

Gender and Sexuality in Paranormal Romance:  
The Postfeminist Agenda of  
Contemporary Vampire Narratives

Dissertation  
zur Erlangung des akademischen Grades eines  
Doktors der Philosophie  
der Philosophischen Fakultäten  
der Universität des Saarlandes

vorgelegt von  
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Saarbrücken, 2020

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Tag der letzten Prüfungsleistung: 7. November 2018

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Prof. Astrid Fellner for her generous support throughout the whole Ph.D. process, and for encouraging me to find my own voice. My work is better thanks to her insightful and constructive feedback. In her research colloquium, she managed to bring together a group of like-minded scholars and to create a welcoming space in which I could regularly discuss my ideas in a friendly atmosphere.

My gratitude also goes to Dr. Stacey Abbott, whose work on horror TV and film has been fundamental for my research, and who kindly agreed to be my second examiner. “TV Fangdom” and “Daughter of Fangdom,” two conferences on television vampires she co-organized, were events that spurred me on and gave me the opportunity to present some of my results to a wider audience.

My work benefited greatly from the insight and critical feedback provided by my fellow Ph.D. students and everyone who participated in our research colloquium at Saarland University. My thanks to you all.

I gratefully acknowledge the intellectual input and motivational boosts I received from countless audience members and fellow conference-goers whose questions and comments contributed to my thinking on this project.

Last but not least, I am very grateful for the unflagging support provided by my family and friends, with some of whom I share a passion for all things vampire. A special thank you goes to my partner Gerrit, with whom I have discussed my ideas innumerable times, and whose support I can always count on.

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# 1. Introduction: The Cultural Politics of Paranormal Romance

## 1.1. Contextualizing Paranormal Romance

Since the mid-2000s, American popular culture has fallen under the reign of the vampire, and the bloodsucker is only slowly releasing its grip. In recent decades, there has been a massive influx of vampire-related content, ranging from novels, films, TV series, comics and more. Vampires have been omnipresent in a number of different media, addressing different target audiences and different age groups.<sup>1</sup> A vast array of shelves in book stores is now expressly reserved for ‘books with bite,’ and in 2011, the Teen Choice Awards created the special category of ‘Choice Vampire’ to account for the wide range of vampire characters in film and television. In particular, recent years have seen the “growth of a massive vampire romance industry, now generally considered to be the most popular subgenre of paranormal romance” (Byron 172). Having started out as a largely literary genre, paranormal romance has subsequently made a huge impact on film and television through the adaptation of some of the genre’s most popular novels, most notably the *Twilight* series by American author Stephenie Meyer (Crawford 4). Thus, after *Twilight*’s tremendous success, the book market was flooded with an abundance of vampire romance narratives taking place in a contemporary setting, a great number of which were specifically marketed to and enjoyed by female audiences, primarily teenagers.<sup>2</sup> These paranormal romance narratives then swiftly spilled across into television and film. A

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1 To give an impression of the number and variety of texts, popular English-language vampire films and TV series from the mid-2000s onwards include: *Underworld* (film series, 2003/06/09/12/16/running, dir. by Len Wiseman/Patrick Tatopoulos/Måns Mårland & Björn Stein/Anna Foerster), *Young Dracula* (CBBC Channel, 2006-2014), *Blood Ties* (City/Space/Lifetime Television, 2007), *Moonlight* (CBS, 2007-08), *30 Days of Night* (2007, dir. by David Slade), *I Am Legend* (2007, dir. by Francis Lawrence), *Being Human* (BBC Three, 2008-13), *Cirque du Freak: The Vampire’s Assistant* (2009, dir. by Paul Weitz), *Daybreakers* (2009, dir. by The Spierig Brothers), *Let Me In* (2010, dir. by Matt Reeves), *Fright Night* (2011, dir. by Craig Gillespie), *Being Human* (SyFy, 2011-14), *The Gates* (ABC, 2010), *Priest* (2011, dir. by Scott Stewart), *My Babysitter’s a Vampire* (Télétoon, 2011-12), *Hotel Transylvania* (2012, dir. by Genndy Tartakovsky), *Dark Shadows* (2012, dir. by Tim Burton), *Vampire Dog* (2012, dir. by Geoff Anderson), *Vamps* (2012, dir. by Amy Heckerling), *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* (2012, dir. by Timur Bekmambetov), *Byzantium* (2012, dir. by Neil Jordan), *The Originals* (The CW, 2013-running), *Hemlock Grove* (Netflix, 2013-15), *Dracula* (NBC/Sky Living, 2013-14), *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013, dir. by Jim Jarmusch), *Dracula Untold* (2014, dir. by Gary Shore), *Vampire Academy* (2014, dir. by Mark Waters), *The Strain* (FX, 2014-2017), *What We Do in the Shadows* (2014, dir. by Jemaine Clement & Taika Waititi), *From Dusk till Dawn: The Series* (El Rey, 2014-16), *Penny Dreadful* (Showtime/Sky, 2014-16), *Preacher* (AMC, 2016-running), *Van Helsing* (SyFy, 2016-running), *The Carmilla Movie* (2017, dir. by Spencer Maybee), *Let the Right One In* (TNT, 2017).

2 This resurgence of paranormal romance, particularly narratives featuring vampire protagonists, has been observed by a variety of scholars, such as Deborah Lutz (2007), Kathleen Miller (2010), Catherine Roach (2010), Brigid Cherry (2012), and Andreea Șerban (2012).

pivotal text that influenced narratives in a range of different media, Meyer's series thus propelled the figure of the vampire to a level of popularity and mainstream appeal that was unprecedented (Crawford 159).<sup>3</sup>

Conceiving of this cultural obsession with the vampire as a phenomenon that needs to be reckoned with from an academic perspective, this dissertation uses three popular romance texts featuring the vampire motif as critical objects to be inquired and interrogated. This study examines the film adaptations of the *Twilight* series, which spawned the new wave of popular fascination with the vampire, as well as the television series *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* with regard to their construction of concepts such as femininity, masculinity, subjectivity, and sexuality. Adopting a Cultural Studies framework, this research presents an analysis of the above-named popular cultural products in relationship to the larger cultural phenomenon of postfeminism. The *Twilight* novel tetralogy, which came out between 2005 and 2008, already had a strong fan base before the release of the first movie.<sup>4</sup> However, the *Twilight* movie adaptations, which include *Twilight* (2008, dir. by Catherine Hardwicke), *New Moon* (2009, dir. by Chris Weitz), *Eclipse* (2010, dir. by David Slade), *Breaking Dawn – Part 1* (2011, dir. by Bill Condon), and *Breaking Dawn – Part 2* (2012, dir. by Bill Condon), “have greatly contributed to the saga’s prominence” (Bucciferro 5). In fact, it was after the release of the first film – a “blockbuster that surpassed all initial expectations” (Bucciferro 5) – that the franchise became the cultural phenomenon as which it is known today. Therefore, it makes sense to draw on the film versions of the *Twilight* series for the analysis in this dissertation.

*The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*, too, are based on popular paranormal romance book series. Similar to the *Twilight* Saga, these series also reached the height of their popularity in the course of their adaptation to another medium. *The Vampire Diaries*' original text is a series of novels of the same name by L.J. Smith, originally published in 1991/92; *True Blood*'s literary source is Charlaine Harris' bestselling book series called *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* (also known as *The Sookie Stackhouse Novels*; 2001-

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<sup>3</sup> The existence of vampire romance parodies, such as *Vampires Suck* (2010, dir. by Jason Friedberg/Aaron Seltzer) and *Breaking Wind* (2012, dir. by Craig Moss), is indicative of the fact that teen vampire romances are relevant enough to generate their own spoofs and that a number of elements and tropes are now clearly associated with this genre. After all, parodies will only be successful if audiences have acquired a certain amount of familiarity with what is being made fun of.

<sup>4</sup> During the release of her novel series, Meyer was the bestselling author in the US, selling over 29 million books in 2008 and 26.5 million books in 2009. In 2008, *Twilight*, the first in the series, was the bestselling book in US bookstores (Waterstones).

2013). Both of the TV series were commissioned on the heels of the *Twilight* franchise's success.<sup>5</sup> Because these three popular cultural products emerged in close temporal proximity to each other, it will be interesting to investigate both their collective relationship with the discourses of postfeminism, and the ways in which they are in dialogue with each other.<sup>6</sup> Importantly, a focus on the cinematic/television adaptations of the literary texts will open up my examination of postfeminism to an analysis of the visual representation of the female gaze, which turns out to be a central postfeminist feature in all three key texts.

What the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* have in common is not only that they are enormously popular texts, but also that they emerge in audio-visual media. All of them appear in the form of series, although the differences between cinematic and TV seriality should be noted. Film and television certainly differ in terms of narrative structure and hours of storytelling involved. Nevertheless, both film and television seriality may entail greater narrative complexity and openness, character density and ambiguity (Creeber, *Serial Television* 2-3).<sup>7</sup> Worth mentioning is that the three texts under analysis display certain differences which can be tied back to the fact that one of them is a series of films (the *Twilight* Saga), one is a network television series (*The Vampire Diaries*) and one is a premium cable television series (*True Blood*). These are all different media which have different methods of producing content and must comply with different rules, such as FCC regulations (Thurber 8). Meanwhile, an obvious commonality of the three texts is that they all center a love story between a young female human protagonist and a male vampire, a narrative premise which apparently strikes a chord with the target audiences. The fact that women and girls are privileged as the intended primary consumers here is unusual and partly accounts for these cultural

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<sup>5</sup> The influence of the *Twilight* franchise is particularly discernable in the case of *The Vampire Diaries*, whose source text is from the early 1990s. The large time gap between the release of the novels and the TV series suggests that the paranormal romance genre's shift from niche to mainstream status had something to do with the producers' decision to adapt the relatively 'old' source material.

<sup>6</sup> My dissertation makes it a point not to lump together the source texts and the adaptations in the frame of the analysis.

<sup>7</sup> A common differentiation in TV studies is the one between 'serial' and 'series.' Thus, one of the key differences between the two formats involves "the series' use of self-contained episodes with relatively autonomous plotlines, [which is set] against the serial's use of continuing storylines" (Turner, "Genre, Hybridity and Mutation" 8). As Graeme Turner argues, "[t]oday, there are elements of the serial in many of what the industry would regard as series" ("Genre, Hybridity and Mutation" 8). Indeed, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* can be described as incorporating aspects of both the serial and the series. For the sake of simplicity, both texts are referred to as 'series' within this research.



products' tremendous success at the box office and within fan communities. As Stacey Abbott argues,

[o]n a practical level, . . . the huge popularity of th[ese] fiction[s], whether in written or film/televisual form, is that they are targeting an audience that is often ignored within popular media (until recently)[,] which is young women. Part of their appeal is linked to how they have been used to explore women's desires and sexuality in rather provocative, at times controversial, ways. (Tranter)

Interestingly, although the *Twilight* Saga, in particular, has been favored by many, it has also been widely castigated for its retrogressive gender politics by critics, scholars and audiences alike.<sup>8</sup> Considering the vampire's fascinating potential to "break. . . down categories, transgress. . . boundaries, and upset. . . the very premises upon which systems of normality are structured" (K. Kane 103), it is striking that – in marked contrast – this contemporary vampire romance narrative seems to introduce its vampires as reinforcing the dominant social order. Stephenie Meyer, author of the *Twilight* series, has been criticized for crafting a group of vampires that do not disrupt the status quo but "align with a trend of non-heteronormative characters supporting heteronormativity" (K. Kane 104).

The inconsistent reception of the vampire romance genre in general, and the *Twilight* Saga in particular, provokes some interesting questions: Does this damning criticism do justice to vampire romance? How does the *Twilight* Saga manage to bring together the transgressive figure of the vampire with conservative ideas about gender and sexuality? In what ways do the other two narratives appropriate the vampire motif? Considering that we live in an era of supposed gender equality, in which the legal and social barriers that prevented women from casting their vote in elections, moving freely in public space, joining the workforce, pursuing an education and controlling their own reproductive processes have supposedly been broken down, why does a text like *Twilight*, which has been accused of being a "creepy antiabortion allegory" (North) and of promoting "deeply regressive and patriarchally inscribed gender role[s]" (Jenson and Sarkeesian 57), have such a tremendous appeal for widespread audiences? If *Twilight* is "[s]ink[ing] [i]ts [t]eeth [i]nto [f]eminism" (Sax) and "celebrat[ing] the oppression of women" (Donnelly 179), why is it particularly popular with female audiences, including

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<sup>8</sup> For an overview of common criticisms in the media and academia, see e.g.: Ames, Melissa. "Twilight Follows Tradition. Analyzing 'Biting' Critiques of Vampire Narratives for Their Portrayals of Gender and Sexuality." *Bitten by Twilight. Youth Culture, Media, & the Vampire Franchise*, edited by Melissa A. Click, Jennifer Stevens Aubrey, and Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz, Peter Lang, 2010, pp. 37-53. For an ethnographic study of readers who view *Twilight* critically, see: Petersen, Anne Helen. "That Teenage Feeling." *Feminist Media Studies* vol. 12, no. 1, 2012, pp. 51-67. doi:10.1080/14680777.2011.558348.

many “self-described feminists” (Wagenseller Goletz 147)? What, then, is the appeal of these paranormal romances for today’s (female) viewers?

This dissertation provides answers to these questions by relating the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* to current discourses of postfeminism. As I contend, contradictoriness is at the core of these contemporary vampire romances, as they oscillate between the reinforcement and the disruption of conventional gender structures. A central argument of this research is that the analyzed texts are highly problematic in some instances, while they simultaneously offer spaces for subversion and the suspension of gendered power dynamics. This “both/and” (Rutland 74) moment at the heart of these cultural products is one of postfeminism’s essential features. Within this study, postfeminism is understood as “the cultural formation that has become the dominant framework in western culture’s discourses of gender” (Levine 137), a hybrid phenomenon emerging at the intersection of such varied influences as feminism, neo-liberalism, consumer culture, individualism, postmodernism, and mainstream media. Essentially, this work argues that the above-mentioned texts pursue a postfeminist agenda, i.e. they both reflect and promote notions that are rooted in contemporary postfeminist culture. As I will demonstrate, the supernatural figure of the vampire, which figures prominently in the analyzed series, functions as a trope that is ideal for the incorporation of postfeminist ideas concerning gender, sexuality, identity and the body. Thus, not only do vampire narratives lend themselves to affirm, explore and/or subvert power hierarchies, particularly concerning categories of sexuality, gender and race, but vampires also work as a projection surface for postfeminist discourses of subjectivation, self-discipline and the management of the body.

In March of 2017, the most recent one of this study’s primary texts came to a close. *The Vampire Diaries*, which was developed by Kevin Williamson and Julie Plec for the broadcast television network *The CW*, can look back on 8 seasons or a total of 170 episodes. For much of its running time of seven and a half years, it functioned as the network’s flagship, generating an enormous viewership and drawing in a myriad of fans; for instance, the number of viewers who watched the pilot episode of *The Vampire Diaries* surpassed that of any other series premiere on *The CW* since the network was launched in 2006 (MacKenzie). Actors and actresses portraying the main characters on the show continue to garner nominations at the *People’s Choice Awards* and *Teen Choice Awards*, which attests to the enduring recognition it receives from the general public and the teenage demographic in particular. A similar success story was *True Blood*, which

was broadcast on the premium cable and satellite television network *HBO* between 2008 and 2014. Despite receiving a TV-MA rating and primarily addressing a mature audience, the show was related to *The Vampire Diaries* in terms of genre and subject matter. *True Blood*, which was created by Alan Ball and ran for a total of 7 seasons, has equally been a favorite by audiences and critics. Among other things, it won both an *Emmy* and a *Golden Globe award* and was chosen as “Favorite TV Obsession” at the *People’s Choice Awards* in 2010. Like *The Vampire Diaries* for *The CW*, *True Blood* turned out to be one of the most profitable shows for *HBO*: “Combined with On Demand and DVR viewings, *HBO* put the show’s average audience at around 12 million an episode, making it *HBO*’s second-most-watched series, behind only ‘The Sopranos’” (Toff).

As these two TV series’ definite predecessor, the *Twilight* Saga was a major factor in the proliferation of paranormal romance. Grossing over \$1.36 billion in the U.S. alone and reaching a massive audience worldwide, it has contributed decisively to the genre achieving mainstream popularity (Box Office Mojo; Crawford 159). Not only has the *Twilight* franchise enabled the enormous expansion of vampire and paranormal romance genres and cemented the central storyline of a “teenage girl . . . , sometimes human and sometimes not, encountering paranormal beings in contemporary American settings” (Crawford 230), but it has also had a tremendous cultural impact beyond these genres. Recent years have seen an explosion of female-led Hollywood blockbusters, including *The Hunger Games* tetralogy (2012-15, dir. by Gary Ross/Francis Lawrence), the *Divergent* series (2015-, dir. by Neil Burger/Robert Schwendtke), *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012, dir. by Rupert Sanders) and its prequel/sequel *Winter’s War* (2016, dir. by Cedric Nicolas-Troyan), the *Fifty Shades* series (2015; 2017; 2018, dir. by Sam Taylor-Johnson/James Foley), *Ghostbusters* (2016, dir. by Paul Feig), *Wonder Woman* (2017, dir. by Patty Jenkins), *Star Wars: Episode VIII – The Last Jedi* (2017, dir. by Rian Johnson), and *Ocean’s 8* (2018, dir. by Gary Ross), to name only a few. As a result of *Twilight*’s overwhelming success at the box office, the American film industry seems increasingly inclined to produce big-budget films featuring female protagonists and targeting a female demographic (Crawford 272). As Owen Gleiberman puts it in an online article of *Entertainment Weekly*:

The ascendance of the *Twilight* saga represents an essential paradigm shift in youth-gender control of the pop marketplace. For the better part of two decades, teenage boys, and *overgrown* teenage boys, have essentially held sway over Hollywood, dictating, to a gargantuan degree, the varieties of movies that get made. . . . Sure, we have “chick flicks,” but that (demeaning) term implies that they’re an exception . . . No more. With *New Moon*, the *Twilight* series is now officially . . . a juggernaut on the big screen . . . And that gives the core audience it represents – teenage girls – a new power and prevalence.<sup>9</sup> (Gleiberman)

This extraordinary popularity, scope and cultural impact alone are reasons to study the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*. As some of the most prominent examples of their kind, these media products have reached – and continue to reach – widespread audiences, transporting notions of gender norms, identities and relations, sexuality, race, class, age, etc. to a diverse group of consumers; it is then up to the latter to negotiate, accept, question or reject these notions. An analysis of these three texts is particularly worthwhile because all three of them come in the form of visual media. As Kristopher Broyles contends, “the visual medium facilitates more passive learning than do other forms of media. Therefore, the impact of ideas about femininity and masculinity may be more passively learned, accepted, or integrated into society” (Broyles). Considering the cultural power of these three paranormal romances, it is an especially valuable endeavor to uncover the subtle as well as naming the less subtle messages they contain.

Besides the discursive and ideological power of these cultural products, their pronounced emphasis on gender and sexuality makes these vampire romances an instructive object of academic study from a gender studies perspective. The vampire is an overwhelmingly popular symbol for the erotic (Wisker 63), and according to Melissa Ames, “the vampire narrative is a productive space to tease out problems of gender and sexuality” (45). Similarly, Catherine M. Roach describes “romance . . . as a rich cultural site that yields much insight into critical issues of gender and sexuality in America today” (“Getting a Good Man to Love” 2). Thus, the genre hybrid of paranormal romance lends itself perfectly to the study of gender that will be undertaken within the frame of this dissertation.

In investigating what characterizes the vampire figure portrayed in the above-mentioned paranormal romances, this research builds upon an extensive body of academic research on the popular-cultural vampire motif.<sup>10</sup> In particular, this study is

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<sup>9</sup> Emphasis in the original.

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. Twitchell (1981), Waller (1986), Auerbach (1995), Gordon and Hollinger (1997), Kungl (2003), Jowett (2005), Waltje (2005), Williamson (2005), Kane (2006), Wilson Overstreet (2006), Abbott (2007; 2016), Clements (2011), O’Brien Mathews (2011), George and Hughes (2013), Hunt, Lockyer and Williamson (2014).

based on Nina Auerbach's much-quoted argument that vampires are subjected to cultural change and that they tend to reflect issues at the center of current debates within society. As she writes, "vampires shape themselves to personal and national moods" (5), and "[b]ecause they are always changing, their appeal is dramatically generational" (5). Thus, a key research question of this dissertation concerns the characteristics of the contemporary vampire figure and the ways in which it is represented in the above-mentioned narratives. This is important because, "[l]ike the pre-twentieth century Gothic, the appeal of today's 'new' vampire tale is to do with its ability to represent what is disavowed, to speak to anxieties and desires that are difficult to name" (M. Williamson, "Vampire Transformations" 105). Hence, it will be argued that, in conjunction with the vampire figure, the way in which gender and sexuality are represented in the three texts is in fact a reflexion of "the plurality and contradictions of contemporary female (and male) experience" (Genz and Brabon 39). The fact that these media products address and negotiate a variety of aspects pertaining to the conflict-laden experience of individuals living in a postfeminist era explains their tremendous appeal for audiences. Rather than framing the analysis of the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* as an attempt to decide whether these texts are essentially feminist or anti-feminist, this dissertation draws on the work of Rosalind Gill, who argues that postfeminist popular culture "critiques as well as endorses"<sup>11</sup> (*Gender and the Media* 248) gendered patriarchal strictures. Importantly, postfeminism is understood within the frame of this dissertation not solely as a retrogressive, anti-feminist backlash but as a dominating discursive system emerging at the intersection of different cultural influences, including feminism, neo-liberalist, consumerist ideology, individualism and postmodernism. Thus, a fundamental assumption of this work is that "[p]ostfeminist culture does not allow us to make straightforward distinctions between progressive and regressive texts" (Tasker and Negra 22).

## 1.2. Originality of the Project

By emphasizing the complexity and ambivalence of the given paranormal romances as indicative of their relation to postfeminist discourses, this dissertation distinguishes itself from the bulk of scholarly work on the texts. While *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* have not been linked with postfeminism as yet, a few academic articles exist which

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<sup>11</sup> Emphasis in the original.

identify the postfeminist tendencies of the *Twilight* series (i.e. the novels). Scholars such as Hila Shachar, Sophie Spieler and Anne Helen Petersen can essentially be placed in the camp of “anti-postfeminist critics” (Genz and Brabon 15), who read Meyer’s series in an overwhelmingly negative way. For instance, in her essay “A Post-Feminist Romance. Love, Gender and Intertextuality in Stephenie Meyer’s Saga” (2011), Shachar underlines *Twilight*’s “deeply conservative politics” (155) and denies the novels any nuances when she writes that they “participate in a post-feminist backlash that recycles traditional notions of love, masculinity and femininity for the contemporary age, rather than re-evaluating them and offering a more complex version of gender relations for modern readers” (148). Similarly, Spieler argues in her article “Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* Series and the ‘Post(-)ing’ of Feminism” (2012) that the “*Twilight* series can be read as a product of new traditionalism” (136) because it “represent[s] a reiteration of conventional gender roles” (135). And Petersen concludes in “That Teenage Feeling. *Twilight*, Fantasy, and Feminist Readers” (2012) that the novels “promote regressive understandings of romance, sexuality, and the place of patriarchy, forming . . . one of the most striking manifestations of postfeminist culture in recent years” (51). What these articles have in common is that they interpret the *Twilight* series, and with it postfeminism, as an anti-feminist backlash. This dissertation distances itself from these accounts by focusing on the contradictory nature of postfeminist discourses. In this way, the project follows Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon, who contradict those who “argue the case of postfeminism as either a new utopia or the trap of nostalgia” (8) and instead define it as “a complex resignification that harbours within itself the threat of backlash as well as the potential for innovation” (8).

