexual violence is excused in scenes where Edward discusses the temptation to kill Bella and her reaction is one of sympathy and feelings of safety: “I was filled with compassion for his suffering, even now, as he confessed his craving to take my life” (*Twilight* 272). Edward’s desire for her blood and his resistance in not following his base urge to “take” Bella are then seen as romantic and valorized. Scenes like this normalize violence towards women as they imply that men have the basic urge “to take” with or without consent. Bella’s noting that she feels safe with Edward despite his admitting to having thoughts of killing her combined with her sympathy creates the idea that, even if he did lose control, Bella would not hold it against him since she knows he would regret hurting her.

One of the most apparent scenes where sexual violence is normalized is a moment in the first book where Edward describes his feelings upon first seeing Bella:

“When you walked past me, I could have ruined everything Carlisle has built for us, right then and there. If I hadn’t been denying my thirst for the last, well, too many years, I wouldn’t have been able to stop myself. [...] In that one hour, I thought of a hundred different ways to lure you from the room with me, to get you alone. And I fought them each back, thinking of my family, what I could do to them. I had to run out, to get away before I could speak the words that would make you follow [...]. I so very nearly took you then. [...] But I resisted. I don’t know how. I forced myself *not* to wait for you, *not* to follow you from the school.” (269-270)

This whole scene details Edward's description of his struggle to resist killing Bella by taking her blood. An examination of the traditional connections a vampire's bite has with sexuality and violence exposes how this scene is littered with thinly veiled sexual threats. For example, Jewelle Gomez highlights the vampire's desire for blood in connection to sexuality, stating, "The sexual nature of the vampire's desire—the embrace, the kiss to the neck, the longing glances—are all as symptomatic of sexual desire as they are of bloodlust" (85). Taking Gomez and Twitchell's theories on vampirism's combining of sexual desire and violence, it is not too hard to see how the above scene implies a rape scenario.

The sexual violence undertones of this scene are further compounded in the fact that this conversation comes on the tail end of Edward, in a fit of rage, demonstrating how much stronger he is than Bella. At first Edward is mournful and tells Bella, "I don't want you to be afraid of me" (262), but after a near kiss, his temper inexplicably explodes. He runs about the forest ripping "two-foot-thick" (264) branches from trees and hurling them across the meadow to make them explode, all the while declaring, "As if you could outrun me" (264) and "As if you could fight me off" (264). Through this show of his physical abilities, the reader is forced to see Bella as helpless in Edward's presence. However, Bella excuses Edward's sudden violence by repeatedly thinking that she "didn't need to be afraid, that there was nothing to fear" (262). The danger and violence that Edward presents is even made out to be desirable in Bella's statement that "I sat without moving, more frightened of him than I had ever been. I'd never seen him so completely freed of that carefully cultivated façade. He'd never been less human... or

more beautiful” (264). Here the reader is invited not only to recognize being powerless to stop an assault, but also to think the implied threat of violence as attractive. To top it off, Bella’s confidence that Edward would never hurt her invites the audience to find safety in Edward’s rage.

A majority of the *Twilight* series relies on Bella getting into trouble and Edward swooping in to save her. It is noteworthy that, in all four books, Bella never saves herself or takes any action against threats to her life. She only takes action against antagonists if they threaten the people around her. However, these moments are passive as they are always Bella sacrificing her own life to keep others safe. In *Twilight*, James, the main vampire trying to kill her, tricks Bella into believing he has her mother. To save her mother, Bella slips past her vampire guards in order to meet James to exchange her life for her mother’s. A similar scene occurs at the end of *Eclipse* when Bella is watching Edward and Seth, a werewolf, battling two vampires. When it begins to look like Edward and Seth are losing, Bella picks up a sharp rock with the intention of slitting her wrist to distract the vampires. Bella sacrificing herself is one of the main driving plots in *Breaking Dawn* as she slowly dies from her pregnancy and refuses the other characters’ advice of getting an abortion. All other scenes where Bella is threatened feature her scared and eventually watching as Edward takes care of the problem.

These “damsel in distress” scenarios are the most prevalent in the first novel, with a total of at least four lengthy scenes involving Edward arriving to save Bella from a major trauma. This number does not take into account the excessive number of times Edward rescues Bella from smaller, implied threats, such as fainting in class or tripping.