At the time of writing, there is no extensive scholarly analysis of the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* and their relationship to postfeminist discourses. Besides the handful of essays quoted earlier, a small number of journal articles published between 2011 and 2014 deal with ambivalent postfeminist aspects in Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* novels in particular, taking a stance similar to this dissertation.<sup>12</sup> However, due to their shortness, these publications do not offer an in-depth investigation of postfeminist

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<sup>12</sup> Among these are Ananya Mukherjea’s article “My Vampire Boyfriend: Postfeminism, ‘Perfect’ Masculinity, and the Contemporary Appeal of Paranormal Romance” (2011) and Christine Jarvis’ essay “The Twilight of Feminism? Stephenie Meyer’s Saga and the Contradictions of Contemporary Girlhood” (2014); furthermore, Tanya Erzen touches on the subject in her monography *Fanpire: The Twilight Saga and the Women Who Love it* (2012). Mukherjea additionally draws on the TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (*The WB/UPN*, 1997-2003) and Annette Curtis Klause’s novel *The Silver Kiss* (1990) to illustrate her argument. Although she briefly mentions *True Blood* and the *The Vampire Diaries* novels by L.J. Smith, these texts are not included in her analysis.

aspects in *Twilight*. Besides, their focus is on the *Twilight* novels, so they do not take into account the film series. Neither do they discuss the other two paranormal romances which form the objects of analysis of this project. My dissertation closes this significant research gap by providing a detailed and systematic inquiry into the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* and their intricate connections with the ideologies of postfeminism. The latter has been referred to by Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra as “a dominating discursive system” (“Introduction” 2) having established itself in recent years “through structures of forceful articulation and synergistic reiteration across media forms” (“Introduction” 2). In analyzing the texts in question through a gender lens, this project aims to shed light on how gender roles and relationships are represented in contemporary American popular culture. Besides providing new insights into how the construction of gender and sexuality operates in the contemporary media, this dissertation also builds upon and contributes to academic debates in (post)feminism, research on the Gothic as well as (paranormal) romance studies.

### **1.3. A Cultural Studies Approach to Vampire Romance**

This research approaches its leading questions by providing a discursive and ideological textual analysis of the *Twilight* film series and the television shows *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*. Thus, this work employs the theoretical strategy “of ‘reading’ cultural products, social practices, even institutions, as ‘texts’” (Turner, *British Cultural Studies* 71). Through a detailed close reading of the above-named texts, the project aims to uncover what kinds of meanings these paranormal romances hold for contemporary postfeminist audiences. In order to achieve this, this study will draw on genre theory, psychoanalytic theory in the form of Laura Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze as well as Jill Soloway’s concept of the female gaze. In keeping with the now established practice of supporting and developing textual analysis “around a wider contextual or extratextual framework” (Creeber, *Tele-Visions* 35), these approaches are coupled with an ideological analysis of the texts. Thus, the close reading is developed around the wider contextual framework of current socio-political processes involving postfeminism. Through this wide reading, the project will examine the ways in which the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* are both building blocks and products of postfeminist discourses surrounding gender, sexuality, identity and feminism. This work, then, provides a critical reading of the three above-mentioned media products from a gender studies perspective.

Committing itself to critically examining representations of gender and sexuality in the narratives, my dissertation will complicate its own readings wherever possible. This research acknowledges that the analyses carried out here predominantly revolve around representations of white, cis, heterosexual, middle-class femininities and masculinities. This focus is difficult to avoid, given that the analyzed cultural products privilege the experiences of these demographics. The fact that the texts, for the most part, neglect to represent in any complexity the experiences of marginalized communities reveals “the class, age, and racial exclusions that define postfeminism and its characteristic assumption that the themes, pleasures, values, and lifestyles with which it is associated are somehow universally shared and, perhaps more significant, universally accessible” (Tasker and Negra 2).

This work’s discursive and ideological approach to textual analysis is rooted in a Foucaultian conceptualization of discourse and power. Michel Foucault has theorized discourses as processes through which meaning, knowledge and subjects are produced: “reality becomes meaningful through discourses; discourses provide us with meaningful ways of talking and knowing about the world and nothing can meaningfully exist outside discourse” (Milestone and Meyer 25). According to Foucault, power is inscribed in and works through discourse (Milestone and Meyer 26). Crucially, in this model, power is “simultaneously productive and repressive” (Milestone and Meyer 27), as discourses are “(re)produced . . . across all social sites and practices” (Milestone and Meyer 26). Although some groups have easier access to power, a shifting of discourses is entirely possible. As Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan state, “[i]f Foucault offers a positive way to challenge power, it is through his suggestion that with power comes the possibility of resistance in a constant struggle” (118). This idea of a constant struggle for the supremacy of certain discourses informs this dissertation. Here the project will work with the Gramscian notion of hegemony, which is best understood as “involv[ing] a specific kind of consensus: a social group seeks to present its own particular interests as the general interests of the society as a whole” (Storey 80). Rather than ruling through imposition and control, the dominating social group manufactures consent on the part of subordinate groups by “‘negotiating’ with and making concessions” (Storey 80) to them. Because a group’s hegemonic position is always subject to potential challenges by non-leading groups and must therefore be continually struggled for, hegemony can be defined as “a *condition in process*”<sup>13</sup> (Storey 79). Thus, the notion of hegemony emphasizes precisely

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<sup>13</sup> Emphasis in the original.



that the media do not function as a monolithic entity regulated by a societal elite which always remains the same but that there is always the possibility of awareness and change (Milestone and Meyer 17).

Cultural theorists have transferred Gramsci's concept of hegemony to the study of popular culture. In their understanding, popular culture is not imposed by dominant groups to manipulate mass audiences who accept the included messages without questioning them, as advocated by mass culture theorists. Instead, popular culture is perceived as a political space in which competing interests and values are negotiated in contradictory ways (Storey 82). Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment have summarized this approach in the following way:

Popular culture is a site of struggle, where many . . . meanings are determined and debated. It is not enough to dismiss popular culture as merely serving the complementary systems of capitalism and patriarchy, peddling 'false consciousness' to the duped masses. It can also be seen as a site where meanings are contested and where dominant ideologies can be disturbed. (1)

It is this critical approach that this dissertation is indebted to. With the aid of this approach, this study will examine how paranormal romance narratives can be seen as both mirroring and actively contributing to contemporary discourses of postfeminism.

The project adheres to the notion that "ideology is always a complex system of domination, resistance and compromise" (Creeber, *Tele-Visions* 49) and, following John Fiske, "not, then, a static set of ideas through which we view the world but a dynamic social practice, constantly in process, constantly reproducing itself" ("British Cultural Studies and Television" 287-288) in institutionalized discourses such as religion, politics, the law, media and culture. With regard to gender ideologies, Katie Milestone and Anneke Meyer argue that they "construct certain characteristics and practices as 'natural' and 'typical' of men and women" (21). This study is committed to this approach which conceives of popular culture as consistently "turning ideological bias into a seemingly '*natural*' representation"<sup>14</sup> (Creeber, *Tele-Visions* 48). Thus, representations are precisely not neutral, since they are "produced by discourses and therefore enmeshed with power relations" (Milestone and Meyer 25). Following Stuart Hall, representation is understood here as "an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture" (15). In adopting a constructionist approach to culture, this dissertation conceives of representation "as entering into the very constitution of

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<sup>14</sup> Emphasis in the original.

things; and thus culture is conceptualized as a primary or ‘constitutive process’” (Hall 5-6).

As Hall maintains, “[m]eaning has to be actively ‘read’ or ‘interpreted’” (32), and in this way, multiple interpretations on the part of audiences may be the consequence. Connecting with this idea, this study draws on Hall’s concept of polysemic texts and the possibility of ‘dominant’/hegemonic, ‘negotiated’ or ‘oppositional’ readings (Creeber, *Tele-Visions* 50). This research, then, adheres to a Cultural Studies approach to issues of representation and mediated discourse. By conducting textual analyses of the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*, this study investigates how representations of femininities and masculinities in these narratives function within and impact wider cultural discourses surrounding gender, race, age, class and sexuality.

Further, my dissertation relies on current gender theory, most notably Judith Butler’s notion that gender is a performative construct and that identity categories in general are “the *effects* of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin”<sup>15</sup> (*Gender Trouble* ix). Thus, this work is based on the assumption that the differences between what is considered feminine and what is considered masculine are not causally linked to biological characteristics, but that gender is produced through social and cultural acts, and is therefore a historically variable category. As Butler theorizes in *Gender Trouble* (1990),

*gender* is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. Hence, . . . gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed. . . . There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results. (25)

This understanding of gender as performative and fluid forms the backdrop of this work. Furthermore, another idea established by Butler which this research relies upon is that gender “[a]s an ongoing discursive practice . . . is open to intervention and resignification” (*Gender Trouble* 33). Thus, basing its study on this notion, the project will explore what kinds of resignifications of femininities and masculinities can be found in the analyzed paranormal romances.

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<sup>15</sup> Emphasis in the original.

## 1.4. Chapter Overview

The first chapter introduces the vampire romance phenomenon which this study aims to tackle, and locates it in the contemporary postfeminist landscape. After putting forward some of the main arguments of this work, chapter 1 presents the academic research areas which this dissertation combines, builds upon and expands, namely research on the Gothic and the popular-cultural figure of the vampire, romance studies, gender studies and feminist theory. This chapter also outlines my methodological approach as well as my theoretical perspective and defines the key concepts which this thesis draws upon.

Chapter 2 outlines the current state of the art in academic research on postfeminism. The chapter provides a detailed overview of three perspectives on the phenomenon that are commonly differentiated in academia. These are the conception of postfeminism as a theoretical perspective, as a historical break and as anti-feminist backlash. After elaborating these perspectives, I develop my own understanding of postfeminism, which forms the basis of this study. In particular, the latter part of chapter 2 will present a critique of the thesis that postfeminist discourses are tantamount to a pure backlash against the advances of feminism. Instead, my dissertation is indebted to Genz's and Brabon's contextualizing approach, which understands postfeminism as a hybrid phenomenon

aris[ing] in a late twentieth-century Western context characterised by the proliferation of media images and communication technologies and a neo-liberal, consumerist ideology that replaces collective, activist politics with more individualistic assertions of (consumer) choice and self-rule. (8)

Chapter 3 looks at the *Twilight Saga*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* from a genre-theoretical perspective. The chapter provides a definition of paranormal romance and delineates the complicated history of the genre, focusing on how it developed out of the entangled strands of the Gothic and the romance novel. This in-depth account of the way the pre-cursors of contemporary paranormal romance coalesced to form a hybrid that emerged in the early 1990s as a niche genre (Crawford 8) forms the backdrop of my argument that due to its defining generic characteristics, paranormal romance can be linked with postfeminism. Thus, as will become clear, Gothic and romance are both inherently ambivalent genres torn between conservative generic conventions and feminist subtext. Similarly, paranormal romance texts like the *Twilight Saga*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* cross boundaries in terms of genre, storytelling techniques, target audiences and subject matter. I argue that the genre's transgressive nature makes it particularly prone to registering and negotiating cultural tensions. Chapter 3 thus explores how the hybrid paranormal romance genre intersects with contemporary postfeminist

discourses on the basis of the ambivalence and liminality which both are characterized by.

Chapter 4 investigates strategies of privileging heterosexual female desire and subjectivity in the *Twilight Saga*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*. Making use of Laura Mulvey's influential film-theoretical concept of the male gaze as well as Jill Soloway's innovative manifesto on the female gaze, this chapter offers close readings of illustrative scenes and relates them to postfeminist discourses surrounding sexual empowerment and self-determination. I will show that the examined popular cultural products stage instances not of a male but a heterosexual female gaze, thereby addressing straight female (teen) viewers and generating female subjectivity. For this purpose, the paranormal romances strategically employ the figure of the male vampire on a narrative as well as a visual level. Here it is the vampire's supernaturally sexy body that becomes the primary object of erotic gazing, blurring conventionally 'masculine' and 'feminine' positions in the process. As I argue, the female gaze found in the analyzed texts can be linked with contemporary postfeminist culture in which women, according to Gill, are experiencing a "shift from objectification to subjectification" (*Gender and the Media* 255). At the same time, female protagonists Bella Swan and Sookie Stackhouse share with viewers their experience of how it feels to become the sexualized object of a heterosexual male gaze, emphasizing both the constraining and violent, and the potentially empowering aspects of this experience. By foregrounding a (straight) female gaze, the analyzed series criticize, complicate and/or take advantage of conventional gaze dynamics as well as the sexist, patriarchal culture which has generated them. Meanwhile, the emergence of this straight, white female gaze is closely interrelated with postfeminist, neo-liberal aspects of marketing and capitalizing on (post)feminism for economic reasons.

Chapter 5 interrogates the relationship between the analyzed texts and postfeminist discourses of individual empowerment, self-optimization and body maintenance. Through the close readings I provide in this chapter, it will become clear how the *Twilight Saga*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* use the figure of the female vampire to negotiate ideas concerning the constant disciplinary shaping of the self by way of working on the body. Thus, here I read storylines of vampiric transformation as narratives of postfeminist makeovers, in the course of which female characters in all three texts come to epitomize the paradox of the active/passive female postfeminist subject, individually empowered and simultaneously ruled by social norms. By relating the texts to discourses

rooted in postfeminist, neo-liberal consumer culture, I will explore the ways in which paranormal romance both mirrors and constructs the contradictory nature of contemporary culture, which provides opportunities of subjectivation and reclamation of the self while simultaneously condemning subjects to perpetual self-discipline and bodily control.

Chapter 6 examines the *Twilight Saga*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* with regard to their representation of masculinities. As will be shown, the texts' humanized vampire romance heroes Edward Cullen, Stefan Salvatore and Bill Compton work as perfect embodiments of contemporary postfeminist masculinity. An intrinsically contradictory formation, the postfeminist man both holds continuities with older, traditional forms of masculinity and offers a new conception of self-reflexive, potentially progressive masculinity in tune with feminist ideas. Here I argue that discourses surrounding this hybrid masculinity, which is in the process of interrogating and challenging its own gendered dominance as well as responsibilities, are mapped onto the body of the male reluctant vampire. By centralizing this paradoxical masculinity in the form of their male vampire protagonists, the analyzed paranormal romances provide a highly attractive redefinition of hegemonic masculinity. Thus, I contend that what emerges here is a transitional postfeminist masculinity which may still be hegemonic but simultaneously open to dismantling gender hierarchies.

In the concluding chapter, the different strands investigated in the preceding chapters will be brought together to paint a full picture of the relationship between the *Twilight Saga*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* and the ideologies of postfeminism.

## 2. Postfeminism

### 2.1. Postfeminism – Introduction

In their introductory guide to postfeminist cultural texts and theories, Genz and Brabon discuss postfeminism in such varying manifestations as backlash and new traditionalism, Girl Power and chick lit, queer (post)feminism, and ‘victim’ vs. ‘power feminism’ (v). Genz’s and Brabon’s table of contents is an excellent starting point for conceptualizing postfeminism because it illustrates the quintessence of the postfeminist phenomenon at a glance: its multiplicity and pluralistic outlook (Genz and Brabon 1-2).

Postfeminism is a concept that entails numerous contradictions and the term is often used inconsistently. Pinning down what exactly it is and what it constitutes is a matter of heated discussion taking place in academic, political and cultural arenas. Even “whether it exists at all as a valid phenomenon” (Gamble 43) has been challenged at times.<sup>16</sup> The characteristic of intangibility is something postfeminism has in common with its semantic relative postmodernism. In fact, Sarah Gamble conceives of postfeminism as “a pluralistic epistemology . . . capable of being aligned with postmodernism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism” (50), thereby taking into account two further important ‘post’-discourses. Recognizing the defiance of being easily defined as one of the core features of the phenomenon, Stéphanie Genz maintains that perhaps “rather than trying to immobilize postfeminism in a rigid structure of meaning, we should interpret its polysemy as an integral part of its cultural force” (70). In keeping with this tenet, a monolithic definition of postfeminism is to be avoided here, in order not to be reductive and exclusive of factors that are equally crucial for the phenomenon. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this dissertation, an extensive characterization of postfeminism is needed. As this dissertation can neither give a comprehensive nor a conclusive definition of the concept, the following paragraphs aim to shed light on a number of essential aspects of postfeminism. First, it will be discussed as a theoretical perspective, as a historical break and as a backlash. In a second step, my dissertation’s approach to the phenomenon will be made clear: My research will follow Gill’s conceptualization of postfeminism as a “sensibility” (*Gender and the Media* 254).

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<sup>16</sup> Exemplary for this standpoint is the following publication: Vicki Coppock, Deena Haydon, and Ingrid Richter. *The Illusions of ‘Post-Feminism’, New Women, Old Myths*. Taylor & Francis, 1995.

Emerging in various cultural, academic and political contexts, the term ‘postfeminism’ made its way into the popular consciousness in the early 1980s (Gamble 43), when the popular press used it as a way to describe the supposed end of second wave feminism (Genz and Brabon 10-11).<sup>17</sup> Thus, in its most popular understanding, postfeminism signifies the supposed rejection of feminism and its collective, activist politics by younger women (Braithwaite 23). However, although postfeminism was popularized as a cultural phenomenon in the late twentieth century, it is interesting that its first mention is from the beginning of said century, namely after the suffragette movement had gained the right to vote for women (Genz and Brabon 10). Nancy Cott

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<sup>17</sup> The historical development of feminism with alternating periods of more and less feminist criticism and activism has led to the ‘wave’ analogy that was first employed in the 1960s; the wave analogy also indicates shifts in the key issues of feminist politics (Pilcher and Whelehan 52, 144). The period of first wave feminism – a term that was applied retroactively – is usually dated as occurring roughly between the 1880s and the 1920s, although Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published in England in 1792, is often regarded as the first crucial feminist treatise (Pilcher and Whelehan 52). Broadly speaking, first wave feminists “lobbied for women’s enfranchisement via the vote and access to the professions as well as the right to own property” (Pilcher and Whelehan 144). While the acquisition of the right to vote was seen as the key for assuring equality for women during the first wave, second wave feminists “specifically addressed the ways in which women have historically been marginalised, both culturally and socially” (Pilcher and Whelehan 145). As Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan put it, in second wave feminism, “women’s chief battle was against the ideological positioning of women as much as their material position was of crucial importance to the first wave feminists” (145). Organizing in small groups and engaging in consciousness-raising as well as public demonstrations, second wave feminists focused, among other things, on issues of sexual politics, such as abortion, sexuality, rape and domestic violence (Pilcher and Whelehan 145). The wave analogy can be criticized for lumping together different strains of thought under one label as well as for neglecting feminist positions in between the waves. Pilcher and Whelehan point out that the wave analogy, if used uncritically, “can lead to attention being overly focused on the ‘crest’ of the wave, on the periods of successful growth and mass activity, at the expense of the recognition due to important feminist analyses, feminist activists and real achievement that occurred both before and after the first wave, and before the onset of the second wave in the 1960s” (55). Nevertheless, if used mindfully, the wave analogy is a useful way to summarize and group feminist activism and critical thinking. Since the 1990s, the term ‘third wave feminism’ has been used in opposition to postfeminism by some feminist activists and scholars, with third wave pioneers trying to “establish an ideological and political split between the two” (Genz and Brabon 160). This rhetoric of antagonism ignores the significant overlaps between both terms, and is mainly based on the assumption that postfeminism is depoliticized, while third wave feminism “defines itself as a budding political movement with strong affiliations to second wave feminist theory and activism” (Genz and Brabon 156). In contrast to many third wave feminist positions, however, my research offers a politicized reading of postfeminist media texts. Here I align myself with Genz and Brabon, who emphasize the commonalities of third wave feminism and postfeminism: “The third wave and postfeminism . . . occupy a common ground between consumption and critique, engaging with feminine/sexual and individual forms of agency. Both third wave feminism and postfeminism have drawn on popular culture to interrogate and explore twenty-first-century configurations of female empowerment and re-examine the meanings of feminism in the present context as a politics of contradiction and ambivalence” (162). Recently, there has been talk of a ‘fourth wave’ of feminist activism in the media as well as academia. For instance, Prudence Chamberlain has dedicated a monograph, *The Feminist Fourth Wave: Affective Temporality* (2017), to this topic. She argues that the fourth wave is characterized by an “incredible use of online fora, including Facebook and Twitter, to communicate, campaign and organise” (8). According to Chamberlain, “[t]he possibilities afforded by speed of communication have led to new forms of collective feelings” (107), with international news, for example of rape and sexual violence against women, spreading quickly and “creating a certain affect that is unique to contemporary feminism” (108).

claims that “[a]lready in 1919 a group of female literary radicals in Greenwich Village . . . declared that moral, social, economic, and political standards ‘should not have anything to do with sex,’ . . . and called their stance ‘postfeminist’” (282). This idea of postfeminism was, as mentioned, based on the achievement of women’s suffrage in the United States. Genz and Brabon clarify that here “the ‘post’ is understood in evolutionary terms as a progression of feminist ideas” (10). In fact, it is important to point out that the ‘post’ prefix is a crucial element generating difficulties tied to the term ‘postfeminism,’ as it comprises several possible meanings and thereby allows for varying interpretations of the word (Gamble 44). Misha Kavka has epitomized this issue in the title of her much-cited essay “Feminism, Ethics, and History, or What Is the ‘Post’ in Postfeminism?” (2002). At the same time, however, the prefix lends itself as a productive way of approaching the “semantic confusion” (Genz and Brabon 2) surrounding postfeminism in order to conceptualize it and distinguish different versions of it. In academic writing, three perspectives on postfeminism are commonly differentiated. From the first perspective, postfeminism is conceived as an epistemological break (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 250), the ‘post’ being understood as “part of a process of ongoing transformation” (Genz and Brabon 4). In this view, postfeminism is seen as “a theoretical perspective concerned to emphasise diversity rather than commonality of experience amongst women (and men)” (P. Abbott et al. 52). From the second perspective, the phenomenon is conceived as a historical shift (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 251), the ‘post’ thereby carrying the idea of ‘after.’ In this view, postfeminism is “a cultural phenomenon, characterised by the emergence of an [sic] historical period ‘after’ feminism” (P. Abbott et al. 52). From the third perspective, then, postfeminism is most pessimistically perceived “as a retrogressive, anti-feminist backlash that retracts and invalidates the gains and social transformations brought on by or through the feminist movement” (Genz and Brabon 5), again with an emphasis on ‘post’ meaning ‘after.’

This dissertation avails itself of ideas of postfeminism as a theoretical perspective in order to analyze the cultural phenomenon of postfeminism as it is understood as historical break from and, in some respects, as a backlash against feminism. As Gill points out, postfeminism in the first sense is mostly used as an analytical perspective in cultural and media analysis (*Gender and the Media* 250). Thus, within the frame of this dissertation, postfeminist theory will be made productive for the cultural analysis of intersections between different subject categories, and for the deconstruction of essentialist assumptions concerning said categories. As Gill writes, postfeminism’s



“value is in stressing the manner in which gender is connected to other forms of marginalization and other axes of power such that it can never be examined separately from ‘race,’ colonialism, sexuality and class” (*Gender and the Media* 250). Generally speaking, the cultural phenomenon of postfeminism in this dissertation will be understood as a hybrid phenomenon emerging at the intersection of different cultural influences, including feminism, neo-liberalist, consumerist ideology, individualism and postmodernism, following Brabon’s and Genz’s contextualizing approach (8). To begin, a more detailed overview of the above-named perspectives will be provided in the following.

## **2.2. Postfeminism as Theoretical Perspective**

As already pointed out, from the perspective that conceives postfeminism as a theoretical stance, the ‘post’ prefix makes reference to feminism by denoting “a genealogy that entails revision or strong family resemblance” (Genz and Brabon 3-4). This position is typically taken up by advocates of postmodernism who stress the continuity of thought between feminism and postfeminism (Genz and Brabon 4). Julie Ewington posits that “it is not feminism that we are ‘post’ but one historical phase of feminist politics” (qtd. in Genz and Brabon 11). In this chronological sense, postfeminism can thus be read as “a healthy rewriting of feminism, a sign that the women’s movement is continuously in process, transforming and changing itself” (Gamble 11). Since its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s, feminism has been subject to a number of significant changes: It has undergone “the conceptual shift . . . from debates around equality to a focus on debates around difference” (Brooks 4), “a shift away from collective, activist politics; [and] an increasing mainstreaming” (Genz and Brabon 11). These changes in approaches and theory seem plausible, considering that (post)feminists today are “embedded in an altered social, cultural and political context and climate” (Genz and Brabon 11) compared to feminists of the second wave.

Postfeminist thinking relies heavily on poststructuralist and anti-essentialist roots (Spieler 123). While postfeminist thinkers are still proponents of the general ideas and goals of second wave feminism, they draw on a different conception of identity (Spieler 123). In particular, they have a different understanding of the way in which ‘woman’ as the subject of feminism is conceptualized (P. Abbott et al. 53). Pamela Abbott, Claire Wallace and Melissa Tyler point out that “given the diversity of womanhood it is

problematic to assume that feminism is based on a unified subjectivity (as in the idea of a ‘universal sisterhood,’ for instance)” (53). This conception of identity as pluralistic is based on “the postmodern notion of the dispersed, unstable subject” (Genz and Brabon 28). Thus, an idea crucial to postmodernism is that things are uncertain and fluid. Criticizing the Enlightenment project, postmodernism turns away from dominant knowledge forms, the authority of rational thinking and prevailing dichotomies (Pilcher and Whelehan 109-10). In a crossing of postmodernism and feminism, postfeminism engages with the intersection of different subject categories and thus examines “gender in relation to other aspects of identity, including race, ethnicity, class, sexuality and age” (Genz and Brabon 28). Displaying awareness of the multiple possible ways of oppression and privilege people can be subjected to or enjoy, postfeminism dismisses the notion of an essential female self (Genz and Brabon 28). Postfeminist criticism of modern theory is also based on women’s exclusion from “the humanist discourse of Man” (Genz and Brabon 115) that imagined the subject as inherently masculine and thereby determined the inferior status of women (Genz and Brabon 108). As modern philosophy served to legitimize the oppression of women for a long period of time, (post)feminist thinkers are inclined to respond to it with distrust as well as an attempt to deconstruct it (Genz and Brabon 108). Along these lines, Gamble describes postfeminism, the theoretical approach, as “a pluralistic epistemology dedicated to disrupting universalizing patterns of thought” (50). This also means that postfeminism critically engages with its own feminist theory and questions the ways in which it is based on dualistic thinking, for example in its reliance on separate opposing categories like ‘women’ and ‘men,’ and totalizing concepts, such as ‘patriarchy’ (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 250).

Michel Foucault’s postmodern analysis of the mechanisms of power is an aspect that has been particularly influential for postfeminist perspectives. Foucault rejects the active subject, which implies that there are no subjects holding or seizing power, nor is there any centre of power; instead, “power is a purely structural activity for which subjects are anonymous conduits or by-products” (Best and Kellner 51-52). Foucault describes power as “a multiple and mobile field of force relations, wherein far-reaching, but never completely stable, effects of domination are produced” (Foucault 102). Thus, subjects are subordinated to a network of power, which in turn constitutes their bodies and identities (Best and Kellner 49). This view of power not as repressive but as productive is central to Foucault’s theoretical reflections. Power, according to Foucault, operates through the hegemony of norms, “through practices and technologies of exclusion, confinement,

surveillance, and objectification” (Best and Kellner 50). In his panoptical model of power, a form of self-governance emerges in which people police themselves because they assume they are constantly under surveillance. Here a crucial role is assigned to discourses, defined by Foucault as “that which creates the conditions of knowledge at any given time” (Pilcher and Whelehan 117). Contrary to modern Enlightenment-influenced theories that conceive knowledge as neutral and objective, Foucault makes the significant point that “knowledge is indissociable from regimes of power” (Best and Kellner 50).

Foucault’s analytics of power is embraced by many postfeminists, as it provides a model that enables them to analyze how power circulates through institutional networks and to focus on the production of knowledge as well as gendered subjects through discourse. His model is particularly helpful because it offers a way to challenge power through resistance (Pilcher and Whelehan 118). As Foucault writes, “[d]iscourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (101). In this way, Foucault’s notion of circulating and productive power provides an alternative to inflexible ideas of patriarchy and established power relations. Indeed, in postfeminism, “there is a shift away from feminist interest in centralized power blocs (e.g., the state, patriarchy, and law) to more dispersed sites, events, and instances of power conceptualized as flows and specific convergences and consolidations of talk, discourse, attentions” (McRobbie, “Postfeminism” 29).

Gill points out that combined with this input from postmodern theories, postfeminism has “risen partly as a result of critiques from black and Third World feminists which destabilized dominant feminist theorizing and interrogated the right of (predominantly) white Western (Northern) women to speak on behalf of all others” (*Gender and the Media* 250). Thus, the influence of postcolonial theory on postfeminism is undeniable: While white feminism proceeds on the assumption that all women are equally subject to patriarchal oppression and therefore puts forward the politics of a ‘universal sisterhood,’ feminists such as bell hooks and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have criticized this very premise. They have drawn attention to the fact that this “ignores specific cultural and material conditions experienced by Black and post-colonial women” (P. Abbott et al. 54), which is seen as problematic. As is typical of postmodern thinkers, these feminists welcome an emphasis on diversity (P. Abbott et al. 54).

A prominent example of the approach that conceives postfeminism as a theoretical perspective and epistemological break is Ann Brooks’ *Postfeminisms: Feminism,*

*Cultural Theory and Cultural Forms*, published in 1997. In her monograph, she describes postfeminism as being

about a critical engagement with earlier feminist political and theoretical concepts and strategies as a result of its engagement with other social movements for change. Postfeminism . . . as such represents a dynamic movement capable of challenging modernist, patriarchal and imperialist frameworks. [It] . . . addresses the demands of marginalised, diasporic and colonised cultures for a non-hegemonic feminism capable of giving voice to local, indigenous and post-colonial feminisms. (4)

For Brooks, the prefix ‘post’ implies “a process of ongoing transformation and change” (1) in feminist theory and practice. She makes explicitly clear that postfeminism in her understanding does not signify that patriarchal discourses have been overcome, but that postfeminism continues to critically engage with patriarchy (1) – much in the same way that postcolonialism does not entail the supersession of colonialism but rather an ongoing critical engagement with it (Spoonley 49). As already pointed out, (post)feminism evokes transformation by questioning its previous premises; more precisely, Brooks “challenges hegemonic assumptions held by second wave feminist epistemologies that patriarchal and imperialist oppression was a universally experienced oppression” (2). These changes in ideas and focus can be attributed to feminism’s intersection with cultural theory, in particular with postmodernist and poststructuralist theory (Brooks 5). Brooks calls this the “collapse of consensus from within feminism” (5), whereby concepts such as ‘oppression,’ ‘patriarchy,’ ‘sexuality,’ ‘identity’ and ‘difference’ that were central to white middle-class feminism are challenged by key thinkers like Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault as well as bell hooks (5).

Brooks has referred to postfeminism as feminism’s “coming of age” (1), taking into account its growth into politics of pluralism and difference as well as its ability to reflect on its position in relation to other political and intellectual movements. While the conception of postfeminism as a theoretical perspective is legitimate and useful in order to make sense of twenty-first century culture, Genz and Brabon contradict this conceptualization by contending that “this definition of postfeminism as a self-critical, evaluative mode is simply too optimistic, as in the end postfeminism is always more than a straightforward criticism of a specific feminist phase” (12). They instead “suggest that postfeminism’s appropriation of feminism is more complex and subtle than a simple rewriting or modernisation, and it can even harbour anti-feminism” (12). This leads to the second perspective on postfeminism as well as the subsequent sections following in this chapter, which will, among other aspects, deal with ideas of anti-feminism that can be contained in postfeminism.

## 2.3. Postfeminism as Historical Break

Diametrically opposed to the view exemplified by Ann Brooks described in the preceding paragraph are perspectives that conceive postfeminism as a historical break: Here the term tends to represent a period that comes after or instead of feminism (P. Abbott et al. 53). This ‘post’ prefix signifies a complete rupture, invoking a narrative of progression and thereby historicizing feminism (Genz and Brabon 3). As Mary Hawkesworth writes, “[w]ithin the narrative frame of evolutionary extinction, postfeminism is a marker of time as well as space, implying a temporal sequence in which feminism has been transcended, occluded, overcome” (969). Whether feminism is pronounced to be redundant or whether it is declared to be “gone, departed, dead” (Hawkesworth 969) – the term postfeminism generally implies the ‘past-ness’ of feminism (Genz and Brabon 3). For advocates of this standpoint, “the project of feminism has ended, either because it has been completed or because it has failed and is no longer valid” (Genz and Brabon 13). Those advocates assume “that the political demands of first and second wave feminism have now been met (enfranchisement, equal pay, sexual liberation etc.)”<sup>18</sup> (Genz and Brabon 13-14) and therefore argue that feminism or feminist activism as such have become irrelevant for young women living today. As feminist demands no longer need to be enforced

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<sup>18</sup> Naomi Wolf writes that “[t]wenty-five years of dedicated feminist activism have hauled the political infrastructure into place” (xvi) in the United States, but statistical evidence confirms that this is clearly not the case. The American Association of University Women (AAUW) announces in its 2018 report that “[i]n 2016, women working full time in the United States typically were paid just 80 percent of what men were paid, a gap of 20 percent” (4). The gender pay gap “exists in nearly every occupational field” (AAUW 17), affects women of different races, ages and educational backgrounds in different ways and “is unlikely to go away on its own” (AAUW 21). Further indication that women’s rights depend on being permanently defended and re-affirmed is the fact that U.S. women’s reproductive rights have increasingly been under attack from the political right wing: NARAL Pro-Choice America (National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League) stresses that since the 2017 presidential elections, anti-choice lawmakers have been emboldened to restrict further women’s rights to contraception and abortion. According to NARAL, “[a]mong the 55 anti-choice state measures enacted in 2017, the most prominent trends were: abortion bans, laws directly funding fake health centers, laws barring abortion providers from participating in public healthcare programs, and laws restricting young women’s access to abortion” (4). In addition, the existence of rape culture – i.e. a society in which rape and sexual violence against women are normalized, excused and condoned, which is visible in the society’s laws and language as well as media and popular culture – attests to the need for feminist action today: RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network) estimates that 1 out of every 6 American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime, and that “90% of adult rape victims are female” (*Victims of Sexual Violence*). According to their sources, about 2 out of 3 sexual assaults are being left unreported, and “out of every 1000 rapes, 994 perpetrators will walk free” (*The Criminal Justice System*), revealing the great imbalance between the widespread prevalence of sexual violence against women and the lack in prosecution of these crimes. Most recently, the international Me Too movement, which was sparked by the public revelations of rape, sexual assault and abuse allegations against American film producer Harvey Weinstein, has drawn attention to the extent of sexualized violence, especially in the workplace. In 2017, numerous women (as well as some men) shared their experiences with rape culture on Twitter under the hashtag #MeToo, demonstrating the continued need for – and existence of – feminism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

politically, the implicit conclusion is that it is now up to individual women to uphold societal changes through their own personal choices (Genz and Brabon 14). According to Abbott, Wallace and Tyler, some proponents of this postfeminist view “claim that to prolong feminism as a political project would be socially regressive and politically divisive (and that, as a result, men would become an oppressed minority)” (52).<sup>19</sup> Hardly any writers have claimed the label ‘postfeminist’ for themselves, but a number of them have been identified with the term (Gamble 45). The most prominent American names among them are Naomi Wolf, Katie Roiphe and Rene Denfeld. Although these writers have not expressed a great deal of solidarity between one another (Gamble 45; Siegel, “Reading between the Waves” 59), they have a number of argumentational strategies in common, which will become clear in the following paragraphs. All of them may appreciate their feminist ‘heritage,’ but they collectively argue for the replacement of a supposedly dull, restrictive, anti-sex, backward and ultimately ineffective feminism by a new feminist movement with a focus on strength, pleasure, individualism and consumerism.

In *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How It Will Change the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, published in 1993,<sup>20</sup> Naomi Wolf starts from the premise that a so-called “genderquake” (xiv) has taken place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. She thereby acknowledges and welcomes the achievements of feminism. At the same time, Wolf denies feminism in the second wave sense the right to exist for much longer because, in her account, it has failed in terms of recognizing its gains and capitalizing on them (Gamble 48): In her opinion, women could easily take over authority from men and claim their power, but they are standing in their own way by identifying as victims of patriarchy (Genz and Brabon 68). This ‘outdated’ version of feminism is what Wolf refers to as “victim feminism” (147), which she distinguishes from her own newly proposed version, “power feminism” (147). In referencing victimhood in the term for the kind of feminism she rejects, she alludes to ideas about the status of women in patriarchal society that were the basis of second wave feminist politics (Gamble 68). As Wolf writes, ‘victim feminism’ entails that “a woman seeks power through an identity of powerlessness” (147), and that she uses the injustices

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<sup>19</sup> The loss of traditionally ‘masculine’ privileges and identities as well as shifts in employment patterns that could equally be attributed to the ongoing process of globalization are seen to be facilitated by feminism. In this way, men’s rights proponents, such as Neil Lyndon and Robert Bly, blame feminism for leading a “reverse sex war” (Pilcher and Whelehan 88) against men, who are supposedly in crisis.

<sup>20</sup> The second, 1994 edition of the book includes an altered subtitle, *The New Female Power and How to Use It*, which evidently puts more emphasis on the reader’s agency and responsibility to take Wolf’s suggestions to the heart (Siegel, “Reading between the Waves” 80).

she experiences as “a way to petition for [her] rights” (xvii). Wolf suggests that second wave feminism always positions women as innocent victims and men as perpetrators, which leads to ideas “about universal female goodness and powerlessness, and male evil” (xvii). This, she claims, is the reason that feminism has driven contemporary women away from the movement in general. In her opinion, second wave/’victim feminism’ has come to “embody a rigid code of required attitudes and types of behaviour” (66). It is, according to Wolf, “too prescriptive of other women’s pleasures and private arrangements” (68), for instance when it comes to “some romantic foolishness or unsanctioned sexual longing or ‘frivolous’ concern about clothes or vulnerability or men” (68). What Wolf sets against this supposedly unstylish, anti-sex tradition of feminism is her version of so-called ‘power feminism.’ ‘Power feminism’ embraces “women as human beings – sexual, individual, no better or worse than their male counterparts” (Wolf xvii), stressing the importance of “identifying with other women through shared pleasures and strengths, rather than shared vulnerability and pain” (Genz and Brabon 69). Wolf believes ‘victim feminism’ is “obsolete and even harmful to the feminist cause” (Genz and Brabon 69) and needs to be replaced by ‘power feminism’ in order to sustain the women’s movement.

What is striking is that Wolf distances herself from second wave critical positions towards the media, emphasizing ‘power feminism’'s “acceptance, use and manipulation of its insider position within popular culture” (Genz and Brabon 70). She is convinced that the movement can benefit from working within the patriarchal, capitalist system, with women seizing their individual “power as consumers” (Wolf 325) and as readers and viewers (Wolf 325). In this way, she turns Audre Lorde’s famous dictum, “*the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house*”<sup>21</sup> (Lorde 112), on its head by asserting that “it is *only* the master’s tools that can dismantle the master’s house, for he hardly bothers to notice anyone else’s”<sup>22</sup> (Wolf 59). Imelda Whelehan has criticized Wolf’s outline of ‘power feminism’ for “working within the status quo rather than attempting to overturn current political realities” (*The Feminist Bestseller* 163). The role of the media is a much-discussed issue in feminist discourse, within which it is often the case that “the media-friendly postfeminist stance is interpreted as an abatement and depoliticisation of the feminist movement” (Genz and Brabon 19).

Another legitimate criticism that can be levelled at Wolf is that she imagines an “impossibly utopian” (Gamble 49) future, developing a simplistic vision of ‘power

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<sup>21</sup> Emphasis in the original.

<sup>22</sup> Emphasis in the original.

feminism' while ignoring institutionalized power structures that constrain women's ambitions of gaining equality (Genz and Brabon 70). Gamble rejects Wolf's argument by pointing out that it "rests on the assumption that power is there for the taking – but it is, can it ever be, as easy as that? If one is a white, middle-class, educated and solvent American, perhaps; but what if you are black, or poor, or subject to an oppressive political, military or religious regime?" (49). What Wolf tends to neglect is the fact that she speaks from a privileged position; she fails to consider the cultural and material conditions of marginality experienced, for example, by Black or poor women. Not surprisingly, Wolf's 'power feminism' tends to be rejected by Black and postcolonial feminists for being "exclusionary and ethnocentric" (P. Abbott et al. 54). bell hooks in particular has criticized 'power feminism' for working "best for the middle class" ("Dissident Heat" 114) and for "turn[ing] the movement away from politics back to a vision of individual self-help" ("Dissident Heat" 115). Here hooks finds fault with Wolf's dismissal of collective political activism and her focus on the lives of individual women, which, in hooks' eyes, is tantamount to stripping the movement of its power and purpose.

Germaine Greer puts forward a similar criticism of postfeminist ideas in general: For her, "the claim that we live in a post-feminist era is little more than a marketing strategy" (P. Abbott et al. 53), and tactics like Wolf's idea of women making use of their power as consumers play into the hands of multi-national corporations that target female consumers of cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, clothing, etc. in order to boost their sales (P. Abbott et al. 53). Greer also argues that by claiming power for themselves in the way that Wolf suggests, advocates of 'power feminism' are complicit in the oppression of others (P. Abbott et al. 53). Again, it becomes clear that Wolf advocates a vision of feminism that can be seen as oppositional to the one suggested by Audre Lorde, whose identity as a "Black lesbian feminist" (Lorde 110) allowed her insights into the intersectionality of sociocultural categories like race, gender and sexuality. In her famous speech at the Second Sex Conference at the New York University Institute for the Humanities in 1979, Lorde argued that "racism, sexism, and homophobia are inseparable" (110) and that, by ignoring the differences between women and thereby shutting different women's voices out of feminist discourse, (white) feminism avails itself of "the tools of a racist patriarchy" (110) that it is essentially trying to abolish: "*For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change*"<sup>23</sup> (112).

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<sup>23</sup> Emphasis in the original.



Another new feminist writer emerging in the 1990s and upholding a dichotomy between ‘old victim feminism’ and ‘new power feminism’ that is similar to Wolf’s is Katie Roiphe. In *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism on Campus*, published in 1993,<sup>24</sup> Roiphe writes critically about a growing awareness of issues of rape and sexual harassment, particularly instances of date rape on American campuses, among feminists and in the public eye. According to Roiphe, by focusing their analyses on the matter of sexual violence, proponents of the second wave have wallowed in a kind of ‘victim feminism’ that keeps itself overly busy with women’s discrimination (Genz and Brabon 71). As she claims,

[t]he image that emerges from feminist preoccupations with rape and sexual harassment is that of women as victims . . . This image of a delicate woman bears a striking resemblance to that fifties ideal [feminists] fought so hard to get away from . . . But here she is again, with her pure intentions and her wide eyes. Only this time it is feminists themselves who are breathing new life into her. (*The Morning After* 6)

Roiphe maintains that feminism has fallen back on a 1950s image of women which is characterized by passivity and (sexual) innocence (Genz and Brabon 71). In this way, she concludes that “feminists are closer to the backlash than they’d like to think” (*The Morning After* 6), employing the feminist backlash argument<sup>25</sup> against its originators (Gamble 46). According to Roiphe, “[r]ape-crisis feminists express nostalgia for the days of greater social control, when . . . women were protected from the insatiable force of male desire” (“Date Rape”). Alleging that feminism’s focus on women’s becoming subject to sexual violence can be ascribed to an outdated model of sexuality based on the assumption that men are interested in sex while women are not (Genz and Brabon 71), Roiphe speaks against feminism’s supposed prudery. This is in line with Naomi Wolf’s preference of ‘power feminism’ over ‘victim feminism’ because the former is, according to Wolf, “unapologetically sexual” (149). Feminist anti-rape initiatives like the Take Back the Night marches<sup>26</sup> are described by Roiphe as self-defeating, as they underline or

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<sup>24</sup> The book is reissued in 1994 as *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism*, signalling that Roiphe intends to extend her argument about the state of feminism beyond the college campus.

<sup>25</sup> The backlash argument will be dealt with in the following subchapter.

<sup>26</sup> The official homepage of the initiative describes its history and goals in the following way: “Over the years, Take Back The Night has become internationally known, as a way to take a stand against sexual violence . . . The first documented Take Back The Night event in the United States took place in October of 1975 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Citizens rallied together after the murder of young microbiologist, Susan Alexander Speeth, who was stabbed to death by a stranger no more than a block away from her home while walking the streets, alone . . . International interest in the movement continued to grow over the next few years . . . For over 35 years in the United States, Take Back The Night has focused on eliminating sexual violence, in all forms, and thousands of colleges, universities, women’s centers, and rape crisis centers have sponsored events all over the country” (Take Back the Night).

even revel in women's vulnerability and weakness instead of celebrating their strength (Genz and Brabon 71). It is Roiphe's conviction that the dangers of date rape are exaggerated by the activist feminist movement, referring to the definition of rape as "a matter of opinion" ("Date Rape") and "a gray area in which one person's rape may be another's bad night" ("Date Rape") – a problematic stance, considering its way of ignoring, trivializing, excusing and normalizing sexualized violence.

Roiphe's standpoint can be criticized further in a similar way as Wolf's stance for being elitist and ignorant of its own privileged position. Deborah Siegel points out that Roiphe's book is based on her experiences as a student at Harvard and Princeton, two of America's leading academic institutions ("Reading between the Waves" 65). She also adds for consideration that Roiphe draws largely on personal anecdotes, while at the same time "translat[ing] her own transparent, 'real' experience . . . into historical evidence" ("Reading between the Waves" 65). In fact, Roiphe draws attention to this herself in the introduction of her book: "This book is not a scientific survey of campus life, measuring the immeasurable with statistical certainty . . . I cannot offer objective truth, unfiltered through my own opinion. I have written what I see, limited, personal, but entirely real" (*The Morning After* 6-7). Although she includes this disclaimer in her text, Roiphe presents her position as representative of the majority of women of her generation, which is also how she is marketed and received within the media (Siegel, "Reading between the Waves" 65).

While Katie Roiphe sees second wave feminism summoning a 1950s ideal of femininity, Rene Denfeld claims that the movement has lapsed into an even older view of women:

In the name of feminism, these extremists have embarked on a moral and spiritual crusade that would take us back to a time worse than our mother's day – back to the nineteenth-century values of sexual morality, spiritual purity, and political helplessness . . . current feminism would create the very same morally pure yet helplessly martyred role that women suffered from a century ago. (10)

Thus, in her book *The New Victorians: A Young Woman's Challenge to the Old Feminist Order*, published in 1995, Denfeld describes feminism as the "New Victorianism" (11). While positioning herself as a daughter of second wave feminism (Siegel, "Reading between the Waves" 59) by referring to it as her "birthright" (Denfeld 1) in a move similar to both Wolf and Roiphe, Denfeld reproaches the women's movement for the "promotion of repressive sexual morality and spiritual passivity [that] promulgates the vision of an ideal woman, sexually pure and helpless yet somehow morally superior to men" (9).

Hence, Denfeld writes feminism off because it has supposedly become “a totalitarian, old-fashioned and fanatic doctrine” (Genz and Brabon 71). Her criticism is similar to Wolf’s and Roiphe’s, maintaining that feminism is invested in a sort of “victim mythology, a set of beliefs that promote women as the helpless victims of masculine oppression” (Denfeld 6), which, to Denfeld, is a “bleak and uninviting – certainly not empowering – view of the sexes” (6).<sup>27</sup> Echoing Roiphe, Denfeld condemns feminist interventions against rape and sexual assault as well as critical feminist stances that concern the influence of pornography on the prevalence of male sexual violence against women (7). She argues that feminism morally judges and restricts women’s personal lives, telling them “what is proper for [them] to read, whom [they] can sleep with, and even when [they] are violated” (7), as feminism supposedly undertakes “sweeping redefinitions of rape” (7). Placing and revering woman on a “pedestal” (9), feminism, in Denfeld’s account, has eventually degenerated into “a profoundly antisex, antifreedom, and ultimately anti-women’s rights perspective” (237). In addition to having become confining and actually detriment to women’s lives, feminism has in her opinion overrun the academy, which led to its losing contact with ideas that once sparked the movement and to its becoming “inaccessible to the uninitiated” (3). In this way, Denfeld explains, feminism has alienated many young women of her generation (9). In line with other twentieth-century individualist precepts, her goal is to “return to a movement that addresses women’s concerns while respecting their personal lives and empowering their choices” (11).