Edward's rescuing of Bella from large and small threats diminishes in the last three installments of the series to the point where he only saves her once or twice from major dangers per book. One of largest issues with the excessive number of times Edward saves Bella in the first novel is that it develops the idea that Bella cannot be trusted with her own safety. A large portion of Edward and Bella's relationship is then formed on the basis of Bella's dependence on Edward to keep her from harm. This dependence and Bella's inability to take care of herself is used throughout the rest of the series as an excuse to strip Bella of her decision-making powers. The more subtle issue with the "damsel in distress" scenarios in the first book is how nearly every rescue by Edward has implications of sexual violence. Three scenes in particular are disturbing because of how they are utilized in the scheme of Edward and Bella's romance. Two of these scenes are the romanticization of rape scenarios in that they depict the idea of a valiant man saving a woman as a sign of his affection and care. The third scene completely ignores the potential threat of violence because that man is showing concern.

The latter of these scenes takes place at the beginning of Edward and Bella's acquaintance. It is important to note that, before this scene, Edward has shown mostly ill-concealed anger towards Bella with only a handful of friendly moments. He has also repeatedly warned her to stay away from him: "If you're smart, you'll avoid me" (*Twilight* 89). Yet, after Bella faints in Biology class, he goes with her to the nurses' office and then follows her out to the parking lot once she decides to leave school early. The combination of the deserted parking lot and Edward's actions gives this scene an



ominous cast of violence that the author attempts to portray as romantic through the guise that Edward wants to ensure Bella's safety:

We were near the parking lot now. I veered left, toward my truck. Something caught my jacket, yanking me back. "Where do you think you're going?" he asked, outraged. He was gripping a fistful of my jacket in one hand. I was confused. "I'm going home." [...] He was towing me toward his car now, pulling me by my jacket. It was all I could do to keep from falling backward. He'd probably just drag me along anyway if I did. "Let go!" I insisted. He ignored me. I staggered along sideways across the wet sidewalk until we reached the Volvo. Then he finally freed me-- I stumbled against the passenger door. [...] I was mentally calculating my chances of reaching the truck before he could catch me. I had to admit, they weren't good. "I'll just drag you back," he threatened, guessing my plan. (*Twilight* 103-104)

The problems with this scene, and the following two, are that they adhere to what Helen Benedict terms the language of rape. By language of rape, Benedict refers to the act of using language that perpetuates the idea of women as prey or portrays rape as "an act of pleasure, or of comedy, rather than of violence" (103). In the above scene, the underlying violence is meant to appear as caring; this rests on the assumption that sexual violence is perpetrated only by faceless strangers. (It also highlights and romanticizes Bella's powerlessness.) *Twilight* reinforces this myth through a scene in chapter eight where Bella is followed and cornered at night by a group of men while in Port Angeles.

Even though it is never openly stated that the men were intent on raping Bella, it is heavily hinted at through the group's demeanor and later comments from Rosalie (who it is hinted at was raped in a similar situation while human) and Edward.

Edward ends this tableau by appearing in his car to take Bella back to her friends from whom she was separated. Bella almost immediately being targeted when she leaves her group of friends to walk by herself, combined with the rescue resembling the modern equivalent of a knight riding in on his white horse (or in this case Volvo), speaks to Benedict's concept of the language of rape. Here, rape is romanticized as a symbolic dragon from which Edward must rescue Bella. The minute Edward shows up, Bella describes "how instantaneously the choking fear vanished" (*Twilight* 162). This near sexual assault that Bella faces is normalized through how it is treated as an expected outcome of Bella walking alone at night on a street. It is not Bella's emotional state that is focused on immediately after this moment but Edward's. After Bella notes her feeling of safety, she notices that Edward is upset. He is angry and she immediately sets out to calm him down by talking to him about everyday things. The incident and potential danger to Bella are given less attention than her fainting in class.

The other important aspect of this scene is how it is used to justify Edward's stalking of Bella. At dinner, Edward admits, "I followed you to Port Angeles" (*Twilight* 174), when asked how he knew Bella was in trouble. This disturbing revelation is then portrayed as romantic because, had he not been following her, no one would have prevented Bella from getting raped. Edward's obsession with Bella, to the point where he begins to secretly follow her, is set up as commendable because he only wants to ensure

her safety. Reinforcing this is Edward bringing up how he has saved her before and subtly laying the blame for his constant surveillance on her. For instance, Edward comments, “I’ve never tried to keep a specific person alive before, and it’s much more troublesome than I would have believed. But that’s probably just because it’s you. Ordinary people seem to make it through the day without so many catastrophes” (*Twilight* 174). Significantly, Bella then views the startling revelation that someone has been watching her every move as desirable.