## 2.4. Postfeminism as Backlash

The preceding subchapter dealt with perspectives that conceive postfeminism as a historical break from second wave feminism, and introduced several positions “announcing if not the death then at least the redundancy of feminism” (Genz and Brabon 3). This notion of the late twenty-first century as a postfeminist age is denounced by a

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<sup>27</sup> Putting forward a point of view that is oppositional to Wolf’s, Roiphe’s and Denfeld’s, Siegel convincingly calls into question the connotations of the term ‘victim’ in her essay “Reading between the Waves” (1997): “I find myself in the position of wanting to reclaim the term ‘victim.’ Although Wolf, Roiphe, and Denfeld would drain claims to victimhood of any semblance of agency, the radical act of pronouncing oneself victim to systemic inequity does not necessarily amount to a defeatist confession of utter weakness. In many instances, to name oneself ‘victim’ is an articulation of strength, for to give a name to the injustices that continue to oppress is to adamantly refuse victim status . . . In my desire to break through the racist, classist, sexist, heterosexist, ageist ties that continue to bind, I am not a ‘victim feminist.’ I am a feminist activist who actively refuses to be a victim” (76).

number of critics and scholars as being “part of a comprehensive backlash, a conservative counterassault on feminism” (Spieler 123). On the part of these critics, postfeminism is interpreted as a betrayal of the feminist project and as intending a relapse to a former state of society (Gamble 44). As Tania Modleski writes in *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a ‘Postfeminist’ Age* (1991): “[T]exts that, in proclaiming or assuming the advent of postfeminism, are actually engaged in negating the critiques and undermining the goals of feminism – in effect, delivering us back into a prefeminist world” (3). Crucial ideas and arguments employed by these “anti-postfeminist critics” (Genz and Brabon 15), among them Susan Faludi, Angela McRobbie, Imelda Whelehan, Judith Williamson and Susan J. Douglas, will form the basis of this subchapter.

Some feminists maintain that an era that saw a lot of feminist advancement will typically be followed by a period of backlash against the respective progress that was made (Genz and Brabon 52). Genz and Brabon assert that this was certainly the case in the 1950s and early 60s when women, after entering the workforce during the Second World War, were encouraged to withdraw from the public sphere and return to the ‘safe haven’ of the family home (52). In turn, the emergence of the second feminist wave in the late 1960s and 70s can be traced back to this mid-twentieth-century backlash (Genz and Brabon 52). Tellingly, the second wave of feminist activism challenged the exclusive role of women as housewives.<sup>28</sup> According to Genz and Brabon, the 1980s are “generally seen as a difficult decade for feminism” (53). On the one hand, feminism was subject to a number of inner divisions, with the emergence of more diverse positions, for example by women of color. Feminists like bell hooks found fault with the politics of a ‘universal sisterhood,’ drawing attention to diversity and difference as well as the intersection of racism, classism and heterosexism (Genz and Brabon 53). On the other hand, feminism faced changes in the way it was perceived from outside of the movement. This did not only have to do with the image of feminism that was created and distributed by the media but also with the fact that, increasingly, “feminist ideas of emancipation and empowerment were appropriated and adopted by popular culture” (Genz and Brabon 54).

The 1980s media are precisely where Susan Faludi locates a comprehensive backlash against feminism. Her book entitled *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* that was published in 1991<sup>29</sup> is one of the most extensive analyses of

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<sup>28</sup> One famous publication representative of this approach is *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan, which was published in 1963.

<sup>29</sup> The book is reissued in 1993 as *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*, extending the scope of the argument made, which is similar to Katie Roiphe’s republication of *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism on Campus* (1993) as *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism* (1994).

what has come to be referred to in academia and elsewhere as the backlash, and is also one of the most popular positions against the backlash. Equating the two concepts, Faludi essentially argues that “postfeminism *is* the backlash, and its triumph lies in its ability to define itself as an ironic, pseudo-intellectual critique on the feminist movement, rather than an overtly hostile response to it”<sup>30</sup> (Gamble 45). According to Faludi, the backlash against feminism has been evident throughout popular culture since the early 1980s. To document this thesis, she cites examples from film and television, the health care and beauty industries, politics, and advertising in her book. Faludi considers postfeminism merely the most recent label for a much older phenomenon since “[p]ostfeminist sentiments first surfaced, not in the 1980s media, but in the 1920s press” (50). In her opinion, postfeminism is nothing but an anti-feminist reaction on the part of the male-dominated establishment in defense of the status-quo; media discourses are drenched in right-wing political ideology (Genz and Brabon 54):

Just when women’s quest for equal rights seemed closest to achieving its objectives, the backlash struck it down . . . In other words, the antifeminist backlash has been set off not by women’s achievement of full equality but by the increased possibility they might win it . . . these whispers and threats and myths move in one direction: they try to push women back into their ‘acceptable’ roles – whether as Daddy’s girl or fluttery romantic, active nester or passive love object. (Faludi xix, xx, xxii)

Backlash examples that Faludi cites are typically based on the assumption that women, instead of thriving under the new living conditions brought about by feminism since the late 1960s, are in fact miserable and depressed. According to Faludi, the 1980s and early 1990s media ascribe various sufferings to women: They are said to be troubled because they are increasingly childless, ‘hysterical’ because they may still be unwed at an advanced age, living in poverty because they are more often divorced, complaining about bad health due to the stress of their working lives – in short, women allegedly “suffer from a new identity crisis” (x). Faludi addresses the paradoxical nature of backlash discourses in a sarcastic tone: “[I]t must be all that equality that’s causing all that pain. Women are unhappy precisely *because* they are free. Women are enslaved by their own liberation . . . The women’s movement, as we are told time and again, has proved women’s own worst enemy”<sup>31</sup> (x).

While Faludi rightly points out that equal opportunities cannot yet be said to have been won for all women, backlash discourses are notable for incorporating feminism’s supposed success into their argument. Thus, Ann Braithwaite argues for a more nuanced

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<sup>30</sup> Emphasis in the original.

<sup>31</sup> Emphasis in the original.

understanding of what Faludi conceives as a purely anti-feminist backlash: She argues that it involves more than a repudiation of anything feminist. Braithwaite draws attention to the fact that the “backlash . . . works not by rejecting ideas about equality and women’s ‘rights,’ but instead by acknowledging those at the same time as identifying feminism as the cause of women’s current miseries” (22). In 1980s media accounts, feminism is blamed for supposedly having “‘gone too far,’ providing women with more independence and choice than they can handle and thereby wrecking their relationships with men” (Genz and Brabon 54). Allegedly, women who, instructed by feminism, assumed they would be able to combine career and family life, find themselves realizing that they cannot endure the double pressure or that professional success has cost them the prospect of getting married and starting a family. Media-generated and circulated images of feminism imply that

women have had to give up a range of other interests or activities such as motherhood, family, relationships, fashion, beauty culture, sexuality, sexiness, fun, pleasure, even . . . men – in short, all of those trappings of traditionally defined ‘femininity’ . . . In the rush to attain equality with men, feminism told them they must stop being ‘women.’ (Braithwaite 23)

This perceived incongruity between feminism and femininity is most prominently represented in the “iconic figure of the humourless and drab ‘bra-burner’” (Genz and Brabon 12). As Genz and Brabon state, this negative stereotype of feminism is the result of two different factors: On the one hand, radical feminism indeed rejected beauty practices and condemned women’s quest for femininity as proof of their being slaves to patriarchal values (23). The image of the bra-burner is in fact an outcome of one of the earliest feminist demonstrations at the Miss America beauty pageant in Atlantic City in 1968. The protest was staged as an attack on male-defined and oppressive visions of beauty and femininity, and was one of the first events to bring second wave feminist activism to public awareness. Media coverage of the demonstration widely cast feminism in a negative light, and the image of the fanatic bra-burner was soon implemented into the collective cultural consciousness (Genz and Brabon 22). Thus, on the other hand, feminism’s bad reputation can also be attributed to the unsympathetic mass media’s portrayal of ‘the women’s libber’ (Genz and Brabon 12). Across newspapers and television, feminists tended to be characterized as unattractive, unstylish women not in accordance with their femininity (Genz and Brabon 22-23) (and this image still persists

today),<sup>32</sup> which misrepresented and undermined feminist politics by way of caricature (Genz and Brabon 12). Genz and Brabon point out that “the view of feminism as a defeminising force can clearly be identified as a distorted media refraction and propaganda” (23). In this context, postfeminism displays itself as “a groovier alternative to an over-and-done feminist movement” (Heywood and Drake 1) because many women come to perceive second wave feminism as restrictive and failing to address their needs. As a reaction to the negative image of feminism perpetuated by the media, many “have adopted those postfeminist strands . . . that embrace femininity/sexuality as an expression of female agency and self-determination”<sup>33</sup> (Genz and Brabon 12). For them, second wave criticism of women being subject to patriarchal beauty standards is out of touch with contemporary women’s lives. Hence, backlash discourses do not refuse women’s rights and equality outright but “the emphasis of this newer ‘more fun’ and ‘groovier’ postfeminism now allows women to (re)emphasize or return to lifestyle choices and personal consumer pleasures” (Braithwaite 24).

What is striking is that some critics see the backlash trend continuing throughout the 1990s and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Thus, arguments along the same lines are made by scholars publishing in the early 2000s. For instance, Angela McRobbie, in following Susan Faludi, understands postfeminism as a movement discernable across popular culture which actively works to undermine feminist achievements of the 1970s and 80s (“Post-Feminism” 255). In “Post-Feminism and Popular Culture” (2004), she maintains that “through an array of machinations, elements of popular culture are perniciously effective in regard to this undoing of feminism, while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism” (255). While the 1980s are usually described as a decade of feminism’s inner divisions in which the

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<sup>32</sup> For instance, in a 2013 blog post at the *New Statesman*, British journalist and columnist Laurie Penny writes about her experiences travelling around the world to give talks about women’s rights, during which she observed a tendency for women as well as men to reject the term ‘feminist’ in referring to themselves despite advocating women’s equal rights and opportunities. As Penny states, “attacks on ‘feminists’ as ugly, masculine, even that worst possible slur, ‘hairy-legged,’ contain the threat that being outspoken will damage our gender identity. Male feminists, when they’re brave enough to identify themselves as such, face being called wet or effeminate, or accused of playing pretend politics just to get laid. Those attacks are doubly effective because they have some basis in truth – feminism does threaten old gender roles, but only by setting us free to define the roles of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ however we like” (Penny).

<sup>33</sup> One of those postfeminist strands is Girl Power, whose defining characteristic is the “re-appraisal of femininity . . . as a means of female empowerment and agency” (Genz and Brabon 76) and the celebration of “the pleasures of feminine adornment and heterosexual romance” (Genz and Brabon 76). Girl Power was popularized to a great extent by the British girl band the Spice Girls in the 1990s. For an in-depth discussion of this key strand of postfeminism, see e.g. the chapter “Girl Power and Chick Lit” in Genz, Stéphanie, and Benjamin A. Brabon. *Postfeminism. Cultural Texts and Theories*. Edinburgh University Press, 2009, pp. 76-90.

emergence of a backlash is partly grounded (Genz and Brabon 53), McRobbie marks the 1990s as a turning point in feminist theory in terms of self-reflexivity and self-critique (“Post-Feminism” 256). Extending the timeframe in which feminism is seen to dismantle itself, she names Gayatri Spivak as well as Judith Butler and Michel Foucault as crucial influences on feminist theory (“Post-Feminism” 256). McRobbie describes the contemporary situation as follows: Feminist ideas are integrated into a number of institutions, including law, education, medicine (albeit only to some extent), employment and the media (“Post-Feminism” 257). As gender roles are no longer fixed and structures of social class are disintegrating, “individuals are increasingly called upon to invent their own structures. They must do this internally and individualistically, so that self-monitoring practices . . . replace reliance on set ways and structured pathways” (McRobbie, “Post-Feminism” 260). In this cultural context in which feminism has become “common sense” (“Post-Feminism” 256) and is simultaneously dismissed, McRobbie sees the occurrence of a “a ‘double-entanglement’ . . . the co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life . . . with processes of liberalisation in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations” (“Post-Feminism” 255-56).

Imelda Whelehan’s discussion of retro-sexism across the media is in the same vein as Susan Faludi’s and Tania Modleski’s backlash theses. In *Overloaded: Popular Culture and the Future of Feminism* (2000), Whelehan argues that “we have passed into an era of ‘retro-sexism’ – nostalgia for a lost, uncomplicated past” (11). Echoing Faludi’s point that the backlash emerges “[j]ust when women’s quest for equal rights seem[s] closest to achieving its objectives” (Faludi xix), she points out that “[s]uch retrospective envisioning . . . is symptomatic of a real fear about a future where male hegemony might be more comprehensively and effectively attacked than has so far been the case” (Whelehan, *Overloaded* 11). Representations of women (and men) are being “defensively reinvented, against . . . cultural and social changes” (MacDonald, qtd. in Whelehan, *Overloaded* 11) in much of contemporary media. According to Whelehan, they are “re-affirming – albeit ironically – the unchanging nature of gender relations and sexual roles” (*Overloaded* 6). A crucial point that Whelehan elaborates on in her argument is “the notion of irony and knowingness offering a layer of protection against critique” (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 254) which is, according to Gill, “central to understanding the contemporary dynamics of media sexism” (*Gender and the Media* 254). Faludi and McRobbie also highlight this important component of the backlash mechanism.



McRobbie, for instance, takes into account how a young female viewer deals with a self-consciously sexist advertisement: “along with her male counterparts, educated in irony and visually literate, . . . [s]he appreciates its layers of meaning, she gets the joke” (“Post-Feminism” 259). This notion of knowingness is central to Whelehan’s discussion of retro-sexism. According to her, forms of attack on women are clothed in nostalgic or retro-chic imagery in order to rebut (potential) accusations of sexism (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 254). In this way, “any criticism of the portrayal of women is shielded by the excuse that this is a portrayal of the past rather than a commentary on the present” (Whelehan, *Overloaded* 6).

Similarly, Judith Williamson (2003) considers retro-sexism a social and aesthetic phenomenon ubiquitous in various types of media: “Retro-sexism is sexism with an alibi: it appears at once past and present, ‘innocent’ and knowing, a conscious reference to another era, rather than an unconsciously driven part of our own” (J. Williamson). As she points out, sexist representations in contemporary advertising are “couched in period setting and clothing, and/or presented with 60s/70s typography and graphics” (J. Williamson) in a self-aware manner. Williamson blames the mainstream advertising industry for creating an implicitly postfeminist world in which women dominate men because this results in the fact that sexism now appears passé, making the designation and criticism of the latter impossible (J. Williamson). Correspondingly, Susan J. Douglas criticizes the media’s “images of imagined power that mask, and even erase, how much still remains to be done for girls and women” (6). Rejecting the term ‘postfeminism,’ Douglas refers to the phenomenon she describes as “enlightened sexism” (10) – which, according to her, originates in the media. Although she understands enlightened sexism to work in a more nuanced, subtler way than the backlash and although she stresses that the phenomenon emerged fully not in the 1980s but under the Bush administration after 9/11 (11-12), Douglas recites Faludi’s main ideas: “While enlightened sexism seems to support women’s equality, it is dedicated to the undoing of feminism” (10), it “reinforces good, old-fashioned, grade-A patriarchy” (10) and “is a response, deliberate or not, to the perceived threat of a new gender regime” (9).

## **2.5. More than a Backlash: On the Complexity of Postfeminist Discourses, or: A Postfeminist Analysis of Postfeminism**

As pointed out earlier, this dissertation aims to employ postfeminist theoretical notions<sup>34</sup> as analytical tools to investigate the cultural phenomenon of postfeminism as it is understood as a historical break from and, in some respects, as a backlash against feminism. Thus, this study will work with the notion of the pluralistic, unstable subject constructed through the discourses around it, it will acknowledge the intersection of different socio-cultural subject categories that persons are subjected to, such as gender, race, class, age and sexuality, and it will consider power as productive and associated with knowledge. Further, to ensure a critical negotiation of postfeminism, it is vital to use the term ‘backlash’ in a differentiated manner. While a number of points discussed in the previous subchapter grant valuable insight into postfeminist media culture and address crucial elements of postfeminist arguments and logic, the backlash thesis put forward most famously by Susan Faludi is certainly up for criticism. Opposing opinions have already been introduced in the preceding text, but in this section, the notion of postfeminism as pure backlash will be further problematized by presenting three central points of critique. The criticisms will then be countered by a more suitable and nuanced approach that this dissertation will adhere to in order to do justice to the complex nature of postfeminist discourses. First, in a poststructuralist move to avoid dichotomies, this study will distance itself from reductive notions of both ‘feminism’ and ‘postfeminism’ as well as their relationship. Second, it will emphasize that postfeminism has other frames of reference besides feminism, such as neo-liberalism, consumerism, individualism and postmodernism, which are to be taken into account. Third, it will stick to current media theories and dodge outdated ones.

### **2.5.1. A Complication of the Dichotomy between ‘Feminism’ and ‘Postfeminism’**

Many critics have drawn attention to the fact that definitions of postfeminism as contrary to second wave feminism – anti-feminist, even – carry reductive notions of either movement. On the one hand, advocates of postfeminism can be seen to display a “dangerously simplistic attitude towards feminism, portraying it as a didactic and monolithic structure” (Gamble 47). As Siegel points out, writers like Naomi Wolf, Katie

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<sup>34</sup> See the view of postfeminism as a theoretical perspective elaborated on in 2.2.

Roiphe and Rene Denfeld “create sensational, fictional accounts of a demonized feminism to satisfy a ‘progressive’ narrative structure that might be summarized . . . as, ‘Down with the ‘bad’ feminism and up with the ‘good!’” (“Reading between the Waves” 67). As has become clear in subchapter 2.2.3, postfeminism often “involves an ‘othering’ of feminism . . . , its construction as extreme, difficult, and unpleasurable” (Tasker and Negra 4). On the other hand, in a move that is similarly reductive, yet different in its ideological purport, opponents of postfeminism/representatives of the backlash thesis on their part argue in favor of a notion of second wave feminism they deem more appropriate and efficient. Braithwaite draws attention to the fact that curiously, in making these overstated and simplistic distinctions, ‘feminists’ and ‘postfeminists’ share the “same delimited understanding of feminism” (26) as well as postfeminism, although they obviously differ in terms of which ideas they prefer. She goes on to argue that the usage of the terms ‘postfeminism’ and ‘backlash’ as equivalent to ‘anti-feminism’ implies “the assumption that there was – or is – something easily (and continuously) identifiable as ‘feminism’ to begin with, which [is then used] as a measuring stick to gauge the ‘backlash’” (25). This one-dimensional reading of postfeminism as anti-feminist makes a simplistic distinction between a more ‘authentic’ feminism on the one hand, and a ‘corrupt,’ usually commercialized postfeminism on the other (Genz and Brabon 4).

Braithwaite alerts us that in this way, “[t]he politics of backlash . . . become a politics of rejection” (26) in which it is most important to distance oneself from the other instead of engaging in a more complex dialogue about the contradictions as well as overlaps between varying (and various) strands of feminism. Gamble concurs that such a conceptualization “locks feminists and postfeminists in dialectical opposition, with both parties attempting to lay claim to some kind of ‘pure’ or ‘correct’ version of feminism” (48). One way in which this plays out is the common framing of the feminist/postfeminist separation as “a generational divide between second wave mothers and postfeminist daughters” (Genz and Brabon 14). Here ‘mothers’ and ‘daughters’ struggle for autonomy over matters of culture and representation, attacking each other for either misappropriating the feminist legacy or for not keeping up with the (postfeminist) times (Genz and Brabon 15). Since there is little room for critique from either side, a productive debate seems to be stifled – as Siegel comments regretfully, “we seem to be at a deadlock on all sides” (“Reading between the Waves” 67).

The attempt to categorize ‘feminism’ and ‘postfeminism’ as two polarizing positions is not only based on the assumption that the two are fully distinct movements

which have absolutely distinguishable agendas (Genz and Brabon 13), but debates also “posit a homogeneous appearance of feminism [and postfeminism] in spite of [their] factual heterogeneity” (Siegel, “Reading between the Waves” 73). Braithwaite, for instance, suggests that

the major problem with defining backlash and postfeminism as ‘anti’ is that it usually leads to a dismissal or rejection of the complexities and nuances of both contemporary feminist theories and popular culture overall, . . . it glosses over the many current contradictions and conflicts that dominate both of these fields of inquiry. (19)

Genz and Brabon point out that “the root of postfeminism, feminism itself, has never had a universally accepted agenda and meaning against which one could measure the benefits and/or failings of its post- offshoot [sic]” (4). Thus, the idea of a past when feminism supposedly had a stable, clearly defined and single signification is not a realistic one (Genz and Brabon 4). There were and are competing understandings of feminism, “different social and political programmes sharply separated by issues of race, sexuality, class and other systems of social differentiation” (Genz and Brabon 4). If “the richness of feminism’s legacy is this diversity and heterogeneity of positions” (Pilcher and Whelehan 49), it is plausible that postfeminism(s) should be grasped in a corresponding manner, taking into account its diverse and even contradictory manifestations.

Two contradictory manifestations of postfeminism that testify to the complex nature of the cultural phenomenon are touched on by Susan Faludi, yet elaborated on by others later. One of Faludi’s crucial and most interesting tenets is that “[t]he backlash is at once sophisticated and banal, deceptively ‘progressive’ and proudly backward” (xviii). While the ‘deceptively progressive’ fraction of postfeminism claims that feminism has reached its goals and is no longer needed, the ‘proudly backward’ fraction lists the supposedly catastrophic consequences of feminist achievements within society for women as well as men, and intends a return to pre-feminist times (Spieler 124). These differing positions show that postfeminist discourses take many contradictory forms, which, according to Gill, signals that they are “much more than simply statements of anti-feminism” (*Gender and the Media* 253). What these discourses seem to have in common is their emphasis on the concept of choice. As Gill writes, the “notion that all our practices are freely chosen fits well with broader postfeminist discourses which present women as autonomous agents no longer constrained by any inequalities or power imbalances whatsoever” (*Gender and the Media* 260). In other words, since full equality has allegedly been achieved for all women, what happens now is a matter of choice: Women are said to be free to decide what they want to do within their own personal lives.

In the case of the so-called ‘deceptively progressive’ strands of postfeminist discourses, every aspect of life is bound to the notions of self-determination and pleasing yourself (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 260). Genz and Brabon point out that “[t]he popular press provides the most explicit portrayal of this postfeminist utopia in which women can do whatever they please, provided they have sufficient will and enthusiasm” (37). Elspeth Probyn refers to this proclaimed new age as a “choiceoisie” (152), which treats major life decisions as individual options while disregarding cultural or political influences. The notion of ‘choiceoisie’ is closely linked to the concept of the American Dream, which is similarly seen to be available to every individual who works hard enough (Genz and Brabon 37). In this logic, it becomes every woman’s own responsibility to fulfil her individual dreams. Gill draws attention to the striking

degree of fit between the autonomous postfeminist subject and the psychological subject demanded by neoliberalism. At the heart of both is the notion of the ‘choice biography’ and the contemporary injunction to render one’s life knowable and meaningful through a narrative of free choice and autonomy – however constrained one might actually be. (*Gender and the Media* 260)

Thus, today’s neo-liberal, consumerist ideology places emphasis on (consumer) choice and self-rule (Genz and Brabon 8). In contemporary consumer culture, notions of freedom and emancipation are dependent on the ability to purchase, with women’s agency based on the consumption of products and services that are often related to femininity and sexuality (Genz and Brabon 79). Bonnie J. Dow points out that a worldview that “implies that most problems can be solved by hard work, good will, and a supportive family . . . works well with advertising, which operates on the presumption that an individual’s purchasing decision can make an enormous change in his or her life” (xxi-xxii).

This “postfeminist utopia” (Genz and Brabon 37) certainly draws criticism. First, postfeminism “is said to effect a decollectivisation of the feminist movement as it translates feminist social goals and political ideas into matters of individual choice or lifestyle” (Genz and Brabon 36-37). Critics fear that in this way, patriarchal ideas may infiltrate postfeminist discourses more easily and that the movement will lose its radicalism once women stop taking political standpoints and instead focus on individual attitudes in their private lives (Genz and Brabon 38-39). A “vaunted consumer emancipation [that] is presented as a substitute for more meaningful forms of emancipation in early twenty-first-century culture” (Negra 117) is the feared outcome of these kinds of postfeminist ways of thinking.

Second, critics caution against the workings of ‘choiceoisie’ because it “redefines oppression and structural disadvantage as personal suffering while reframing success as an individual accomplishment, faith and self-determination” (Genz and Brabon 38). ‘Choiceoisie’ conceals the fact that oppression is something that social groups, not individuals, face; in this way, collective, organized action to end inequality is effectively prevented (Genz and Brabon 38). As was pointed out earlier, postfeminism’s individualism can be disapproved of as it signals postfeminism’s exclusivity: It typically appeals to the privileged and reinforces (patriarchal) power imbalances between different women (Genz and Brabon 38). Thus, Tasker and Negra maintain that “postfeminism is white and middle class by default, anchored in consumption as a strategy (and leisure as a site) for the production of the self. It is thus also a strategy by which other kinds of social difference are glossed over” (2). Besides, even privileged women’s free agency is questioned by critics. For instance, McRobbie believes that “[c]hoice is surely, within lifestyle culture, a modality of constraint” (“Post-Feminism” 261); in this culture, she sees young women being “re-regulate[d] . . . by means of the language of personal choice” (“Post-Feminism” 262). Similarly, Gill argues that the adherence to certain beauty standards that are valued by heterosexual men is a requirement for women who would like to achieve agency in contemporary culture (*Gender and the Media* 258). Thus, there exists considerable scepticism about the ‘progressive’ fraction of backlash discourses among critics – hence its designation as ‘deceptive.’

The ‘proudly backward’ fraction of postfeminism is, according to Spieler, “much more overtly antifeminist” (126) than the ‘deceptively progressive’ version. Probyn refers to this fraction as “new traditionalism [which] naturalizes the home into a fundamental and unchanging site of love and fulfilment” (152). The domestic sphere is “rebranded as a domain of female autonomy and independence” (Genz and Brabon 52), which is contrary to second wave feminist criticism of women’s confinement to the home in patriarchal society (Genz and Brabon 58). Instead of considering female domesticity a patriarchal strategy to exclude women from participation in public life and political arenas, new traditionalists romanticize domesticity as “an idyllic space of personal satisfaction and freedom from the shackles of working life” (Genz and Brabon 58), reinforcing the dichotomy between the ‘feminine’ domestic and the ‘masculine’ public sphere. Critics view this nostalgic return to the idealized domestic realm as “a conservative and reactionary move” (Genz and Brabon 58-59). One trope that is exemplary of new traditionalism and that is remarkably popular in contemporary media

is that of 'going home' or 'retreating.' In her book *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the reclamation of self in postfeminism* (2009), Diane Negra discusses retreatist narratives in which the female protagonist leaves life in an urban environment and a career that has become unrewarding, and returns to her regional hometown to reassume her role as daughter, sister, and/or childhood sweetheart (17, 21). As Negra puts it, the protagonist "'downshift[s]' her career or ambitions in order to re-prioritize family commitments and roles" (18), returning to "a reassuringly stable familial/ideological geography" (28). Negra refers to retreatism as "one of the key social practices of postfeminist culture" (25). Framing the phenomenon in a larger cultural context, she writes that "[i]t is clear that the 'going home' fantasy . . . is surely part of a broader matrix of behaviors in which women are seen to 'unlearn' feminism" (18).

Similar to neo-liberal ('deceptively progressive') strands of feminism discussed above, new traditionalism is grounded on the notion of choice, as the vision of the home(town) is one "to which women have 'freely' chosen to return" (Probyn 149). Genz and Brabon, too, argue that "the new traditionalist discourse centralises and idealises women's apparently fully knowledgeable choice to abstain from paid work in favour of hearth and family" (51-52). New traditionalism encourages women to place less importance on their professional lives, to re-centre their ambitions on the realm of marriage and family and to re-embrace the housewife role (Genz and Brabon 57). If feminism has enabled women to make free choices in their lives, it is striking that "the choices postfeminism urges upon women are usually traditional ones" (Negra 7). What is interesting is that these discourses not only reinforce the (constructed) gap between family life and career by telling women they must choose between one or the other, but they also endorse domestic life as a more fulfilled and happier existence for them (Genz and Brabon 55). As Faludi emphasizes, media narratives suggest that "if [women] gave up the unnatural struggle for self-determination, they could regain their natural femininity" (452). In a similar vein, Probyn argues:

The categories of 'mother's' [sic], 'kids,' 'love,' and even 'life' are presented as immutable truths . . . In other words, the ideology of choice operates not on choice but as a reaffirmation of what has supposedly always been there . . . Quite simply, new traditionalism hawks the home as the 'natural choice' – which means, of course, no choice. (152)

As becomes clear, both 'deceptively progressive,' neo-liberal versions of postfeminism and 'proudly backward,' new traditionalist strands employ feminism as a justification: Both "claim to be facilitated by feminism while, at the same time, they covertly and

overtly undermine it” (Spieler 126). Braithwaite points out that in this way, “feminism is ‘written in’ precisely so it can be ‘written out’; it is included and excluded, acknowledged and paid tribute to, and accepted and refuted, all at the same time” (25).

### 2.5.2. A Contextualizing Approach to Postfeminism

If one thing has become increasingly clear in the preceding subchapters, it is that postfeminism emerges not as the consequence of one singular influencing factor but at the intersection of various cultural phenomena. In the words of Genz and Brabon, “postfeminism is not the (illegitimate) offspring of – or even a substitute for – feminism; its origins are much more varied and even incongruous” (7). Thus, postfeminism should be conceived as a hybrid phenomenon. In a similar vein, Gill emphasizes that an informed approach to postfeminism must go beyond understanding it solely as a backlash against feminism but ought to take into account neo-liberalism as a closely related discursive phenomenon (*Gender and the Media* 254). In an attempt to round up postfeminism’s different determining factors, Genz and Brabon write that it arises “in a late twentieth-century Western context characterised by the proliferation of media images and communication technologies and a neo-liberal, consumerist ideology that replaces collective, activist politics with more individualistic assertions of (consumer) choice and self-rule” (8). Their contextualizing approach is taken as a leading example for this dissertation. Embedded in it is the premise that all articulations of postfeminism are valid and that they inform one another (Genz and Brabon 2). This was illustrated perfectly in the preceding subchapter about two seemingly contradictory postfeminist strands, the ‘deceptively progressive’ and the ‘proudly backward’ ones, that are nevertheless connected due to their basis in the same concept of choice. Both can be understood as postfeminist in nature, and both pervade one another. The interpretative possibilities of postfeminism, its polysemy or multiple meanings, are at the core of the phenomenon, which is what Genz and Brabon emphasize in their monograph (6-8). Recognizing postfeminism as a “junction between a number of often competing discourses and interests” (Genz and Brabon 6) makes it possible to take seriously and examine different versions of it. As a matter of fact, postfeminism’s plurality and its crossing of boundaries identify it as a product of “a contradiction-prone late modernity and a changed social/cultural environment characterised by complex discursive and contextual interactions” (Genz and Brabon 6). In a cultural climate that is accompanied by “a loss of faith in the powers of science and other universalist ‘metanarratives’” (Pilcher and



Whelehan 110),<sup>35</sup> an increasing plurality and diversity in cultural representations can be found (Pilcher and Whelehan 110).

The changing political and cultural situation that involves, among other things, women's enfranchisement, the destabilization of gender relationships and the entering of feminist ideas into mainstream media and popular culture, is also where neo-liberalism takes center stage:

Prevalent in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Western capitalist societies, neo-liberalism is generally understood in political economy terms as the dismantling of the welfare state and the expansion of the global free trade. Its importance for cultural analysis lies in its extension of market values and rationality to other areas of life, including its construction of the individual as an entrepreneur and consumer-citizen who should self-regulate and self-care. (Genz and Brabon 170)

In this neo-liberal context, individuals actively construct a narrative of the self, which enables them to self-reflexively develop an idea of their identity through a number of lifestyle choices (Genz and Brabon 170). In this way, the individual “comes to be seen as an ‘entrepreneur’ or ‘an enterprise of the self’ who remains continuously engaged in a project to shape his or her life” (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 70). This neo-liberal logic of the entrepreneur of the self who finds agency in his/her personal life and/or consumer choices displays obvious links to postfeminist notions of individualism and consumer ideology. On the one hand, the postfeminist/neo-liberal conceptualization of the individual as an unconstrained agent who decides freely over his or her life is to be seen in a critical light. As referenced earlier, Gill maintains that agency is afforded to the individual only upon condition that he or she becomes a particular kind of individual – one whose body is in line with certain standards that are bound to ideas which can be called sexist, racist, classist, ageist, ableist, etc. (*Gender and the Media* 258). Gill is convinced that the described shift “represents a higher or deeper form of exploitation” (*Gender and the Media* 258) because in this new “disciplinary regime” (*Gender and the Media* 258), “power is not imposed from above or from the outside, but constructs our very subjectivity” (*Gender and the Media* 258). McRobbie further calls out “the regulative dimensions of the popular discourses of personal choice and self improvement” (“Post-Feminism” 261) in which the “individual is compelled to be the kind of subject who can make the right choices” (“Post-Feminism” 261).

On the other hand, though, postfeminist/neo-liberal logic also opens up a space for the expression of politicized agency for women (Genz and Brabon 171). Patricia Mann

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<sup>35</sup> This thesis has been famously put forward by Jean-François Lyotard in his 1984 publication *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*.

proposes a theory of individual agency which she refers to as “gendered micro-politics” (1). Taking into account the different identity positions available to individuals, she writes that “[w]e are micro-political agents insofar as we manage to operate within various institutional discourses without ever being fully inscribed within any of the familial, military, economic, or other corporate frames of reference that engage us” (31). Micro-politics can be found in individual and daily gender-based interactions and practices (Gamble 172). Genz and Brabon discuss the example of sexual micro-politics in particular. In a climate of increasing sexualization of contemporary culture and the sexualized portrayal of women as knowing sexual subjects, they see everyday fashion practices as containing “the seeds of a sexual micro-politics whereby women/girls use their bodies as political tools to gain empowerment within the parameters of a capitalist economy” (175). Within the frame of a case study, they refer to the American author and comedian Periel Aschenbrand who spearheaded a feminist campaign by designing and selling provocative t-shirts across the United States and Europe. In her campaign, Aschenbrand takes advantage of the fact that women’s breasts are frequently oversexualized in the media by using this circumstance in order to make her own messages public. Slogans she displays on t-shirts include quotes “against the Bush administration, date rape, domestic violence and the erosion of American abortion legislation” (Genz and Brabon 175). Aschenbrand describes her motivation for the campaign in her 2006 book *The Only Bush I Trust Is My Own*: “we should reject renting our bodies as billboard space for odious companies and use them instead to our advantage, to advertise for shit that matters . . . We should use our tits to make people think” (qtd. in Genz and Brabon 175). In her plan to reclaim the female body for her own (feminist) purposes, she adopts an approach similar to a strategy the LGBTQ community has been pursuing since the 1970s in terms of the re-appropriation of pejorative terms like ‘queer’ and ‘poof.’ In the same way that for some members of the LGBTQ community even ‘reclaimed’ usage of such terms remains a subject of controversy, Aschenbrand’s campaign is ambiguous and raises a number of questions. In Patricia Mann’s opinion, “[w]omen have no choice but to attempt to rewrite patriarchal codes of recognition” (87) by making use of signifying practices that have historically catered to “the expectations of the patriarchal gaze” (87). As Genz and Brabon write, sexual micro-politics are “inherently contradictory, simultaneously playing to stereotypes of women while hoping to rewrite and resignify the patriarchal codes which deny women the subject status . . . they aspire to” (176).

Thus, the “threat of backlash” (Genz and Brabon 176) seems to always accompany the potential innovation brought forth by postfeminism. This “double movement” (Genz and Brabon 8) is what makes postfeminist texts neither undoubtedly “progressive or regressive, liberating or containing” (Tasker and Negra 21). Postfeminism’s contradictory meanings can be tied back to its hybrid status and its emergence at the intersections of “mainstream media, consumer culture, neo-liberal politics, postmodern theory and, significantly, feminism” (Genz and Brabon 5).

### 2.5.3. An Update of Outmoded Cultural Theory

“The backlash is not a conspiracy” (xxi), Faludi assures her readers. At the same time, she refers to the backlash as “outright propaganda” (xviii) and to the media as a “backlash collaborator and publicist” (78) aiming to “dictate trends and determine social attitudes” (79). Throughout her book, she argues that “the backlash/postfeminism can be attributed to an entirely hostile media that acts as an anti-feminist force to damage and undermine the women’s movement” (Genz and Brabon 55). In doing so, Faludi can be said to be representative of certain (second wave) ways of thinking which, from a contemporary academic perspective, are largely outdated. This concerns a specific attitude towards popular culture and the media in general as well as a specific definition of the workings of power in society. Rather than attributing the backlash to a male-dominated establishment, this dissertation will focus on elements of backlash as they manifest in cultural discourses and social practices. As already mentioned, this dissertation follows Foucault’s analytics of power: Power is not seen to be “anchored in . . . ruling classes and to be repressive in nature” (Best and Kellner 48), but conceptualized as “a ‘relational’ power that is exercised from innumerable points” (Best and Kellner 51), one that produces individuals shaped by discourses. As Myra Macdonald has pointed out, “we need to recognize the part we all play in keeping mythologies and ideologies alive. This gets obliterated in conspiracy-theory accounts that see the media as bastions of male privilege, spurred on by the mission of keeping feminism at bay” (qtd. in Genz and Brabon 62).

Faludi’s *Backlash* further seems to be attached to an early theoretical model of the media that has since been debunked, namely the ‘hypodermic syringe model’ (Milestone and Meyer 152). This model is based on the assumption that “media texts contain certain representations and messages, which are directly, uncritically and passively absorbed by the audience” (Milestone and Meyer 152). The theory of the media that Faludi works with

is similar to the model of power that Foucault sets out to criticize: According to this theory, the media directly affect entirely passive audiences, which in turn absorb the messages that are being imposed upon them from above. It is within this frame that popular culture is seen in a highly pessimistic light, suspected of being an “instrument of mass deception” (Milestone and Meyer 152) and offering no choice for viewers but to uncritically take in whatever is presented to them. With this understanding of the media, Faludi is certainly in line with dominant strands of the women’s movement which often rejected popular culture as “a sort of ideological machine which more or less effortlessly reproduces the prevailing structures of power” (Storey 9). Along these lines, second wave consciousness-raising strategies involved the enlightenment of “previously brainwashed” (Genz and Brabon 21) women.

This hostility towards the media has meanwhile given way to a more relaxed and positive attitude in (post)feminist circles and media theories. Critics who consider popular culture a more complex site of meaning-making have attempted to “challenge the view of women as passive victims of an inexorably sexist media and affirm the notions of consumer agency and popular resistance” (Genz and Brabon 24). In a similar vein, this dissertation will work with the notion of an active audience, conceptualizing media audiences as critically thinking about cultural texts and being “actively involved in the process of meaning production” (Milestone and Meyer 154). John Fiske explains that different interpretations of one television text are possible because a text is “both polysemic and flexible” (*Television Culture* 84). This means that there are different ways for individuals to interpret the same representation, as all texts contain multiple meanings. Audiences can consciously deconstruct cultural products, offer resistance to certain messages or, in the “negotiated reading position” (Milestone and Meyer 157), accept some of the meanings that confirm their held beliefs while they reject others (Milestone and Meyer 155, 159). The theory of media audiences that this dissertation adopts recognizes consumers as active, aware and using the media to construct their (gender) identities. First, consumers can perform gender by the very act of consuming or being a fan of certain gendered genres (Milestone and Meyer 170). Through taking up gendered positions, persons form their gender identities. Individuals are encouraged to do so since “taking up clearly gendered subject positions is met with socio-cultural approval and confers some gender-specific power on the individual” (Milestone and Meyer 167). Second, “in late modernity the media are one key source of information and knowledge about gender and in this sense can teach individuals how to do masculinity and

femininity” (Milestone and Meyer 170). Thus, my dissertation is invested in determining what kinds of masculinities and femininities are being represented and promoted in the postfeminist vampire romances that form the basis of analysis of this research.

What proves exceedingly useful here is Gill’s proposal to conceive of postfeminism as a “sensibility” (*Gender and the Media* 254), which entails a number of traits that are distinctive to representations of gender, race, class and other identity categories in contemporary popular culture. One advantage of Gill’s approach is that it circumvents the dichotomous notions of feminism and postfeminism, and it does not require any pledges for or against one of the two (*Gender and the Media* 254). Instead, it “is informed by postmodernist and constructionist perspectives” (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 255), as it understands postfeminism as a discursive system or construct. A second advantage is that it can easily take into account different intersecting discourses that play a central role in the phenomenon. Thirdly, by establishing postfeminist media culture as a “critical object; the phenomenon which analysts must inquire into and interrogate” (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 254), the approach is indebted to current ideas from Cultural Studies, such as Stuart Hall’s theory which posits that “culture is concerned with the production and the exchange of meanings . . . between the members of a society or group” (Hall 2), and that these meanings can be studied by analyzing “‘regime[s]’ of representation” (Hall 6). In other words, Gill’s approach offers a brilliant alternative to previous conceptualizations of postfeminism since it provides a way out of the above-described limitations. Gill summarizes her observations about postfeminist media culture as follows:

there are a number of recurring and relatively stable themes, tropes and constructions that characterize gender representations in the media in the early twenty-first century. These include the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; the articulation or entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualization of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. These themes . . . coexist with stark and continuing inequalities and exclusions that relate to ‘race’ and ethnicity, class, age, sexuality and disability – as well as gender. (*Gender and the Media* 255)

My dissertation will adopt Gill’s constructionist approach in its analytical chapters. Throughout the analyses of the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*, a number of the themes identified by Gill will keep resurfacing, which confirms their centrality in contemporary postfeminist culture.

### 3. Genre – (Teen) Paranormal Romance

This chapter examines paranormal romance's general relationship with postfeminism with the help of genre and transmedia theory. After a brief cursory look at contemporary genre theory, a short definition of the paranormal romance genre will be given. The delineation of some of paranormal romance's defining features seems worthwhile, considering that the genre is a relatively young one. Here it will also become clear what generic features the *Twilight Saga*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* share, and in what ways they differ from each other. As the chapter will illustrate, (teen) paranormal romance crosses boundaries in virtually every respect: It transgresses genre boundaries due to its hybrid status, uses more than just one medium to narrate its stories, appeals to different audiences and age groups at the same time, and destabilizes binaries of reality/fantasy and self/Other with its narratives of human-monstrous alliances. The following subchapters will zoom in on the genre's hybrid nature as well as its use of the figure of the sympathetic/reluctant vampire, its transmedia storytelling, and its position in the popular imagination. The final subchapter will deal with (teen) paranormal romance's relation to contemporary postfeminist discourses. Based on its ambivalent, liminal nature in terms of formal and textual features, (teen) paranormal romance will be tied to postfeminism's "double movement" (Genz and Brabon 8) between progression and regression, and will be related to the "contradictions at the core of postfeminist culture" (Tasker and Negra 8).

#### 3.1. A Brief Survey of Contemporary Genre Theory

Broadly speaking, genre can be described as a way of "grouping or framing texts and thereby creating expectations and evoking familiarities" (Branston and Stafford 74). One of many forms of classification, genre has been relevant to studying literature, theatre, film, television and other media forms since the ancient Greeks (Creeber et al. 1). Aristotle's distinction between different genres like comedy, tragedy, the epic and the ballad was further developed and set into a modern context by Northrop Frye in 1957. In *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, he elaborates the structuralist idea that all literature is part of one imaginative system and attempts to break this system down to a number of common archetypes. Important to note is that genre theorists after Frye increasingly acknowledge the instability of generic categorization (Creeber et al. 2). Thus, debates within film and television theory have been heated, with disagreements arising around

the definition of ‘ideal types’ of genres and the question whether genre criticism is circular and prescriptive (Creeber et al. 8). As Glen Creeber points out, “[f]or several centuries, it was the role of academics and other cultural institutions precisely to specify the generic norms and ideal types to which artists and writers were meant to adhere or aspire” (4). The term ‘genre,’ which was first used to refer to literary works in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when art was starting to be industrialized and mass-produced, “came to be identified with impersonal, formulaic, commercial forms and distinguished from individualised art” (Creeber et al. 4). This attribution of non-originality and commercialization to genre texts still plays a role in the discussion of genre today.

Most genre theorists now agree that genres change over time, that they may overlap, and that some texts are mixtures or hybrids of different genres. As Gill Branston and Roy Stafford point out, genres “are no longer seen as sets of fixed elements, constantly repeated, but as working with ‘repertoires of elements’ or fluid systems of learnt conventions and expectations. These are shared by makers and audiences, who are *both* active on *both* sides of meaning-making”<sup>36</sup> (79). Each category or class of film, for instance, is characterized by a particular set of conventions, features and norms. Conventions include the areas of narrative (encompassing story arcs and characters), *mise-en-scène* (involving the setting, costumes, lighting, etc.) and the text’s relationship to the rest of the world (for example perceptions of how realistic the genre is) (Branston and Stafford 79). For audiences, the classification of popular cultural products into genres is a means of understanding texts (Creeber et al. 3). Simply put, genres enable audiences to identify the product they want: Drawing on information provided for instance by advertising and reviews, they are likely to come to a conclusion about whether to watch or rather avoid a particular film or TV show. This active decision is made on the basis of a set of expectations audiences have of a text. Viewers may have different degrees of generic knowledge at their disposal; they also exhibit varying degrees of preference for certain genres (Creeber et al. 3): Some may exclusively watch one genre, while others are interested in all sorts of generically different films.

Steve Neal argues that “the ‘inter-textual relay’ – the systems and forms of publicity, marketing and reviewing that each media institution possesses – plays a key role not only in generating expectations, but also in providing labels and names for its genres” (Creeber et al. 3). Thus, genres are also used by companies to “minimize risk by grouping and selling their products through established expectations” (Branston and

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<sup>36</sup> Emphasis in the original.

Stafford 76). As a result of recent developments, such as the advancement of pay TV and the advent of multichannel cable and satellite TV, audiences are more and more fragmented. On the one hand, this is why more specialized and smaller subsets of people are often targeted, for example there now exist whole channels catering to specific genre preferences like sports, music, documentary, etc. (Creeber et al. 7). On the other hand, media forms have become increasingly cross-generic or hybrid in order to appeal to as many audience segments as possible (Branston and Stafford 77-78).

As Branston and Stafford write, “[f]or the owners of media industries, standardised practices are indeed a profitable part of making genre products” (78). However, they also emphasize that the terms ‘standardization’ and ‘repetition’ should be freed from the negative connotations they are often seen to imply. Crucially, genre products always involve both repetition and difference (Branston and Stafford 74); again, what is essential here is that viewers/readers must have knowledge about generic classifications in order to be able to follow and appreciate repetitions and differences in the usual script of a genre. Audiences can derive pleasure from both processes. On the one hand, they “understandably seek the pleasures of the familiar. We enjoy the ritual and reassurance involved in knowing *broadly* what ‘might happen’ in a particular media text”<sup>37</sup> (Branston and Stafford 78). On the other hand, it can be exciting to find out how exactly connections between the well-known elements of a genre will play out in one particular text. Furthermore, after a genre has become established, its conventions can be played with (Branston and Stafford 76). Part of the viewing pleasure can be recognizing and understanding not only references but also deliberate breaks with genre conventions.

The latter are especially interesting for studying genres as cultural categories. Rachel Blau DuPlessis emphasizes that “[a]ny . . . convention – plots, narrative sequences, characters . . . – as an instrument that claims to depict experience, also interprets it. No convention is neutral, purely mimetic, or purely aesthetic” (2). Here she takes a constructionist view on popular culture, which implies that television and film represent reality by constructing it from a particular ideological point of view. In his influential article “Encoding and Decoding in Television Discourse” (1980), Stuart Hall, one of the founding figures of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, puts forward the argument that all television texts are polysemic, which means they can be read by different audiences in different ways (Creeber, “Decoding Television” 49-50). The recognition of audiences as active in the process of meaning-making – a notion that was

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<sup>37</sup> Emphasis in the original.



cited already in the previous chapter – is one element that is important for current genre theory. Rather than conceiving film and television texts as tools of a dominant ideology, it is crucial to “recognise the complex means by which . . . representation is both constructed and *actively* consumed by its audience”<sup>38</sup> (Creeber, “Decoding Television” 54). This study follows Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson who argue that “genre should be dealt with in terms not only of how it is configured by society, but also how genres themselves shape society, or are, in fact an inseparable feature of it” (6). As Branston and Stafford conclude, “a cultural approach to genres . . . asks whether some of the repetitions within genres . . . excludes [sic] some identities and imaginings, and might be reinforcing dominant or oppressive sets of values” (92).