The final moment in *Twilight* that romanticizes a rape scenario as a method of showing Edward’s care for Bella is the climax of the book. Bella, in a misguided attempt to save her mother, finds herself at the mercy of the vampire James. Adhering to Twitchell’s concept of the vampire as a metaphor for sexual violence, thus the act of a vampire biting (penetrating) a victim and ending with the bitten inseminated with vampirism (112), James’ attack on Bella becomes a thinly veiled rape scene. This is indicated in the suggestiveness of James wanting to videotape his biting Bella in order to send it to Edward later. James’ approach to Bella implies a sexual desire of her that links into his violence: “He took another step toward me, til he was just inches away. He lifted a lock of my hair and sniffed at it delicately. Then he gently patted the strand back into place, and I felt his cool fingertips against my throat. He reached up to stroke my cheek once quickly with his thumb [...]” (*Twilight* 448). This scene ends in another rescue by Edward that leads to Bella imagining him as an angel and begging him never to leave her. All of the above scenes in the first novel are used to form the basis of Bella and Edward’s relationship as one saturated in rape culture that is ultimately unacknowledged.

In addition to the undertones of sexual violence, Edward's relationship with Bella is rife with non-physical abuse. According to Maureen Outlaw, there are four major categories of non-physical abuse: emotional, psychological, economic, and social (264). Edward's interactions with Bella display characteristics associated with social and psychological abuse. These traits found in the primary relationship in the series are problematic because they are typically written as romantic or ignored as destructive. In the case of the psychological abuse Edward displays, the constant patronizing and belittling of Bella's physical abilities are portrayed as running jokes. However, Edward's "teasing" is rather malicious when taking into account Bella's low self-esteem and embarrassment over her lack of motor skills. His constant patronizing is also damaging when considering Bella's constant thoughts of how spectacular Edward is and how she does not deserve him.

The social abuse is most commonly found in Edward's exchanges with Bella. Outlaw describes social abuse as generally involving "an imposed isolation—victims are cut-off from family and friends, whether by threat, force, or persuasion" (264). A heavy display of this is seen in the novel *Eclipse* when Edward tells Bella that she is not allowed to see Jacob. Edward goes through all three methods (threat, force, and persuasion) to prevent Bella from seeking out Jacob. As it usually is, Bella's safety is used to justify these obsessive, controlling, and abusive actions Edward takes. Edward's focus on Bella's safety is written in a way to imply that it is necessary for him to exert almost complete control and supervision over Bella's life. Reinforcing this is Bella repeatedly getting into harmful situations and her excessive clumsiness that imply an

inability to take care of her own body. In addition, other characters constantly tease her about having extremely bad luck: “Your bad luck seems to get more potent every day. [...] If we could bottle your luck, we’d have a weapon of mass destruction on our hands” (*Eclipse* 31). The steady stream of comments like this are used to justify the stripping of Bella’s decision-making powers. One disturbing aspect of this is that the romance between Edward and Bella seems to rely on Bella’s incompetence in managing her own safety. Edward consistently ignores Bella’s desires to the point of forcing her to do what he wishes if she persists in protesting. Lack of respect for Bella’s choices are so extreme in the series that other characters unblinkingly follow Edward’s instructions regarding Bella no matter what she says.

Bella’s dependence and other characters’ recognition of Edward’s power over her creates a very disturbing atmosphere for *Eclipse*. The beginning conflict of the novel comes from Edward refusing to let Bella see Jacob. The verbal refusal takes on disturbing connotations when Edward acts to ensure that Bella does not disobey his order. To guarantee that Bella obeys him, Edward has his sister Alice use her psychic abilities to watch her. Alice then acts as a warning system, calling Edward on his cell phone anytime she “sees” Bella attempting to visit Jacob. Unknowing that Edward is keeping a close watch on her, Bella attempts one night to drive out to where Jacob lives, only to find Edward standing near her vehicle, “looking at the piece of [her] truck’s engine as he twirled it in his hands” (*Eclipse* 63). Instead of feeling outraged that he went as far as to dismantle her truck, Bella is only angered for about a paragraph. His domineering attitude

is quickly forgiven as Bella is motivated by her fear of losing Edward's attention such that she acquiesces to his demands.

Edward also uses a certain level of threat in an attempt to guarantee Bella's compliance. At one point, Bella successfully escapes to visit Jacob and returns home only to be faced with Edward's anger. After Edward climbs into Bella's window, seething with rage, she notes him growling and observes that "he ground his teeth together. His hands were balled up in fists at his sides" (*Eclipse* 141). This reaction of barely contained violence in combination with Edward's constantly saying how difficult it is for him to resist killing her makes the prospect of engendering his anger extremely threatening.