Furthermore, when analyzing genres, it is important not only to focus on textual conventions but to also look at practices of production and reception. Thus, Ken Gelder underlines that “popular fiction is not just a matter of texts-in-themselves, but of an entire apparatus of production, distribution (including promotion and advertising) and consumption” (2). Hence, this research takes into account the transmedia storytelling techniques used in paranormal romance in 3.4, as these are not only an important aspect of the creation and the marketing of the genre, but also offer participatory possibilities on the part of audiences. Furthermore, subchapter 3.5 will deal with the overall public reception of paranormal romance among American audiences.

Since this dissertation is concerned with one film text and two television texts, a brief discussion of genre in terms of these two media is useful. When it comes to differences between film and television, it is noteworthy that television is particularly prone to the use of stereotypes “because the medium often needs to establish character almost instantly before an audience loses interest and switches over or off” (Creeber, “Decoding Television” 47-48). Jane Feuer points out that relatively recent viewing practices like zapping require the rapid application of genre-recognition skills (158). Similarly, Negra emphasizes that “it has been television that has proven itself perhaps most adept in codifying a broad set of ideological concerns about femininity, agency, domesticity, and work through narrative formulae” (21). Thus, due to certain preconditions of the medium, television texts are likely to rely on generic conventions more extensively than film narratives. This renders an analysis of *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* vis-à-vis their adherence to genre conventions especially urgent and fruitful. Steve Neale predicts that genre will indeed remain central to television and its

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<sup>38</sup> Emphasis in the original.

consumers in the future because of the above-mentioned reasons (“Genre and Television” 6).

Another aspect that distinguishes television from film genres is that they are more heavily influenced by market pressures, which may shape the structure and development of the respective texts (Turner, “The Uses and Limitations of Genre” 7). Features of TV series are sometimes changed in response to audience feedback. Thus, “[u]nlike the audiences for films or the readers of novels, the audiences for continuing television programmes respond to the texts they consume directly through ratings figures, phone calls to the network, talk radio and so on” (Turner, “Genre, Hybridity and Mutation” 8). Since many TV shows are produced in relatively close proximity to their screening dates, audience reactions can have an impact on the content or even the running time of the shows. A good example for this process is the daytime Gothic soap opera *Dark Shadows*, which was broadcast on *ABC* between 1966 and 1971.<sup>39</sup> The production was initially due to be cancelled because it found little acceptance with viewers. It was only after the introduction of Gothic elements, i.e. the vampire character Barnabas Collins, that viewing figures rose and the soap opera gradually achieved cult status. Once the producers realized that Barnabas was extremely popular with audiences, they made him a central character in the narrative, changing the initially evil vampire into a more relatable person with a back story and a moral compass. A similar process took place three decades later with the vampire Spike on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (*The WB/UPN*, 1997-2003), who was saved from being killed off because of the overwhelming viewer response to him (M. Williamson, “Television” pars. 3-11).

Even more so than film genres, television genres and programming formats are “notoriously hybridised and becoming more so” (Turner, “Genre, Hybridity and Mutation” 8). In fact, one single series can tap into different genres from season to season or even from episode to episode. Thus, Miranda J. Banks states that in television, “genre is not a static system” (20). Nevertheless, it is true for film and television alike that in general, “genre plays a major role in how . . . texts are classified, selected and understood” (Turner, “The Uses and Limitations of Genre” 7). In this context, it is essential to keep in mind that the formation of genres is an “ongoing process” (Altman 70), with genres

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<sup>39</sup> *Dark Shadows* was later remade in the form of a prime-time soap in 1991 (*NBC*). There were also two films associated with the soap, *House of Dark Shadows* (1970, dir. by Dan Curtis) and *Night of Dark Shadows* (1971, dir. by Dan Curtis). A horror comedy film version called *Dark Shadows* revived the cult TV text in 2012 (dir. by Tim Burton).

changing and developing over time – a factor whose significance will become much clearer in subchapter 3.3, which deals with the history of paranormal romance.

### 3.2. A Short Definition of (Teen) Paranormal Romance

Combining elements from a number of different genres, the *Twilight Saga*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* doubtlessly represent the trend to hybridity in popular fiction. Both the *Twilight Saga* and *The Vampire Diaries* can be classified as teen paranormal romances, while *True Blood* is similar but leans more towards horror and predominantly addresses a mature rather than adolescent audience. Leigh M. McLennon argues that paranormal romance “transgresses traditional boundaries of genre by simultaneously hybridising, cannibalising and parodying generic structures from other numerous genres” (par. 40). Thus, it may borrow from romance the elements of the star-crossed lovers or the love triangle, from the Gothic the conventions of the antiquated or haunted setting and the rising of previously hidden secrets of the past in the form of some monstrosity, and from the Southern Gothic in particular the elements of the grotesque and of sexual non-conformity. In fact, its transgressive nature is one of the key features of the hybrid paranormal romance genre, according to McLennon: Not only does it formally transgress boundaries of genre and media, but it is also concerned with destabilizing the categories of self and other in terms of content (par. 7).

Important to note is that the conception of paranormal romance as a subgenre of romance is neither accurate nor helpful. Such a conception is likely to result in the idea that paranormal romance has only ever been influenced by one single parent genre (here: romance), which is historically not the case. Understanding paranormal romance as a subgenre involves the risk of neglecting other significant influences, for example from crime fiction or fantasy (McLennon par. 12).<sup>40</sup> The concept of a hybrid with a “complex generic interplay” (McLennon par. 18) is therefore a more favorable way of approaching paranormal romance. Concerning the transgression of generic boundaries, what is interesting here is the amalgamation of elements from two genres in particular which show fascinating parallels. Thus, paranormal romance first and foremost contains components of two so-called “women’s genres (women-targeted mass cultural forms)” (Dines and Humez 161), Gothic and romance.

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<sup>40</sup> For instance, paranormal romance “inherited from paranormal detective fiction . . . a preference for plots which featured action, deception, conspiracy and crime” (Crawford 73) as well as “the generic structure of a mystery format” (McLennon par. 40).

Before delving into the convoluted histories of Gothic and romance, the definition of paranormal romance given above shall be briefly expanded. Paranormal romance narratives, which are typically set in fictional worlds that “closely mimic our contemporary reality but contain additional supernatural content” (McLennon par. 36), incorporate paranormal, fantastic and monstrous creatures and/or components. The protagonist – usually female and narrating the story from her perspective – strives to resolve a conflict, investigate a crime or deal with a mysterious event that may turn out to be supernatural in nature. Within the frame of this adventure, she typically forms an alliance with a supernatural being, which oftentimes leads to a romantic bond between her and the monster; in the cases of the texts that will be analyzed within this dissertation, this creature is usually a vampire. As the narrative progresses, boundaries between reality and the fantastic as well as those between human self and monstrous Other become increasingly blurred and indistinguishable (McLennon pars. 35-36).

McLennon explicitly rejects the distinction between urban fantasy and paranormal romance that is often undertaken in critical definitions. Instead, she proposes the conception of both genres as occupying two ends of a broader generic continuum (par. 39), since definitions of urban fantasy and paranormal romance as two distinct genres “obscure the complex generic interplay which actually constitutes UF/PR” (par. 18).<sup>41</sup> Due to the central position of a love story, its development and consummation in the *Twilight Saga*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*, these texts can be located closer to the paranormal romance end of the proposed continuum. The *Twilight Saga* centers on the relationship between the human Bella Swan and the vampire Edward Cullen; the main storyline in *The Vampire Diaries*, which spans several seasons, is concerned with the love triangle between the human Elena Gilbert and the vampire brothers Stefan and Damon Salvatore; and *True Blood* follows the romantic adventures of Sookie Stackhouse (who assumes she is human but turns out to be part faerie in a later season) with the vampires Bill Compton and Eric Northman, the werewolf Alcide Herveaux and the faerie-vampire hybrid Ben Flynn/Warlow.<sup>42</sup> The term ‘paranormal romance’ will therefore primarily be used when referring to the genre of the texts discussed here.

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<sup>41</sup> McLennon further suggests that the genre label ‘dark fantasy’ is a term no longer in use among current fans of urban fantasy/paranormal romance, and is therefore neglectable (par. 14).

<sup>42</sup> Although *True Blood* also develops other storylines and is regularly associated with a male audience because of its focus on violence and gore, the centrality of Sookie’s relationship drama within the series can be derived for example from the promo posters of seasons 2 and 4, which feature Sookie together with her male love interests relevant to the respective seasons. Besides, Brigid Cherry points out that “*True Blood* maintains a large female fan following and characters such as Bill, Alcide and (especially)

As for the ‘teen’ identifier in teen paranormal romance, it is used within this dissertation to refer to the intended audience of the *Twilight* Saga and *The Vampire Diaries* (to a lesser extent also *True Blood*). As Timothy Shary writes, the teen genre “is defined not so much by its narrative characteristics (although there are considerable generic similarities among teen films) as it is by the population that the films are about and to whom they are directed” (38). Similarly, Alison Waller posits that young adult fiction “should be *about* adolescence in some way; that is, it should have a teenage protagonist and a plot that incorporates elements of adolescent experience or interest” (15), and that it is of capital importance that “it is clearly aimed at teenagers as they are recognised as such through various (usually adult) discourses” (16-17). At the same time, it is worth noting that teen paranormal romance frequently has a cross-generational appeal. Rachel Moseley points out that “[g]iven the intense nostalgia that surrounds the teenager and teenageness in contemporary culture, the audience for the teen drama may exceed the teenage years” (54). Thus, although the target audience of the *Twilight* franchise is generally presumed to be “largely teen and tween girls” (Roth), there are also huge *Twilight* fan communities of adult women like the “Twilight Moms” (Em & Lo). Their existence demonstrates that teenagers are definitely not the only demographic enjoying contemporary teen paranormal romance.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, although the channel *The CW*, on which *The Vampire Diaries* is broadcast, maintains a teen-centric brand identity with its focus on shows like *The 100* (2014-running) and *Supergirl* (2015-running), its official overall target audience is “18- to 34-year-old women” (Dana). Moving “within the boundaries of acceptable broadcast material, broadcasting regulations, and generic expectation” (R. Williams 95), *The Vampire Diaries* balances both horror and teen genres. In contrast, *True Blood* predominantly addresses a mature audience, while also leaving a backdoor open for younger viewers, for example by foregrounding teen character Jessica Hamby.<sup>44</sup> Thanks to its position at the pay-TV channel *HBO*, the series

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Eric are subject to ‘Team ...’ affiliations (in the same way that Team Edward and Team Jacob dominate *Twilight* fandom)” (“Before the Night Is Through” 11).

<sup>43</sup> For a discussion of the implications of a cross-generational readership of the *Twilight* series; see e.g.: Siebert, Maria Verena. “Kidult readers. The cross-generational appeal of Harry Potter and Twilight.” *Interdisciplinary Approaches to Twilight. Studies in Fiction, Media, and a Contemporary Cultural Experience*, edited by Mariah Larsson, and Ann Steiner, Nordic Academic Press, 2011, pp. 213-28.

<sup>44</sup> Jessica is a character that is absent in the book versions of *True Blood*, Harris’ *The Southern Vampire Mysteries*. Her character was added to the TV series, arguably because it adds a teenage point of view to the narrative and may thereby draw in younger viewers. Being new to the vampire world, Jessica also provides the possibility for writers to introduce audiences to the basic rules of the vampire society in *True Blood*.

is not subject to the same FCC regulations that series broadcast on other channels are bound to (Jowett and Abbott 11). As a result of *HBO's* greater freedom from certain restrictions, its shows are frequently “stylistically, generically and narratively provocative and transgressive, often breaking social, cultural and televisual taboos” (Jowett and Abbott 11), which makes them less suitable for t(w)een audiences.<sup>45</sup>

Possible reasons for the fact that teen narratives do not only attract teenagers in contemporary society have been put forward by Davis and Dickinson, who write in the introduction of their book *Teen TV: Genre, Consumption, Identity*:

Factors accounting for the broad appeal of youth TV could include: a complicated but generally increased accessibility to higher or further education; the social pressure to grow up quickly and then to stay young for longer . . . ; and the current decay of the notion of the ‘job-for-life’ whose acquisition was so often a marker of adult maturity in the past.  
(11)

Thus, the crossover phenomenon may be linked to social changes that occurred over the course of the past century, particularly the expansion of the phase of adolescence and the de-standardization and individualization of markers of transition into adulthood (Hurrelmann 115, 122). These changes could explain the appeal of teen narratives for (young) adult viewers, since the latter continue to have an adolescent status despite their early autonomy in cultural, consumer-related and private spheres of life (Hurrelmann 121). Furthermore, as we have seen, it is beneficial for media industries to make an effort to cater to different consumer tastes in one product. *The Vampire Diaries* in particular contains a high level of self-reflexivity and self-irony, which may draw in especially older viewers. Through this knowing make-up, the series can “deliberately court such [mature] audiences with [its] intelligence and intertextuality” (Davis and Dickinson 11).<sup>46</sup> By including a range of different features, a teen series like *The Vampire Diaries* thus aims to attract as many audience segments as possible. Besides, Richard A. Peterson’s and Roger M. Kern’s theory of cultural “omnivorousness” (901) may provide additional insight into the fact that a great audience segment of current teen paranormal romance is

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<sup>45</sup> TV programs focused on breaking social and cultural taboos are not likely to be originally envisioned for teenage audiences. Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson argue that because teen TV is created by adults, it tends to “raise crucial issues (of *adult* choosing) in a ‘responsible manner’ that is entirely hegemonically negotiated. Recurrent topics of discussion . . . are sex and sexuality, drug and alcohol use, family tensions and negotiating one’s place among one’s peers” (“Introduction” 3; emphasis in the original).

<sup>46</sup> Kevin Williamson, who developed *The Vampire Diaries* series together with producer and writer Julie Plec, is also the creator of *Dawson’s Creek* (*The WB*, 1998-2003), the tremendously popular teen show whose trademarks were, among other things, “a use of language which is too sophisticated for the ages of the characters; [and] frequent intertextual references” (Davis and Dickinson, “Introduction” 1). Williamson has implemented these elements as central features into *The Vampire Diaries* as well.

mature and well-educated. Peterson and Kern argue that a development since the 1980s has been that “omnivorousness is replacing snobbishness among Americans of highbrow status” (903-04). This means that on average, people with a higher social status consume significantly more kinds of non-elite popular cultural genres than they did only ten years earlier.<sup>47</sup> For the two sociologists, cultural omnivorousness “signifies an openness to appreciating everything” (904) and can be seen, among other things, as the result of structural changes in contemporary society and generational politics that define youth culture as a viable alternative to the established ‘highbrow’ culture (905-06).

### **3.3. (Teen) Paranormal Romance, Genre Hybridity, and the Transgression of Boundaries between Self and Other**

#### **3.3.1. From the Origins to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

The paranormal romance proper emerged in the early 1990s in roughly the form in which we know it today. Having started out as a niche genre, it reached mainstream popularity in the years between 2000 and 2008, which was in huge part due to the publication of Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* in 2005 and its sequels in the subsequent years. As briefly summarized in the introductory chapter of this dissertation, paranormal romance made its transition from the book medium to the media of film and television in the aftermath of the *Twilight* novels’ immense acclaim among audiences, with such media franchises as the *Twilight* movies (2008-2012), *True Blood* (2008-2014) and *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-2017) (Crawford 8). In order to gain a deeper insight into the genre hybrid that is paranormal (teen) romance, it is crucial to look at its origins, namely the way it developed out of the entangled strands of the Gothic and the romance novel. As Joseph Crawford points out, “the histories of those genres which we now call ‘Gothic’ and ‘romantic’ fiction have always been heavily interlinked; indeed, for most of their history, the single word ‘romance’ has served to denote them both” (5). Here Crawford is referencing the ‘Gothic romance’ of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries as well as contemporary ‘romance’ fiction.

During the 1100s, romance developed in Europe as a form of fantastic narrative poetry.<sup>48</sup> As Susan P. Starke defines this heroic romance, it was “a narrative with an

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<sup>47</sup> In their research, Peterson and Kern have focused on music in particular; for an extension of the omnivore theory, see: Emmison, Michael. “Social Class and Cultural Mobility: Reconfiguring the Cultural Omnivore.” *Journal of Sociology*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2003, pp. 211-230.

<sup>48</sup> Its name refers to the fact that it was written in the vernacular *romans* language instead of Latin, the language used in scholarship and Church texts. Generally speaking, romance was a secular verse tale of

episodic plot structured by the protagonist's quest for love and honour within an idealised, imaginative, often mythical setting" (506). Northrop Frye identifies these motifs as the core transhistorical elements of romance.<sup>49</sup> He claims that romance is "at the structural core of all fiction" (*The Secular Scripture* 15), and that all narratives can be broken down into "man's vision of his own life as a quest" (*The Secular Scripture* 15), a quest for identity. In reference to this, it is significant that contemporary (paranormal) romance deals with the search for identity as well – however, told primarily from a female character's point of view (Ryder 508), which makes the genre particularly attractive for female audiences.

Over the course of several generations, a growing scepticism towards the existence of supernatural forces led to the gradual removal of paranormal elements in literature. The novel emerged as the opposite of romance, exemplified by such works as Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), which told the stories of "flawed, ordinary people living in a recognizable, realistic present" (Crawford 13), rather than aristocratic protagonists on a quest for love in a magical setting. As Crawford writes, "[w]idely criticized for its lack of realism, the romance passed into cultural eclipse, from which it has never fully emerged" (13). However, the love story fared much better in the English novel's time of origin. Richardson's *Pamela*, in particular, can be attributed with establishing the narrative template of two young people encountering various social or emotional obstacles, which they have to overcome in order to become married (Crawford 14).

The evolution of the novel was not the end of the romance, however: The latter re-emerged towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the form of what we now refer to as the 'Gothic novel.' This re-emergence took place within the frame of the so-called Gothic revival, a cultural trend which spread across Europe, bringing forth a resurging interest in medieval architecture, art and literature. Writers of Gothic romances sought to imitate the romance tradition of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, for instance by including supernatural or fantastic elements in their stories and setting the latter in historical rather than contemporary spaces (Crawford 17). In this way, authors strove to distance themselves from the relatively young novel tradition, and instead emphasized their ambition to employ impulses from both the novel and the romance. One of these authors was Horace Walpole, who published

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love and adventure highly popular in the Middle Ages, featuring knights who articulated the chivalric values of aristocracy.

<sup>49</sup> His influential work, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance*, was published in 1976.



the earliest and one of the most influential Gothic romances in 1764, *The Castle of Otranto*. In the second preface of his work, he described *Otranto* as “an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern” (11). That is, he tried to put psychologically ‘realistic’ characters into extraordinary, magical situations (Chaplin 200). It was then Ann Radcliffe who rendered Gothic romance a literature of fear: By 1800, “the terrified virgin girl fleeing through Gothic ruins by night had become almost as much of a literary cliché as it is today” (Crawford 18). Texts of the genre frequently described the plight of a female heroine who is threatened by a monstrous villain and must navigate her way through a cruel male-dominated world, often by escaping into marriage with an honorable man. This Gothic romance of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, a hybrid *par excellence*, was mother to both the genres of the Gothic and romance fiction that are popular today (Crawford 16).

From the beginnings of Gothic romance to the paranormal romance of today, the genre has changed in significant ways. Crawford describes the evolution of the dark and powerful male protagonist, who transformed from an evil villain into a figure of simultaneous danger and (sexual) appeal. Three texts that were foundational for this evolution are Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847) (Crawford 37). Not coincidentally, the latter is referenced and quoted repeatedly in the *Twilight* and *Eclipse* novels as well as the first season of *The Vampire Diaries*, which confirms its significance within the historical development of contemporary paranormal romance.<sup>50</sup> In the run-up to the Brontë sisters’ success, Jane Austen had popularized the novel of mutual education, most clearly in *Pride and Prejudice*, as a story of two “lovers who must educate and reshape

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<sup>50</sup> In *The Night of the Comet*, Stefan and Elena talk about the Brontë sisters and *Wuthering Heights*; it is implied that Stefan read the novel when it was first published, as he gives Elena his original edition (“The Night of the Comet”). In *Twilight*, the novel, Bella reads *Wuthering Heights* (30); in *Eclipse*, it is described as one of her favorite books (28). The novel version of *Eclipse* also includes several direct quotes from *Wuthering Heights*, and Bella compares her relationships with Edward and Jacob to Catherine’s relationships with Heathcliff and Edgar (S. Meyer 517). Intertexts of the *Twilight* series, such as *Wuthering Heights*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Merchant of Venice*, have been examined in a great number of essays in *Twilight* academia; articles dealing with *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* include: Deffenbacher, Kristina, and Mikayla Zagoria-Moffet. “Textual Vampirism in The *Twilight* Saga: Drawing Feminist Life from *Jane Eyre* and Teen Fantasy Fiction.” *Bringing Light to Twilight. Perspectives on a Pop Culture Phenomenon*, edited by Giselle Liza Anatol, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 31-42; Kapurch, Katie. “‘Unconditionally and Irrevocably’: Theorizing the Melodramatic Impulse in Young Adult Literature through the *Twilight* Saga and *Jane Eyre*.” *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2012, pp. 164-187; Morey, Anne. “‘Famine for Food, Expectation for Content’: *Jane Eyre* as Intertext for the ‘*Twilight*’ Saga.” *Genre, Reception, and Adaptation in the “Twilight” Series*, edited by Anne Morey, Ashgate, 2012, pp. 15-27; Wakefield, Sarah. “Torn Between Two Lovers: *Twilight* Tames *Wuthering Heights*.” *Theorizing Twilight. Critical Essays on What’s at Stake in a Post-Vampire World*, edited by Maggie Parke, and Natalie Wilson, McFarland, 2011, pp. 117-131.

each other, overcoming one another's initial failures, misunderstandings and character flaws in order to establish the basis for a successful subsequent marriage" (Crawford 22). This element of mutual education was essential for the further development of Gothic romance, as it marked a departure from the polarized figures of the evil villain and the morally pure hero/love interest, and instead opened up the possibility of a heroine finding herself with a hero-villain she must redeem. The possibility of the hero's redemption through the romantic love of the heroine can be seen as one of the core features of contemporary romance narratives, as – in the logic of the genre – the heroine's redeeming of the hero demonstrates her power over him: "It is the true and selfless love of the 'good' woman (or 'true female of worth'), who proves understanding, reliable and supportive, which helps her mate come to terms with his dark nature that stems from a traumatic past" (Şerban 107-108). Thus, for this narrative to make sense, the hero-villain had to become a more ambiguous figure, characterized by violence and cruelty, but also passionate and tortured by his actions (Crawford 23). This hero-villain character is commonly referred to as the 'Byronic hero,' a figure which is taken up and made commercially viable by Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (Crawford 30).

The figure of the Byronic hero goes back to Lord Byron, who used this new type of character in his poems from the early 1810s onwards. Embittered by some kind of tragedy in their past, the characters in Lord Byron's poems are "gloomy, passionate, aristocratic heroes, men of action and violence who scorned social convention, preferring to withdraw from the world to live as pirates, or solitaries, or wanderers upon the earth" (Crawford 24). These are the characteristic features of the Byronic hero, whose contradictory characteristics may well be a reflection of the time of his inception.<sup>51</sup> More obviously, though, the figure was influenced by the famous public persona that its inventor embodied (Crawford 25). Byron, who took impulses from German *sturm und drang* literature, cultivated the public image of a lonely aristocratic wanderer, brooding, melancholic and set apart from the world through his self-absorbed and disillusioned nature.<sup>52</sup> His public

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<sup>51</sup> Taking into account the historical moment at which the new character type emerged, Crawford locates the Byronic hero at the intersection of two conflicting tendencies within the contemporary society: On the one hand, the violence and political turmoil in the aftermath of the French revolution led to a nostalgia for the old aristocratic order; on the other hand, there was also a strong appreciation of "the exhilarating possibilities of rebellion and defiance against the status quo" (25).

<sup>52</sup> Although Byron was generally known for his conventionally good looks, he also deliberately adopted typical physical traits of Gothic villains by maintaining a skeletal-like thin figure, and preserving the paleness of his skin by staying indoors (Crawford 25-26). Byron's death-invoking appearance and demeanor may have facilitated his connection with the figure of the vampire, which up to this point had been bound to its folkloric roots that characterized it as a "cadaverous relative who returns from the grave to enervate its victims by draining their blood" (Aquilina 25).

persona is deeply intertwined with the figure of the sympathetic vampire that is so popular today. Thus, Byron's performance of his own invention, the (so-called) Byronic hero, played a significant role in the shift from understanding the vampire as a grave-haunting revenant to its portrayal as an irresistibly seductive hero-villain (Aquilina 27). Before their entry into Continental Romantic literature, literary representations of the vampire leaned on reports of the so-called 'vampire controversy,' which took place in a number of Slavic countries during the 1720s and 30s. In these countries, a series of panics resulted in the exhumation and defiling of corpses in order to make sure that recently dead relatives had not risen from the grave to come for their loved ones (Aquilina 25; Crawford 27).

When Byron joined John Polidori, Percy Shelley and Mary Godwin (later Shelley) for a ghost-story competition in 1816, the writers were familiar with accounts of these Eastern European vampire panics. The competition amongst the fellow authors not only brought out the idea for *Frankenstein* (published in 1818), but also spawned the novel *The Vampyre* (1819), which Polidori wrote on the basis of Byron's contribution to that evening, *A Fragment of a Novel* (1819). Involved in a rivalry with Byron, Polidori decided to satirize Byron and the Byronic hero in *The Vampyre* by "appropriat[ing] his aura of melancholic broodiness and reputation of nocturnal lover and destroyer" (Aquilina 29) and assigning it to the vampire figure of the novel. *The Vampyre* thus became the first story to detach the vampire from its folkloric roots and to include a Byronic vampire – an archetype still dominant today (Aquilina 35). Lord Ruthven, the novel's Byronic vampire, was an outcast living on the fringes of society, "yearning for redemption and ultimately finding none" (Aquilina 28), but nevertheless a nobleman, intelligent and with irresistible powers of seduction. The figure was subsequently revised and adapted by a plethora of authors in the course of the following centuries. For instance, James Malcolm Rymer based the lead character of his work *Varney the Vampire* (published between 1845 and 47 in the form of penny dreadfuls) on Lord Ruthven (Aquilina 32).

The Byronic hero then found entrance into romance as well. As Crawford suggests, the commercial success of Brontë's *Jane Eyre* "marks the point at which the Byronic hero, already so prominent in Gothic fiction, crossed decisively over into the English love story" (30). Similar to Austen's heroines, Brontë's protagonist Jane finds herself entrapped in a large, dark house, Thornfield Hall, which scares her; her life story is filled

with violence and the threat of death.<sup>53</sup> However, instead of replacing the villain residing in the eerie place with a suitable husband, Jane “will purge Thornfield by saving Mr Rochester, the flawed, embittered, but still redeemable Byronic hero who owns it, through the redemptive power of her love” (Crawford 32). As already pointed out, Charlotte Brontë thereby established a narrative template that has persisted in romance texts throughout the centuries. Her sister Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* equally features a monstrous, powerful hero. However, contrary to Mr Rochester, Heathcliff is not redeemed in the course of the narrative, which renders *Wuthering Heights* a much darker and much more controversial novel, compared to *Jane Eyre* (Crawford 34). Nevertheless, as Crawford explains, what both writers explored in their books was “the potential attractiveness of the Byronic hero” (37), which makes both novels important cornerstones in the history of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century romance narratives.

### 3.3.2. The 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the Formation of the Humanized Vampire Figure

The narrative templates that Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë provided were picked up by various authors almost a century later, in the 1920s and 30s (Crawford 41). This was the timeframe in which the modern romance genre started to form a generic identity of its own (Crawford 38). The emergence of the romance proper was closely linked to British and American women’s increasing employment in the white-collar workforce. Working in female-gendered positions, for example as secretaries, typists and shop-girls, women, for the first time, had a significant amount of income and leisure time at their disposal, which the generations of women before them did not have. The lucrative possibilities that came with this new audience were quickly recognized by publishers, and the romantic love story as a specifically female-directed narrative was rendered “a viable commercial category” (Crawford 39). The specialization in romance fiction soon panned out, as the genre rose to be one of the most popular genres of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>54</sup> Crawford points out

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<sup>53</sup> These tropes are clearly adopted in *The Vampire Diaries*, which introduces Elena as a typical Gothic heroine in these respects: At the beginning of the narrative, Elena is grieving the loss of her parents, and she experiences the death of a variety of family members and friends over the course of the series. She is often represented in situations where she is trapped inside her supposedly safe family home after dark, and attacked by strangers who have gained entrance to her house, for example in *Family Ties* and *Crying Wolf*.

<sup>54</sup> In fact, the romance genre has grown enormously since the 1970s, with an audience base that, while being rather diverse in marital status, age, and level of education, is almost exclusively female (Ryder 508). The female audience of romance is “determined by a concerted program of market research, mass publication and multi-media advertising” (Jones 198). Generally speaking, the “romance boom – the

that in early romances, generic conventions were still in the process of becoming formed, which is why one can find greater diversity, for instance in terms of narrative. With publishers becoming more aware of readers' preferences, conventions "became much more rigid" (Crawford 283). In the contemporary understanding, romance is usually seen as a type of formulaic fiction "where the plot focuses on the development of a romantic relationship between two people that is resolved happily" (Ryder 508).

Crucially, male protagonists in romance texts of the 1930s and beyond were largely modelled after the figure of the Byronic hero. As Crawford suggests, "such masterful heroes would become virtually obligatory" (41), since guidelines to depict the hero as "an 'Alphaman:' tall, strong, powerful, handsome and socially dominant" (41) were fixed for example in the editorial policy of Mills and Boon. Aside from E. M. Hull's *The Sheik* (1919) and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936), Crawford names Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938) as well as the novel's groundbreaking 1940 film adaptation as further important milestones in the development of the Gothic hero-villain. *Rebecca* was rather openly based on *Jane Eyre* in many respects – for instance, it employed both the motifs of the dark man in his large, menacing house, and the haunting presence of a dead or imprisoned woman.<sup>55</sup> Interestingly, the highly Gothicized *Rebecca* took the redemption of the Gothic villain one step further by presenting a heroine who accepts and supports her criminal hero-villain unconditionally (Crawford 44). The glamorization and glorification of male violence that the novel and film adaptation display can be tied back

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phenomenal increase in titles, readers, and authors of romance that took place in the latter half of the twentieth century" (Regis 156) – can be attributed to three large publishers: the British house Mills and Boon, established in 1908, the Canadian Harlequin Books, established in 1949, and the American Silhouette Books, established in 1980 (Regis 156). Mills and Boon was the first publishing house benefiting from a distinct focus on romance in the 1930s; Harlequin, which started out as a paperback reprint house that reprinted Mills and Boon romance titles, soon turned its list towards romance as well (Regis 156). In 1971, Harlequin purchased Mills and Boon, and in 1984, it also bought up Silhouette, which had been reaping profits from the US romance market in the meantime. According to Pamela Regis, the moment when American author Janet Dailey sold her first novel to Harlequin in 1975 marks the point in time when the centre of the popular romance novel started shifting from Great Britain, where the genre had been popularized, to the American market (155). Dailey, as Regis claims, "provides our first look at heroines, heroes, and courtships that take place in America, with American sensibilities, assumptions, history, and most of all, settings. . . . [Dailey] wrote best when writing about the quintessential American setting: the West" (159). Both of the acquired publishing houses continued publishing, each under its own imprint and covering a variety of romance subgenres (Regis 156). Indeed, Harlequin has retained the Silhouette and Harlequin names until today and continues to publish popular lines under these imprints.

<sup>55</sup> This trope is alluded to in the title of *The Madwoman in the Attic*, a landmark in feminist literary criticism of Gothic novels published by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in 1979. Interestingly, the trope is taken up in *The Vampire Diaries* when Katherine Pierce appears on the scene in season 1 to exert her manipulative influence; she turns out to be Elena's doppelganger and Stefan's as well as Damon's previous lover, whom they believed to be trapped in a tomb beneath the city's church since 1864.

to a more general cultural shift in the popular culture of the 1920s and 30s, according to Crawford (45). The interwar period, as “an epoch saturated with both the physical violence of modern warfare and the ideological violence of authoritarian politics” (Crawford 45), produced narratives of accepted and welcomed male violence in a number of genres.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, as we will see in chapter 6, the popularity of physically violent, yet benevolent masculinities in contemporary postfeminist culture can equally be linked to post-9/11 times of cultural turmoil. The fascination with and appreciation of male power and strength that is palpable in the popular culture of the interwar period was also taken up in romance narratives, albeit from a heterosexual female perspective in which powerful, violent men increasingly came to be seen as desirable. In this way, the Byronic hero-villains of this period paved the way for truly monstrous Gothic creatures like vampires who would become romantic love interests later in the same century (Crawford 46).

In the course of the 1970s, there was a tendency for romance and Gothic genres to become more and more similar, and thereby to almost converge. On the one hand, portrayals of male lovers in romance fiction fused the Gothic villain with the romantic hero, as described in the previous paragraphs. On the other hand, villains in Gothic fiction became more and more humanized (Crawford 50). As Fred Botting writes, “[m]onsters, in this romantic transformation of gothic, find themselves increasingly humanised while villains become increasingly alluring: repulsion cedes to attraction as horror gives way to romance” (*Gothic Romanced* 2). This development in the depiction of vampire characters in particular is frequently traced back to broader cultural shifts concerning society’s attitude towards outsiders (Crawford 52). As Carol Senf points out, “changing attitudes toward authority and toward rebellion against that authority have . . . led to a more sympathetic treatment of the vampire” (150). Having witnessed the rise and successes of the civil and gay rights movements as well as the feminist movement, audiences were more likely to express an appreciation for characters displaying rebellious attitudes and a refusal to conform to socially prescribed notions of normality. While a character’s vampire nature had previously been something that may have impeded audiences’ sympathizing with that character, it could now serve as precisely the feature that audiences found attractive (Carter 27). Since contemporary American society increasingly accepted and even glorified the figure of the outsider, the vampire came to

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<sup>56</sup> Hard-boiled detective fiction became increasingly popular, and the 1930s also witnessed the birth of the superhero, with Superman emerging as one of the first superhero characters to use physical violence and other superhuman abilities in the ‘fight for good’ (Crawford 45).

represent attraction, rather than threat: “As rebellious outsider, as persecuted minority, as endangered species, and as member of a different ‘race’ . . . , the vampire makes a fitting hero for late twentieth-century popular fiction” (Carter 29). This shift in representation was accompanied on a formal level by the introduction of the vampire as viewpoint character or even narrator (Carter 27).

The figure of the humanized or ‘good’ vampire is a trope through which paranormal romance explores the destabilization of boundaries between reality and fantasy as well as self and Other (McLennon 8). Besides generic hybridity, the thematic transgression of these cultural categories is another defining feature of paranormal romance, as mentioned in subchapter 3.3. The Gothic, as Botting points out, has always had a “fascination with transgression and the anxiety over cultural limits and boundaries” (*The New Critical Idiom* 1). The figure of the humanized vampire upholds this trend. When it comes to humanized vampires, it is important to differentiate between reluctant and sympathetic vampires – two terms that are often used interchangeably (Abbott, “TV Vampires”). Abbott defines the reluctant vampire as “a figure who seeks to deny its vampire identity in favour of a desire to live a human-like life” (“TV Vampires”). In order to become a member of the human community, this type of “vampire has become socialized and humanized, as well as secularized” (Zanger 22). One of the key characteristics of reluctant vampires is their abstaining from human blood and their desire not to hurt or kill people. Their self-loathing and struggle to control their physical impulses renders them noble and facilitates audiences’ sympathy for these characters (Abbott, “TV Vampires”). In *The Vampire Diaries*, it is Stefan Salvatore who represents the reluctant vampire type; *True Blood* has Bill Compton, and the *Twilight* Saga features the Cullen family, most of all Edward, as so-called vegetarian vampires.

Sympathetic vampires, on the other hand, are rather figures who are “sympathetic without being reluctant, embracing their vampirism and urging audiences to negotiate a tightrope walk between attraction and repulsion” (Abbott, “TV Vampires”). Damon Salvatore, Stefan’s brother, embodies the features of the sympathetic vampire most clearly in *The Vampire Diaries*; in *True Blood*, it is first and foremost Eric Northman who represents this type. Both are cast in the role of “the ultimate ‘bad boy’” (Wilson Overstreet 25) who regularly “giv[es] in to his darker nature and wallow[s] in the kill” (Abbott, “TV Vampires”). However, especially Damon oscillates between both reluctant and sympathetic vampire types, depending on the respective season and on whether he is currently in a relationship with Elena, his true love. Similarly, there are periods of time

where Stefan gives in to his vampire needs and turns into a ripper,<sup>57</sup> thus shedding his usual reluctant vampire identity.

In general, characters of both types nowadays typically appear in “the context of everyday life” (T. Kane 88), and are portrayed “no longer [as] exotic and aristocratic intruders, but rather [as] average people, such as neighbors, family, and friends” (Abbott, *Celluloid Vampires* 9). This is why vampires in contemporary popular culture are frequently described as having undergone a process of “domestication” (Gordon and Hollinger, “Introduction” 2). However, Abbott provides a more differentiated perspective by arguing that vampires appearing in serial texts may be sympathetic/reluctant but are precisely not defanged. According to Stacey Abbott and Lorna Jowett, “the sympathetic or reluctant vampire, while not exclusive to TV, is a recurring trope in series” (202).<sup>58</sup> In long-running serial dramas, vampire characters can be developed in complex ways; over the course of several episodes or even seasons, audiences get to witness both good and bad sides of vampire protagonists. Against this backdrop, their malevolent actions become more complicated, and moral ambiguity is emphasized (Abbott, “Vampires on My Mind”). Through the sense of intimacy that is established between audiences and TV vampires by means of televisual seriality, the former become complicit in their favorite characters’ crimes, and “the assumed connections between monstrosity, evil and Otherness” (McLennon par. 24) are challenged and destabilized. At the same time, Abbott argues that “[t]he seriality and suspense of each series . . . is built around the potential that [the vampires] will give in to their bloodlust – which each of them do at some point. Their inevitable downfall makes their crimes all the more horrific and disturbing” (“TV Vampires”). Interestingly, it is often deeply human flaws like revenge, grief or jealousy that incite the vampires’ monstrosity (Abbott, “TV Vampires”). Again, the consequence is ambiguity and a blurring of social-cultural binaries of good/evil and self/Other.

One early example of this trend towards the complex, boundary-blurring, humanized TV vampire is Barnabas Collins, who was introduced to the Gothic soap opera *Dark Shadows* (ABC, 1966-71) as a vampiric antagonist in 1967. As mentioned already, Barnabas Collins was kept on the show only because of the overwhelming positive audience response to him. Vampire Barnabas was depicted as a mysterious, potentially

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<sup>57</sup> In *The Vampire Diaries* mythology, rippers are extremely feral, savage and predatory vampires who sadistically torture and mutilate their victims. Because they have turned off their humanity, they have no empathy and do not care about their actions.

<sup>58</sup> The following argument by Abbott and Jowett is developed with explicit reference to the medium of television. However, perhaps their reasoning could be extended to include cinematic serial texts, like the *Twilight* Saga, as well.



dangerous stranger, isolated from the rest of the characters not only due to his monstrousness but also because he had just entered the contemporary world after having been confined to a chained coffin for about two centuries. Crawford points out that due to these characteristics, Barnabas was interpreted by viewers not as a monstrous villain, but as a redeemable Byronic hero (52). This interpretation does not come as a surprise, considering that *Dark Shadows* was “established as a classic female Gothic narrative from the outset (young woman, relocated from her home, arrives in a threatening house)” (147), as Helen Wheatley underlines. It seems plausible that viewers were reading the show’s vampire character within the established conventions of the romance genre. Owing to the positive audience response, Barnabas’ character was endowed with greater complexity in subsequent episodes, which further expanded his popularity.<sup>59</sup> Barnabas Collins’ shift from Gothic villain to romantic lead, or rather his simultaneous embodiment of both roles, confirms that by the 1970s, “it was possible for one to be mistaken for the other” (Crawford 52).

It was Anne Rice who then “brought the figure of the sympathetic, conflicted vampire anti-hero to a mass audience” (Crawford 55). Rice’s *Vampire Chronicles*, which started off with *Interview with the Vampire* (1976), were majorly influential for the broader category of vampire fiction – so much so that Rice is attributed a “near-mythic status” (Badley 111) and is often credited with having “given birth to the ‘new’ vampire” (Badley 111). Rice not only portrayed her vampire protagonists as members of a vampire society, which further humanized them, but also played a significant role in the eroticization of the vampire figure that is so blatant for example in *True Blood* today (Crawford 56). Having “an alter ego as a pornographer” (Badley 4) – under a pseudonym, she published several BDSM-themed erotic novels besides her vampire project *Chronicles* –, Rice established love and eroticism as central issues in her vampire series. Her protagonists’ “murderous acts of vampirism were frequently described in overtly sexual terms” (Crawford 57), and her novels depicted many deeply passionate homosexual love affairs between beautiful, sexually attractive vampires.<sup>60</sup> Generally speaking, the trend towards more sexually explicit sexual content in American popular

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<sup>59</sup> Not only was the pain over his long-lost love Josette emphasized within the narrative, he was also shown to be miserable because of self-hatred (M. Williamson, “Television” par. 10). Furthermore, viewers learned that he was transformed into a vampire against his will, which highlighted Barnabas’ predicament and assured him the empathy of audiences (M. Williamson, “Television” par. 12).

<sup>60</sup> The 1994 adaption of *Interview with the Vampire* (dir. by Neil Jordan) featured Tom Cruise and Brad Pitt as vampires Lestat and Louis – two actors who are well-known for their perceived sex appeal.

culture was also visible in the launch of a new romance series entitled ‘Mills and Boon/Harlequin Presents,’ which contained explicitly erotic romance narratives. As Crawford points out, these erotic romances were increasingly in demand by readers and soon dominated the market (47).<sup>61</sup> A similar development was discernible in vampire film: Although audiences were familiar with sexually attractive vampires since the casting of Bela Lugosi in *Dracula* (1931), the 1970s can be considered the high point of an erotic cycle in the history of vampire film narratives: What characterizes films of this cycle are “[h]ighly sensual scenes of vampirism, especially THE BITE” (T. Kane 44).

### 3.3.3. Early Paranormal Romance Tropes and the Proliferation of the Romantic Vampire Hero

According to Crawford, in 1989, it was once again Anne Rice who can be credited with publishing “the first best-selling paranormal romance novel of the modern era” (60), *The Mummy*. A huge success among readers, *The Mummy* told the story of a young human woman falling in love with the immortal Ramses. The novel marked the beginning of a period in which American authors published an abundance of narratives featuring human female protagonists and supernatural creatures as romantic leads (Crawford 63).<sup>62</sup> From ghosts and angels to werewolves, psychics, aliens and elves, all kinds of supernaturally powerful beings appeared as romantic partners.<sup>63</sup> Within this new genre of paranormal romance “which drew upon the traditions of both romance and horror fiction” (Crawford 59), supernatural lovers who exuded an aura of power, strength and experience were basically “exaggerated version[s] of the romantic hero” (Crawford 65).

In these early paranormal romance texts, a number of recurring tropes were popularized which still play a role in contemporary narratives. One of these is the redeemability of the Byronic vampire figure; as discussed, it goes back to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Karen Bethke points out that texts belonging to the genre typically narrate “stories that reaffirm the idea that deep down, [women] have the power to tame even the wildest animal and redeem even the worst man. That . . . is the core appeal of the

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<sup>61</sup> The 1970s were also the heyday of the so-called ‘bodice-ripper,’ which is a derogatory term for a category of erotic romance novels set in a historical context. The term is derived from the covers of these paperback novels which tended to feature scantily clad women being grabbed by the hero and having their clothes torn off in a passionate gesture. The novels typically included scenes of non-consensual sexualized violence, which is arguably mirrored in the images on the covers (Crawford 47).

<sup>62</sup> Crawford suggests that the relative size of the American publishing industry and its willingness to try out new types of narratives was instrumental in this process (64).

<sup>63</sup> Interestingly, the monsters dominating the paranormal romance market today are primarily vampires and werewolves.

paranormal romance” (236). Crawford links this ‘heroine-redeems-vampire hero’ trope to the new sympathetic portrayal of the vampire in the popular culture of the time. Since the vampire had been increasingly humanized in the course of the 1970s and 80s, it gained the opportunity to be redeemed, and the romance heroine played a decisive role in this process (Crawford 83). Having taken an enormous risk and devoted considerable efforts, the female protagonist ensures the gratitude and love of her vampire partner; besides, she is often rewarded for her perseverance by getting to share the supernatural hero’s powerful position.

While this trope plays a role in all three texts discussed in this dissertation, it is emphasized most clearly in *The Vampire Diaries*. Girl-next-door Elena is torn between the two vampire brothers Stefan and Damon; in the course of the series, she has monogamous relationships with both of them, and it becomes clear that her positive influence on the brothers is crucial for their status as humanized vampires. Both Stefan’s and Damon’s ‘humanity’ and placidity depend on Elena’s presence in their lives. This is particularly true for Damon, who is the more vicious and violent brother from the start, and who therefore undergoes a particularly remarkable development thanks to Elena’s redeeming qualities. Stefan comments: “Elena is good for Damon. She makes him happy. And we all know that when Damon is happy, he is not out there killing people. Which I guess is a plus for mankind” (“The Devil Inside”). The series also explores what happens when the heroine stops redeeming the vampire: Once Elena withdraws her love and breaks up her relationships, the brothers tend to go on veritable killing sprees. In season 5, when Stefan learns that Elena is in a relationship with Damon, his vampire hunger, which he had previously conquered, returns. A couple of episodes later, an upset Damon reconnects with his evil side and murders several people after having been left by Elena/Katherine.<sup>64</sup> At the same time, *The Vampire Diaries* displays an overt awareness of the trope and comments on it in an ironic way, for example when Damon mocks Stefan: “I care, Stefan . . . I’m changing and evolving into a man capable of greatness. Better watch your back” (“Daddy Issues”).

The trope of “a magical connection between a male vampire and his predestined lover” (Crawford 70) is also a trope established in early paranormal romances. Thus, paranormal romance lovers often share a psychic bond or special emotional connection, which emphasizes the unique nature of the relationship and implies the inevitability of the pairing. If lovers have access to each other’s thoughts, this psychic connection can

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<sup>64</sup> At the time, Elena’s doppelganger Katherine has taken over Elena’s body, unbeknownst to Damon.

also “heighten . . . their mutual erotic attraction” (Crawford 75). The supernatural link may further turn out to enable the heroine, as Crawford suggests, to change the hero’s mind and win his heart – or, “despite his undead status, to bear his children” (82).

When it comes to the cultural productions under analysis in this study, it is interesting that they tend to counteract or subvert this trope. The one that comes closest to incorporating the trope is the *Twilight* Saga, where Bella is Edward’s ‘singer’ – in *Twilight*, “la tua cantante” (*New Moon*) is the Italian expression for a human whose blood appeals to a certain vampire in a particular and unusual way. This is Edward’s and Bella’s special connection which establishes itself on a biological level. The Saga also includes the concept of ‘imprinting,’ which is the involuntary mechanism by which shape-shifters (not vampires) become unconditionally bound to their soulmates. However, it is striking that Edward, a mind reader, cannot hear Bella’s thoughts. Antonio Sanna reads this as an element of postmodern parody which “is simultaneously a legitimisation and subversion” (72) of the portrayal of telepathy in Gothic novels and horror films. A similar dynamic can be found in *True Blood*, where Sookie has the ability of mind-reading but finds that she cannot access the thoughts of Bill, her vampire love interest. Here the lack of a psychic connection turns out to be a relief for Sookie since her supernatural abilities have previously been detrimental to her social life. Finally, in season 5, *The Vampire Diaries* plays with the notion of “the universe . . . drawing Stefan and Elena together” (“Resident Evil”), suggesting that because the two are doppelgangers of a couple that lived in Ancient Greece, they are meant to be together in each of their incarnations. However, a twist reveals that “the promise of true love” (“Resident Evil”) is in fact a hoax, thought out by a powerful witch out of ulterior motives. Thus, in these instances, genre conventions are simultaneously cited and undermined.

A third paranormal romance trope promoted in early texts of the genre comprises “both the ‘vampire becomes human for love’ and the ‘human becomes vampire for love’ plotlines” (Crawford 76). While either of the plotlines may occur, the latter one has proven to be the more frequent one. In fact, in paranormal romances until today, it is most commonly the human heroine who is turned into a vampire at the end of the narrative (Crawford 84). Through her transformation, she acquires the same position as her supernatural partner, thereby correcting the power imbalance that has existed between the female protagonist and her vampire lover from the beginning. In this way, the heroine “has miraculously managed to level the playing field between them” (Crawford 84), and,

importantly, has secured for herself the freedom from fear of being overpowered by anyone in the world, including her monstrous lover (Crawford 84).