The threat of violence and Edward's attempts at forcing Bella to comply extend to his soliciting other people's help. Alice agrees to trap Bella into staying with her while Edward is out of town as insurance that Bella will not be able to see Jacob. Any issues the reader may take with this level of domineering from Edward is made light of through Bella easily forgiving Edward and admitting to enjoying her surroundings. Bella's safety is also once again brought up as a defense for Edward's actions. When Bella points out that Edward's behavior "is just a little bit controlling", Alice replies, "Not really. [...] Edward has no way to know you're safe [while he is gone]. You shouldn't be so reckless" (*Eclipse* 146). This attempt at controlling Bella's movements fails when, during the next day at school, Jacob appears suddenly and drives off with Bella before Alice can stop him. After this fiasco, Edward resorts to a certain level of manipulation and persuasion. He tells Bella that she is free to visit Jacob; however, Bella ends up constantly warring with herself over the urge to visit her friend versus reassuring Edward

that she does not return Jacob's romantic feelings. This results in her continuously trying to guess what Edward would prefer her to do whenever the possibility of a visit comes up: "I just stared at him, trying to understand what he wanted, trying to put out of my mind the yearning I felt to go to La Push so that I wouldn't be swayed by my own wishes" (*Eclipse* 231). Bella clearly does not feel free to visit Jacob, despite Edward's reassurances that he will not attempt to stand in her way any longer. This is an example of Edward's use of psychological threat to keep Bella in place both figuratively and literally.

Edward's abusive qualities are detrimental to readers because the damaging impact of his actions are blurred by the insistence that he is a wonderful person. An enormous portion of all four novels is dedicated to describing not only Edward's goodness, but also his blinding attractiveness. The character's attractiveness and the words Bella uses to describe him are also linked symbolically to her judgment of his character. The main word Bella uses to describe Edward is angelic, with god-like coming in a close second. These two terms work also to imply that Edward is unique and special. Edward's uniqueness then influences readers who identify with Bella, described as rather ordinary, to further excuse his abusive traits. In this setting, Edward's extreme interest in Bella suggests that she must be something truly spectacular to have drawn the undivided attention of this unique 106-year-old being, especially since she has unintentionally succeeded in doing, without any effort, what others have failed to accomplish.

All of this works to obscure the disturbing qualities of Edward's attraction to Bella by forcing the idea of romance onto it. One of the most distressing aspects of

Edward's fixation on Bella is his stalking of her. Orit Kamir discusses the various forms that stalking takes in cultural narratives. She states that, no matter what form such narratives take, stalkers always display a kind of behavior that "invades the other person's privacy, disregards the other's will, and denies his or her right to self-determination" (Kamir 15). All of such traits are portrayed frequently throughout the *Twilight* saga's books. Edward's stalking of Bella follows what Kamir terms the "ever present 'shadow'" (15). Edward watches Bella constantly, to the point where she just assumes that Edward is around and knows what she is doing even if she does not see him. In part, this is spurred by Edward's use of Alice in watching Bella's movements. The use of Alice along with Bella's assumption that Edward is always watching follows with Kamir's concept that male stalking is seen as "ever-present, omnipotent, and overpowering" (68). Edward's stalking is portrayed as desirable, a sign of his fascination and affection. However, Edward's ever watchful presence also acts in the typical role of male stalkers that Kamir describes. Thus, the male stalker, through his actions, "controls, subordinates, objectifies, judges, and condemns" (68). All of these aspects can be seen in various moments in the novels where Edward displays knowledge of Bella that she never told him herself or when he lets her know that he is following her.

One particular scene where Edward's stalking illustrates his control over Bella's life as well as his judgment and condemnation of her actions takes place in *Eclipse*. Bella, having escaped Alice, goes to visit Jacob. On her way home, Bella knows that Edward is going to be angry with her for disobeying his order not to see Jacob. As she exits werewolf territory, a place Edward cannot go, she notices that his car immediately



appears behind hers: “The Volvo followed inches behind me. I kept my eyes on the road ahead. Chicken through and through, I drove straight to Angela’s without once meeting the gaze I could feel burning a hole in my mirror. He followed me until I pulled to the curb in front of the Webers’ house” (*Eclipse* 132).

Edward’s following of Bella in this scene acts as an extension of his controlling of her life. Intentionally letting her spot him in his car as she drives to her other friend’s house acts as the warning that he knows she disobeyed him. Bella’s reaction of avoiding looking into her rearview mirror so she does not have to meet his gaze pushes the idea that a judgment of her actions are getting taken into account. As it is with the rest of Edward’s destructive tendencies, his actions in this scene are described as spurred purely by worry over her safety. The reason he gives for waiting outside the border for her to emerge and then following her to the next destination is that he wanted to guarantee that she was alright.

*Eclipse* is not the only novel in the series that attempts to romanticize this level of stalking. From *Twilight*, the very first book in the collection, such an intersection of violence and romance has been central to the formation and foundation of Bella and Edward’s relationship. In one particularly important scene, Bella finds out that Edward has been breaking into her house and riffling through her possessions. However, her reaction is not one of fear and a sense of violation; instead she states, “‘You spied on me?’ But somehow I couldn’t infuse my voice with the proper outrage. I was flattered” (292). Bella’s sense of flattery continues even after Edward admits that he comes into her room every night while she is asleep and watches her. When he asks if she is angry with

him, she states, “That depends!” (293). Her anger is not at the violation of her privacy or the potential danger of having heard him openly declare that he has been watching her for weeks. Instead, she is angry with him because she speaks in her sleep and is embarrassed. This whole scene romanticizes stalking through casting it as the ultimate form of flattery from a potential romantic partner.

Continuing *Twilight*'s embodiment of rape culture is the love triangle that develops between Edward, Jacob, and Bella. Halfway through the first novel, Bella makes her choice in romantic partners very clear. Also in the first novel, hints that Jacob has a crush on Bella appear. However, Bella never reciprocates his interest. She even turns him down several times, stating that she wishes only to be friends with him. Despite this rejection, Jacob continues to pursue Bella. This love triangle exemplifies rape culture in Jacob's refusal to accept that Bella does not feel attracted to him. Her lack of consent is consistently ignored throughout this particular arc in the series by both Jacob and Edward, who continue to fight over Bella even though she constantly states that she only wants to be with Edward.

The biggest problem revealed in this love triangle is how the question of consent is completely ignored. As Joseph Weinberg and Michael Biernbaum state, “Consent is the continual process of explicit, verbal discussion, a dialogue, brief or extended, taken one step at a time, to an expressed ‘yes’ by both parties” (93). In the love triangle arc, consent is completely over-ridden on multiple occasions. In *New Moon*, Jacob pushes for a closer relationship with Bella, and every time, Bella tells him she is not interested in anything more than friendship. One particular scene features Jacob forcibly initiating

psychical contact despite Bella's clear signals that she does not want him touching her. After he attempts to put his arm around her and she leans away from him, "He reached out and took my hand firmly, wrapping his other hand around my wrist when I tried to pull away again" (212). Following this Bella states that she is not interested in dating Jacob, to which he replies that he is "prepared to be annoyingly persistent" (213). This exemplifies rape culture as it follows the idea that when a woman says no either her mind can be changed by persistence or she is playing hard to get. Both of these examples perpetuate an acceptance of rape culture through making a "no" from a woman an invitation to continue efforts of persuasion rather than a clear denial.

Jacob's refusal to respect Bella's rejection escalates in *Eclipse*. A large portion of the novel is dedicated to Edward and Jacob fighting over Bella. Most of this stems from Jacob refusing to believe that she is uninterested in him. Despite Bella constantly stating that she is only interested in Edward, Jacob and Edward begin a competition for Bella's affections. Rape culture is demonstrated as Jacob sets out to force Bella into realizing she loves him; he even goes as far as to force sexual contact on her. In two scenes in *Eclipse*, Jacob kisses Bella without consent and persists despite her struggles. In the first scene, Bella immediately notices Jacob is intent on kissing her and begins to say no:

"N--" I started to object, but it was too late. His lips crushed mine, stopping my protest. He kissed me angrily, roughly, his other hand gripping tight around the back of my neck, making escape impossible. I shoved against his chest with all my strength but he didn't even seem to notice [...] I grabbed at his face, trying to push it away, failing again. He

seemed to notice this time, though, and it aggravated him. His lips forced mine open, and I could feel his hot breath in my mouth. Acting on instinct, I let my hands drop to my side, and shut down. I opened my eyes and didn't fight, didn't feel... just waited for him to stop. (330-331)

This assault on Bella is trivialized as Jacob finds her anger amusing and insists that she enjoyed the kiss. This diminishing of the situation links back to Benedict's discussion of the language of rape. Consent is ignored and Jacob insists on reading a non-verbal yes in Bella's body language despite her repeatedly saying no. The entire situation is depreciated more by Charlie's, Bella's father, reaction:

“Why did she hit you?”

“Because I kissed her,” Jacob said, unashamed.

“Good for you, kid,” Charlie congratulated him. (*Eclipse* 336)

This reaction not only sanctions the action by having one of the only human adult figures in the novel approve, but makes it into a joke as well.

A scene similar to this one is played out towards the end of *Eclipse* when Jacob once again kisses Bella. This time, instead of forcing her into it with his strength, he blackmails her. Earlier in the novel, he promised that he would not kiss Bella again unless she asked him. Bella makes it clear that she has no interest in ever asking him, so in order to get her verbal consent, Jacob emotionally manipulates her. Before heading off to fight a bunch of vampires intent on killing Bella, Jacob stops to speak to Bella, who is feeling very guilty over not telling Jacob about her engagement to Edward. As Jacob is preparing to leave, he states that he is going to make Bella's life easier by letting one of

the vampires take him “out of the picture” (523). Bella is distraught that Jacob is planning to commit suicide in the battle. In a panic she strives for a way to make Jacob come back alive, and reluctantly, she tells him that she will kiss him before he leaves as long as he promises to return. Jacob immediately takes her up on her offer. Once again Bella is not compliant at first, merely standing there and taking it. But then she changes her mind and kisses him back. Out of nowhere she suddenly thinks, “I’d been lying to myself. Jacob was right” (528). She continues, finally admitting that she does love him.

There are several problems with this scene. The first is that Jacob emotionally blackmailed Bella into kissing him despite knowing that she had no interest in doing it. Later, Edward reveals that Jacob’s threat to kill himself had been a bluff and that he only said that to guilt her into kissing him. Despite Bella verbalizing that she wants to kiss Jacob, there is still a lack of consent. Both parties involved know that Bella is an unwilling participant who is only agreeing based on Jacob’s threat. The second issue is with the result of the kiss. Bella’s sudden declaration of love towards Jacob and, in particular, her thought that he has been right all along is an eradication of the importance of consent.

Jacob being cast as knowing Bella’s body and mind better than she does works to excuse his over-riding of her decisions. Excusing Jacob’s actions in this way is similar to the justification of Edward’s stalking and non-verbal abuse under the guise of concern for Bella’s safety. In addition, having Bella’s sudden declaration of love not only attempts to vindicate Jacob’s actions, but also endeavors to justify force as sometimes “required because women’s sexual ‘needs’ [are] [...] in need of ‘awakening’” (Gavey 20). Nicola

Gavey points out that this way of thinking puts “women’s consent as always up in question” (22). With this development in the series, Meyer has fed the “no means yes” stereotype.

### Religion Sanctioning Abuse

Further validating the violence perpetrated in these relationships are the religious themes that endorse romance as an example of “pure” love. By “pure” love I mean that the romance is portrayed in a way that denotes its sanctity. Primarily, this applies to the relationship between Edward and Bella as most of the religious motifs surround them. Joan H. Timmerman notes that traditional religions’ connection to violence against women appears in how “male dominance and the rituals that consecrate it” (204) are sacralized. She also states that there is the misguided belief that religious men do not perpetrate violence against women (205). The combination of the valorization of male dominance and the assumption that religious believers do not commit violence appears throughout the *Twilight* series in its reliance on religious attitudes and symbols.

*Twilight* establishes its connection to religion immediately as the first book opens with a quote from Genesis 2:17: “But of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.” In the Bible, God forbade Adam and Eve from eating the fruit produced by the Tree of Knowledge: this prohibition led to humanity’s first act of rebellion. After Adam and Eve ate the fruit, God made them mortal and banished them from the Garden of Eden. Opening the series with this quote casts a symbolic parallel to the events in the Tree of

Knowledge story and *Twilight*. Vampirism, in the novels, acts much in the same way as eating fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. Like the bible story, one bite (in this case from a vampire) condemns a person to death as well as banishment from the world in which they had been living.

However, despite these parallels, Meyer does not associate her main vampires with the devil (or serpent). Instead, as Susanna Clements states, she casts them “as something higher than human, rather than lower” (106). Edward in particular is depicted as a higher being; in fact, Meyer’s repetitive descriptions of him as “angelic” or “god-like” put him symbolically with God in the Tree of Knowledge story. In this scenario, *Twilight* centers on Bella as a part of punished humanity who regains her lost immortality by proving her devotion and obedience to Edward (God). Additionally, as Lewis Aron highlights about the Tree of Knowledge story, partaking of the fruit forces Adam and Eve to leave “childhood innocence behind, accepting self-consciousness, sex, work and death” (Aron 688). Like the original story, Bella also has to leave behind childhood before ascending into vampirism. However, she must do so while following religious virtues. For example, Bella’s acceptance of death comes through sacrificing herself for her baby in *Breaking Dawn*. This sacrifice leads to Bella’s transformation into a vampire. Moreover, one of the conditions Edward places on both sex and turning Bella into a vampire is that they have to be married first, which links into religious ideas of purity. These overtones of Edward as a God figure, to whom Bella must prove her love, sanctifies the abusive qualities of their relationship as divine tests of Bella’s devotion rather than emotionally and psychologically destructive acts.

Another religious aspect of the *Twilight* saga is the popular quote about Bella and Edward's relationship that has been picked up heavily by marketers: "and so the lion fell in love with the lamb" (*Twilight* 274). The scene from which this quote is pulled situates Bella as the lamb and Edward as the lion. The lion here acts as an implication of Edward as a predator with Bella the prey. However, it also imparts stereotypical ideals of maleness / masculinity (aggressive and strong) and femaleness / femininity (docile and innocent) onto the characters. Within this context, Edward's violence is written off as part of his "nature", and his resistance towards devouring Bella is a testament to his self-control. In addition, the lion/lamb imagery has deep biblical roots. Kristen Nielsen discusses how the imagery of a lion is often used as a "poetic expression of Yahweh as a powerful figure" (185), with the lamb typically used to imply his human followers. Meyer's use of these figures links into the typical biblical use to imply a human-divine relationship. Consequently, it sanctions the predatory aspect of Edward's association with Bella while simultaneously reinforcing the image of Edward as the divine (again read as god-like) and Bella as one of his followers.

Further encouraging the idea of "pure love" between Edward and Bella are the constant reassurances of the purity of Edward's soul. One of the main concerns Edward voices in *New Moon* and *Eclipse* is whether or not he has a soul. Bella and, to a lesser extent, Carlisle both act to reassure Edward that he is not damned for being a vampire. Carlisle's opinions over the state of their souls, as vampires, verge along the line of suggesting that, as long as they are good people, they are not damned. This is seen in the reunion scene between Edward and Bella in *New Moon*. Bella's sudden appearance as



Edward is about to commit suicide<sup>1</sup> leads him to believe that he is dead and somehow he has made it to heaven. This inspires the comment, “Amazing [...] Carlisle was right” (452). In *Eclipse*, Bella makes an argument similar to Carlisle’s whenever the prospect of her getting turned into a vampire arises. As such, both Carlisle and Bella emphasize Edward’s need to believe in or contemplate the (real or potential) sanctity of a person’s soul after vampirism.

Abstinence also plays a significant role in the idea of “pure love” throughout the series. After reluctantly agreeing to turn Bella into a vampire, Edward refuses to have sex with her unless they are married because, as he states, “I’ll be damned [...] if I’ll let them keep you out, too” (*Eclipse* 455). This entire scene links into the idea of sexual purity as important to the status of a person’s immortal soul. Edward does not believe that he can be redeemed because he believes that he has broken most of the rules of salvation. However, he hopes that by ensuring Bella follows all the rules she will not face the same fate as he expects for himself. This connection between sex, marriage, and the church not only works to condemn non-heterosexual relationships, but also reinforces the patriarchal monitoring and control over women’s sexuality.

In all, Meyer’s *Twilight* saga is essentially a cautionary tale that promotes traditional gender norms and instills a sense in women that violence from romantic male partners is to be expected. These novels exemplify rape culture through a combination of the normalizing and romanticizing of male violence. This violence is excused through the religious and paranormal aspects of the novels that are the main features of the depicted

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<sup>1</sup> Edward’s suicide attempt is actually a course of action he takes under the assumption that the Volturi will kill him since, being a vampire, the only way for him to die is to be torn apart.

romantic relationships. Edward's vampirism is used to deflect the disturbing nature of his actions in courting Bella as well as normalize his violent tendencies by making it a part of his "nature." In addition, the love triangle between Edward, Bella, and Jacob promotes stereotypical ideas concerning women's right to consent. Although these novels are typically brushed aside as pure escapism, this thesis demonstrates how the violent relationships at the center of the novels are detrimental to its audience, especially the youth and young adults who comprise the majority of its readers. Listing the *Twilight* saga as simply escapism ignores the cultural impact the series has had and continues to have due to its wide popularity. The series' wide base of fans and the influence it has over them is a substantial reason that taking this critical look into the novels is important.

### Chapter Five: Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have criticized Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* saga for its depictions of romance that glorify violent and abusive relationships. My examination of the novels revealed that the series exemplifies rape culture through how it excuses, normalizes, and romanticizes violence against women. As I read through the books, I recorded instances of abuse from the male love interests and scenes where Bella's autonomy was eliminated. In all four novels, Edward had the largest number of scenes depicting violence towards Bella. In addition, his actions were laced with undertones of sexual violence, stalking behaviors, and non-physical abuse. In contrast, Jacob did not have as many violent scenes. However, his main function as the secondary love interest reflected rape culture through his admitted refusal to accept that Bella was not romantically interested in him. Scenes depicting his pursuit of Bella consisted of forced sexual contact and proclamations that, despite her denials, she really did want him. All of this was justified in the novels by the strong religious themes that worked to sanction these damaging portrayals of romance as images of "pure" love.

I went into this project aware of the huge fan base *Twilight* has garnered. I became familiar with the series after I began working at a bookstore one month after the release of *Breaking Dawn*. So even though the main chaos and rush of the midnight book releases were over, I still found myself in constant contact with *Twilight* fans. During this time, it seemed one could not turn a corner in the store without coming across some sort of *Twilight*-based item. In addition, one of the most frequently asked questions every

bookseller at the time had to field was, “I’m looking for a book that is like *Twilight*. Do you have any suggestions?”

Despite all this, one of the most shocking aspects of my research still came from seeing fans’ reactions to the series romances: websites riddled with women, young and old, praising the novels and wishing for their own Edwards or Jacobs; thousands of images depicting weddings created to reflect Bella and Edward’s own ceremony. A wide range of fan-made items getting sold online, such as felted replicas of Bella’s womb, life-size Edward silhouette wall decals for bedroom walls, and even underwear featuring Edward’s face on the crotch. All of these examples of the *Twilight* craze showcase the staggering influence these books are having on their readers. Yet, even more shocking is the number of people claiming that the *Twilight* series is feminist.

The research I have conducted for this project attests to the fact that *Twilight* is not feminist. In fact, I feel safe in saying that nothing about *Twilight* is feminist. Bella acts as little more than a prop in all of the novels; her few self-determined actions arise only if they fit into preconceived gender norms. Her main function is to contemplate her feelings for Edward and Jacob, make sure she is home every night in time to cook for her father, and excuse the male characters’ abusive tendencies. When Bella does find herself in the middle of the action sequences, her main function is to sit on the sidelines fretting and, at times, contemplating suicide to save the others from pain. Yes, Bella is the main protagonist and ninety percent of the novels are told from her perspective, but she is merely a reactionary character. Her decisions and actions do not drive the plots forward.

This role is given to Edward, whose decisions influence the plot; Bella simply reacts to what is happening around her.

Hence, one idea for further study on Meyer's *Twilight* series would be a deeper interrogation of Bella's character and her lack of autonomy in the novels. Questions I am left wondering are, Is the *Twilight* series anti-feminist? How are these novels encouraging traditional gender norms, heteronormativity, and the pro-life agenda? If they are encouraging these ideas, what do these books' massive influence mean for social justice issues? How is the popularity of these novels influencing the publishing market?

In response to all of these questions, I leave this project with a sense of excitement and slight frustration. My frustration comes from the continual advertisement of *Twilight* as a quintessential love story featuring the ideal romantic hero, when said romance is the embodiment of a non-physically abusive relationship. It is disturbing to constantly see enthusiasts of *Twilight* attempt to emulate the relationships found in this series. (As seen in the soon-to-be released romance self-help book *Twilight, True Love, and You: Seven Secret Steps to Finding Your Edward or Jacob*.) However, I maintain hope that by bringing these issues to light more readers of the series will look closer at the social implications of these relationships and think more carefully before ascribing the dynamics of *Twilight*'s romantic relationships to their own lives.

## Notes

1. This quote is taken from a speech Edward gives to Bella in *Twilight* (p. 310), the first novel in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* saga. I use it to emphasize the prevalence of violence that is integral to the romantic relationships Bella forms throughout the series. I argue that interconnecting violence and romance in this manner sends a dangerous message to *Twilight*'s audience, who voraciously engage in the romantic relationships portrayed to the point of emulation. This provides a significant point of critique of intimate partner violence in contemporary popular fiction.

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