This trope is featured most prominently in the *Twilight* Saga, which famously entails Bella's transformation into a vampire. Already at the end of the first instalment, it is clear that Bella has decided that she wants to be turned in order to be with Edward forever. Her decision is also based on her wish to be as powerful as her vampire partner; she knows that as a human, she is indefinitely weaker than him. This power hierarchy is then reversed after her transformation: As a newborn vampire, Bella is physically and mentally stronger than Edward, and she gets a supernatural gift that allows her to protect her loved ones.

Alongside Laurell K. Hamilton's *Anita Blake: Vampire Hunter* novel series (1993-present), it was then particularly the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* franchise which turned out to be the next cornerstone in the history of contemporary paranormal romance. Both of the series featured strong female protagonists who functioned as action heroines, vampire huntresses and investigators of supernatural mysteries, which can be linked to "the contemporary cultural significance of girl-power . . . that emerged in the 1990s" (McLennon par. 26). Joss Whedon, the creator of *Buffy*, has made it clear in more than one interview that he envisioned the TV show's heroine to be a character who turned horror conventions upside down by refusing her traditional generic victim position: "I'd seen a lot of horror movies . . . with blonde girls getting themselves killed in dark alleys and I just germinated this idea about how much I'd like a blonde girl go into a dark alley, get attacked by a big monster and then kill it!" (qtd. in Buttsworth 185).<sup>65</sup> Thus, the first episode showed Buffy walking to a club at night, and dealing with a mysterious stranger who follows her. Making clear that she is neither afraid of nor physically inferior to her stalker, she confronts him and demands to be left alone. This scene is staged as a surprise moment for both the audience and the man who had not expected Buffy to even notice him, let alone stand upon her defence.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> In this context, it is worth noting that Sarah Michelle Gellar, who plays Buffy Summers in the TV series, had previously appeared in two teenage slasher movies, *I Know What You Did Last Summer* and *Scream 2* (both 1997, dir. by Jim Gillespie and Wes Craven, respectively), which added to her being coded as the typical young, attractive, white female victim in horror media.

<sup>66</sup> The scene develops as follows: When the stranger follows Buffy into a deserted alley, viewers share his point of view: He looks around but does not spot her; it seems he may have lost her. As he slowly keeps on walking, the camera pulls up and it is revealed to the audience that Buffy is performing a handstand on a bar high above the pavement. When the man passes underneath her, she swings down and kicks him in the back, knocking him to the ground.

Besides the introduction of an action heroine as the main female protagonist, a second element that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* strengthened was the mainstream appeal of the sympathetic, romantic vampire (Crawford 135). The mysterious stranger following Buffy turns out to be the vampire Angel, with whom she later enters into a complicated love relationship. While Buffy has several relationships with different, predominantly human men over the course of the series, another one that stands out is her affair with the vampire Spike in season 6. However, it is worth noting that it was actually the lack of a narrative constructed along romance conventions in *Buffy* which spurred the production of subsequent paranormal romances (Crawford 136). Buffy's and Angel's relationship did not last, and especially her affair with Spike was not necessarily romantic, but rather portrayed as dysfunctional, unhealthy and self-destructive for Buffy. As Crawford explicates, the relationship between Buffy and Spike became "an interpretative battleground between the writers of the show and a vocal (and mostly female) sub-section of its viewers" (129). Similar to what happened with Barnabas Collins in the 1960s, this group of viewers was reading in terms of post-1970s romance conventions what was intended by the writers as a clearly abusive relationship. Despite protest by these fans, the writers insisted that the affair between Spike and Buffy demonstrated Buffy's straying from her true identity, and put a (rather offensive) end to it.<sup>67</sup> Crawford argues that because viewers were denied the complete mainstream romance between a human heroine and her vampire lover in *Buffy*, they turned to other vampire romance fiction, such as Christine Feehan's *Dark* series (1999-present), J. R. Ward's *Black Dagger Brotherhood* series (2005-2015) and Jeaniene Frost's *Night Huntress* series (2007-2014), the latter of which Crawford refers to as "a corrective rewrite of Spike and Buffy's relationship" (136). Thus, it may have been precisely the lack of a conventional romance narrative in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* that generated a huge demand for paranormal romance in the new millennium, ultimately creating the circumstances in which paranormal romance would transition from a minor niche genre to a more present mainstream one (Crawford 144), and achieve the immense success it had with the *Twilight Saga*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*.

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<sup>67</sup> To make their point, they included a scene in which Spike attempted to rape Buffy in episode 19 of season 6, which was to underline the abusive nature of their relationship and end it once and for all: "Co-executive producer Marti Noxon has stated that Spike's attempted rape of Buffy in 'Seeing Red' was constructed as a corrective to fans who read Spike as worthy of Buffy's love. The rape was intended to demonstrate that Spike was, in essence, evil" (Heineken, qtd. in Crawford 130).

### 3.3.4. Paranormal Romance and the Teenager

The great popularity of *Buffy*, which began in the late 1990s, was further indicative of an important trend in the American media industries: the rapidly growing and increasingly diversified sector of young adult<sup>68</sup> fiction (Crawford 89). Young people had emerged as an influential consumer group after World War II, and media industries had started catering to this new powerful economic force from the 1950s onwards (Osgerby 72).<sup>69</sup> For instance, both Hollywood and the developing television industry attempted to capitalize on the flourishing youth market, especially on the new spending power of young women (Osgerby 73). By the 1980s, “teenagers had become demanding ‘arch-consumers’” (A. Waller 194), and young adult literature enjoyed tremendous commercial success. Since the YA media products had by then become firmly established, “the body of work found space and the opportunity to expand and experiment” (A. Waller 194) – a consequence of which was “the rise of alternative genres to realism in the 1980s and into the 1990s” (A. Waller 194). As Crawford writes, adult and young adult vampire romance cropped up almost simultaneously; examples of young adult paranormal romance novels are *The Silver Kiss* by Annette Curtis Klause (1990) and *The Vampire Diaries* series by L.J. Smith (1991-92), upon which the eponymous TV series is based (90). Similarly, when it comes to the medium of film, “the 1980s, with its intense focus upon films for teenaged-audiences, was also the decade that spawned adolescent-centric vampire movies” (Zehentbauer ix), such as *The Lost Boys* (1987, dir. by Joel Schumacher).

The emergence of vampire-themed media aimed at teenagers or children may initially seem counter-intuitive. In fact, these texts’ existence was not always self-evident:

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<sup>68</sup> Within this project, the terms ‘young adult,’ ‘teenager,’ ‘adolescent’ and ‘youth’ will be employed. While the terms are used to refer to roughly the same imagined group in everyday discourse, subtle distinctions can be made between them (A. Waller 8). ‘Young adult’ (‘YA’) is commonly adopted as a label to classify fiction aimed at a teenage market (A. Waller 9). ‘Teenager,’ according to Alison Waller, is a cultural term that emerged after World War II to describe members of a new cultural group or subsection of society that “had previously lacked coherence” (9). A little earlier, the term ‘adolescent’ was introduced by American psychologist G. Stanley Hall, who is commonly credited with formulating the concept of modern adolescence in his 1904 study. Thus, the term ‘adolescent’ is “codified through various professional, academic and physical or social discourses” (A. Waller 8).

<sup>69</sup> The emergence of young people as an addressable consumer market was partly due to demographic developments, namely a post-war ‘baby boom’ that resulted in an exponential growth of the American teen population in the 1950s. In the wake of the demand for labor force during wartime, there was also an increase in youth employment; young people continued to work at least part-time after the war, whereby they were able to maintain their spending power (Osgerby 72). At the same time, more and more teenagers received an education (with the percentage of young people, including women, attending high school reaching 100% in the 1960s) (Osgerby 72), which afforded them more space to learn and try out themselves – something that is nowadays considered one of the core features of being a teenager. As Bill Osgerby underlines, the spending power of young people in the 1950s and 60s was definitively a matter of social class: “in America the rise of teenage spending was related to the prosperity of the suburban middle class” (81).

After a controversy over the content of horror comics in the 1950s, vampires and other monsters were classified as harmful to young readers and subsequently banned from young adult media for almost two decades; they only made a comeback with *Dark Shadows* in the mid-60s (Waltje 87). Nevertheless, as Catherine Spooner notes, “Gothic has always had a strong link with adolescence” (*Contemporary Gothic* 88). The heroines of classic Gothic texts, like Radcliffe’s and her contemporaries’, were typically “young women on the verge of adulthood” (*Contemporary Gothic* 88). Furthermore, teenagers seem to be ideal protagonists of Gothic narratives, given the status between child and grown-up that is culturally ascribed to them:

Subject to physiological change and occupying a liminal space between past and future, adolescence would seem a particularly viable subject position in which to explore anxieties about the return of the past, and the preoccupations with excess, limits and transgression which Alan Lloyd-Smith identifies as central to Gothic texts. (McLennan 86)

Conversely, the figure of the vampire is linked to the teenager in its boundary-crossing nature: “The inherent liminality of the . . . vampire provides an ideal site, or focus, of transition” (Bacon 152). Indeed, transition has been a central concept when it comes to defining adolescence in psycho-social discourses (A. Waller 30). Since the 1920s, the dominant perception of adolescence has been that it is a liminal stage, Other to childhood but also still not quite adulthood, which is the ultimate goal that every person supposedly strives to achieve (A. Waller 1, 6). As Waller states: “Adolescence is, after all, a less stable and more fluid concept, defined by its ‘in-between-ness,’ its transitory position between childhood and adulthood” (6).<sup>70</sup>

In the course of the frequently lengthy period of transition from childhood to adulthood, teenagers “straddle . . . a huge and often incommensurate set of situations” (Davis and Dickinson 11): On the one hand, they increasingly gain rights and mobility,

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<sup>70</sup> This dominant conception frames adolescence as a process of constant and linear growth towards maturity, and relies on the binary construction of childhood and adulthood, innocence and experience, asexuality and sexuality etc., in the middle of which adolescence is located (A. Waller 30). Waller points to the rise of the new sciences of sociology and psychology in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which “instilled developmentalism as the governing framework for adolescence” (30). The developmental approach can be criticized for its reductive perception of children and adolescents because in some ways, it presents the latter as “lesser beings” (A. Waller 32) – in other words, for its adultism. Children and teenagers have recently been redefined “as a marginalised group in its own right” (Davis and Dickinson, “Introduction” 11) and recognized along with other disenfranchised groups involved in political struggles for empowerment (A. Waller 97). In addition, Waller emphasizes that developmentalism as a discursive framework is rooted in a patriarchal context: “In its concern with linear progression it prioritises a masculine version of time and any diversion from the correct sequence is considered to be unhealthy (unhealthily feminised, perhaps)” (35). Considering that the developmental conception of adolescence as a series of stages or tasks that lead towards maturity is based on stages of a male biography (one that is typical for the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when these ideas are emerging), this conception can be described as androcentric.



and are addressed as subjects by consumerism; on the other hand, they are not allowed to vote, to drink alcohol and to earn more than the minimum wage (if such a thing exists where they live). Thus, the life stage of adolescence is actually “heavily monitored” (Davis and Dickinson 10). Increasing independence from parental and institutional authority as well as the discovery of one’s sexual identity are processes that may not always go smoothly. In this context, teen fantasy/horror “offers excellent possibilities for creating situations in which young people’s dilemmas can be represented and tested” (Hilton and Nikolajeva 15). As Moseley points out, many teen shows “deal with questions of difference, otherness, increased power and the impact of these on personal and community relationships: a significant number of them . . . us[e] supernatural power as a motif through which to explore these concerns” (54). Thus, teen paranormal romance “tackles real adolescent problems, sometimes disguised in metaphorical ways” (Rogobete 116), and allows teenage audiences, who are in the midst of establishing their identities, to experiment and try on transgressive roles that may otherwise be unacceptable (Wilson Overstreet 13). For instance, the quest for an individual identity and the physical changes of the pubescent body are developmental tasks that can be explored in teen paranormal romance in which a human teenager becomes a vampire (Wilson Overstreet 14-15). A second realm explored in teen paranormal narratives are the adolescent themes of loneliness and isolation as well as “the renegotiation of relationships and power dynamics (with parents, teachers, and other authority figures, and with peer groups . . .)” (Wilson Overstreet 15). A third one is the appearance of first sexual impulses and an interest in pursuing romantic relationships (Wilson Overstreet 15).

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is an often-cited example of this kind of exploration of typical teen issues in the form of supernatural metaphors – Joss Whedon himself has defined the show as “a horror story about high school, and that’s exactly what high school life is like . . . both literally and metaphorically” (qtd. in R. Campbell and C. Campbell par. 9). In the course of the first couple of seasons, Buffy Summers and her friends confronted a variety of mundane issues turned literal, such as addiction, domestic violence, romantic relationships gone bad, coming out, racism, social isolation and date rape (Crawford 126).<sup>71</sup> Thus, *Buffy* was concerned with a group of teenage protagonists who made their way through the ambiguous period of adolescence, thereby paving the way for contemporary teen paranormal romance. Among this dissertation’s examined

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<sup>71</sup> For a more detailed discussion of supernatural metaphors in *Buffy*, see: Wilcox, Rhonda. “There Will Never Be a ‘Very Special’ *Buffy*: *Buffy* and the Monsters of Teen Life.” *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 27, no. 2, 1999, pp. 16-23.

vampire romances, *The Vampire Diaries* most obviously dramatizes issues surrounding adolescence and high school life with the help of supernatural metaphors, thereby following in *Buffy*'s footsteps. For example, the series' metaphorical explorations touch on the topics of romantic love, homosexuality and homophobia, the changing pubescent body, the management of grief and loss, and the difficult high school environment in general, with its very own social system and hierarchies that are not necessarily easy to navigate. As Elena comments in season 4: "It's my senior year. I survived this long. There's no way I'm bailing before graduation" ("The Rager").

### **3.4. (Teen) Paranormal Romance as a Transmedia Phenomenon**

As pointed out in 3.2, besides its generic and thematic blurring of boundaries, a third defining feature of paranormal romance is that it functions as a transmedia genre, thereby additionally transgressing media boundaries (McLennon par. 43). Henry Jenkins theorizes transmedia storytelling as

a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes it [sic] own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story. (Jenkins)

Thus, a given story is not only told within the frame of a single movie or television series, but instead spreads across multiple media platforms; every part of the story which is added "enhance[s] or expand[s] the source material" (Anyiwo 161). Although the concept of transmedial representation is not new – from Greek mythological and biblical stories to 19<sup>th</sup> century fictional characters with multiple media incarnations like Frankenstein or Sherlock Holmes, instances of transmediality can be found across the centuries in Western culture (Ryan and Thon 15) –, it can be considered a growing phenomenon in contemporary popular culture. Economically speaking, transmedia storytelling has arisen out of synergistic effects and the horizontal integration of big media conglomerates today. Thus, the latter have an interest in expanding their franchises across the different media industries they have successfully merged. Using a range of different media platforms and multiple ways of narration, media companies aim to attract as many audiences as possible "by creating different points of entry for different audience segments" (Jenkins). Hence, from a financial point of view, transmedia storytelling is almost "an economic imperative" (Jenkins) among modern media industries. However, it also serves a number of other important functions.

Transmedia storytelling can facilitate a more immersive experience: Since audiences are already familiar with a given story world and its main characters, they can instantly immerse themselves into the narrative when consuming a sequel, prequel or any other extension of the original work (Ryan and Thon 1). Furthermore, transmedia storytelling techniques can add to a story's sense of realism, provide further background information about certain characters, and explain or delve into various elements of a narrative (Jenkins). Most importantly, transmedia texts are "both participatory and performative" (McLennon par. 44). As U. Melissa Anyiwo argues, they rely "on the active participation of an audience willing to go far beyond the initial source – the television show or film – to find and engage in a wealth of additional and enhanced content" (158). In this way, consumers are able to exert influence on what kind of content is produced by media companies and thereby to "drive the narrative in real ways" (Anyiwo 158). Not least, transmedia storytelling is also a means of building and maintaining audience loyalty (Jowett and Abbott 204).

Significantly, transmedia narratives are based on elaborate fictional worlds, rather than individual characters or specific storylines (Jenkins). This makes sense because an interesting world can always generate more stories and explore new interrelations between different characters: "plots are self-enclosed, linear arrangements of events that come to an end while storyworlds can always sprout branches to their core plots that further immerse people, thereby providing new pleasures" (Ryan and Thon 19). Due to their depth, the resulting multi-layered worlds resemble our experience of real life much more than any simple movie or TV show could (Anyiwo 158). Jenkins argues that the "process of world-building encourages an encyclopedic impulse in both readers and writers" (Jenkins). Since different consumers may notice different story elements and interpret them in different ways, they draw on each other's expertise in order to reach a more comprehensive picture of the narrative. Transmedia texts encourage this kind of active audience participation in meaning-making processes by consciously and consistently fuelling audience speculation and discussion, and by motivating consumers to convene on social media like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Tumblr (McLennon par. 44). In online as well as offline conversations, audience members are invited to analyze and dissect the "multi-layered world that can be peeled away to reveal layer upon layer of depth" (Anyiwo 160). Drawing pleasure from their interaction with the text(s), consumers become "puzzle solvers" (Ndalianis 12) or "hunters and gatherers moving back across the various narratives trying to stitch together a coherent picture from the

dispersed information” (Jenkins). Gaps and discrepancies within the transmedia narrative invite readers or viewers to engage with the text in an array of active ways, for instance by producing fan fictions that present alternative turns of events or fill in the perceived gaps. Fan fiction can be considered “an unauthorized expansion of . . . media franchises” (Jenkins), with “[s]ituations that are not explored fully, characters who are not developed, and tensions that are unsatisfactorily resolved provid[ing] the fanfic author with possibilities to take the story imaginatively in another direction” (Lindgren Leavenworth, “Transmedial Narration” 320).

*True Blood* in particular has been discussed as an excellent example of a transmedia narrative which deploys a “viral marketing as a form of extended storytelling” (Ndalianis 12). The TV series is based on Charlaine Harris’ *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* novel series, but it is more than that: The *True Blood* universe extends across novellas, short stories, companion world guides, a graphic novel prequel as well as tie-in graphic novels presenting spin-off narratives of specific characters, bonus scene material released online and on DVD, and character webisodes (McLennon par. 47). The series was also publicized through a transmedia marketing campaign which expanded “beyond the boundaries of traditional narrative media” (McLennon par. 47). In the run-up to the airing of the first episode on September 7, 2008, *HBO* attempted to draw in potential audiences through a number of marketing measures, all the while skilfully blurring the boundary between reality and fiction. Before the series was officially announced, a select number of American horror bloggers were sent vials containing an unidentified red liquid. In May 2008, bloggers also received cards with a message written in an unknown language, which was soon also printed in various newspapers (Utsch). Furthermore, in various countries all over the world, billboards advertising a new synthetic blood drink called ‘Tru Blood’ were put up (Anyiwo 163). As none of these campaigns provided any context, they spurred the curiosity and ambition of horror fans and bloggers to find out what was behind the mysterious operation. Thus, “the marketing campaign followed the typical pattern for an alternate reality game (ARG), where players have to find and follow clues” (Anyiwo 163). With the help of the internet, the message in the unfamiliar language was shared between users all over the globe and went viral (Utsch). The language was quickly identified as Ugaritic, which belongs to the Afro-Asiatic language family, and the message translated as: “Thank you for answering the call and joining us. But what it means to us is almost beyond words. Tru Blood can sustain us. The bonds of blood will no longer hold us hostage” (Anyiwo 164). There was still no reference to the fact that this

campaign was advertising an upcoming television series, so participants of the ARG continued to develop theories as to the meaning of the message (Utsch).

Horror fans were given new food for thought when a number of viral videos were posted online in June 2008, for instance on YouTube: One seemingly showed a local newscast in Baltimore, with a vampiric-looking woman reading out a statement proclaiming that “we now come out into the open with the hope to finally become part of society fully” (Anyiwo 165). Besides, more and more videos sprang up which appeared to show footage of vampires revealing their existence to the public. The fact that these viral videos were released all over the world, “[m]irroring the way in which anyone with access to the right technology can make videos and upload them to YouTube and other similar sites” (Anyiwo 166), added to the verisimilitude of the marketing campaign (Anyiwo 166). In this way, *HBO* was able to “capitalize on new media and the evolving technologies of the Internet” (Anyiwo 165) in a clever manner.

Since the vampire community’s ‘coming out of the coffin’ is also a central event in the first season of the series, the viral marketing campaign can be seen as the starting point of *True Blood*’s transmedia narrative (Anyiwo 167). The boundary between reality and narrative continued to be blurred during the broadcast of the series. For instance, the narrative explored the existence of a number of religious communities and hate groups targeting vampires, such as the Fellowship of the Sun, a church devoted to the extinction of all ‘creatures of the night.’ During the series broadcast, viewers could access the Fellowship’s website online; in a similar manner, other websites based on anti-vampire groups existing within the *True Blood* narrative were created.<sup>72</sup> In turn, these websites were modelled after real hate groups’ online presences (Utsch), mirroring their hate speech.<sup>73</sup> Other companion websites created by *HBO* were LoveBitten.net, a human/vampire online dating site, TrueBloodJobs.com, an employment website seeking to help motivated mainstreaming vampires enter the workforce, several product websites aiming their advertising specifically at vampires, such as TrueBloodShave.com,<sup>74</sup> and

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<sup>72</sup> See [www.fellowshipofthesun.org/](http://www.fellowshipofthesun.org/), [www.keepamericahuman.com/](http://www.keepamericahuman.com/) and [www.vamps-kill.com/](http://www.vamps-kill.com/) (the websites no longer exist at the time of writing).

<sup>73</sup> For example, the manifesto of [keepamericahuman.com](http://keepamericahuman.com) (which was invented by *HBO*) reads “Vampires and other covert mutants are stealing our jobs, buying our politicians, controlling the media, and seducing our children. If we have any chance of keeping America human, brave citizens like us have got to stand up and fight back” (Home Box Office).

<sup>74</sup> In the creation of these websites, *HBO* partnered with real-life companies like Monster.com and Gillette (True Blood Wiki, “TrueBloodJobs.com”). The online *True Blood* Wiki states that these websites “acted only as redirects leading the viewer to the *True Blood* page on the HBO website, HBO.com . . . costs to produce real-life banners and real-life fliers were paid for exclusively by HBO . . . The purpose of this

BabyVamp-Jessica.com, a recurring video blog and online journal created for one of the show's central characters, teenage vampire Jessica Hamby.

The blog was updated after each episode and provided viewers with additional insight into Jessica's interior life as well as the opportunity to comment on Jessica's blog entries and thereby to personally interact with the *True Blood* narrative (Anyiwo 168). The site's sense of authenticity was strengthened for instance by the fact that over the course of the seasons, the layout was changed from a playful, girly version to a more adult, modernized one, which mirrored Jessica's continuing growth as a character. The blog also featured links to Jessica's favorite websites, like Seventeen Magazine, and her current taste in music and film, like Taylor Swift and *The Hunger Games* (True Blood Wiki, "BabyVamp-Jessica.com"). Not least, Jessica's blog was also "a great marketing tool allowing fans to click on the sidebar links to Jessica's favourite stores which just happen[ed] to sell HBO-themed products" (Anyiwo 168). Besides traditional merchandise like t-shirts, books and posters, consumers were able to buy items that also existed in the series, such as a Merlotte's waitress uniform and specific characters' jewellery.<sup>75</sup> Anyiwo, drawing on Matt Hills' concept of performative consumption, argues that these products could be "used to replicate a *True Blood* experience or role play" (167). Once more, it becomes apparent that the marketing concept of the series facilitated a more immersive experience for viewers and complicated the boundaries between narrative and reality.

Another interesting, yet different example of transmedia storytelling is *The Vampire Diaries*. Like *True Blood* and the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* is based on a series of four novels by L.J. Smith, which was published in 1991/92. Following the extraordinary success of the *Twilight* series, Smith returned to her series and wrote three additional novels; in 2009, *The CW* decided to order *The Vampire Diaries* for the upcoming season. After the termination of Smith's employment at Alloy Entertainment, the company which owns the copyright to the series, an additional set of six novels was written by ghostwriters. Paradoxically, Smith, the original author, continues to publish her own *The Vampire Diaries* novels as 'fan fiction' for Amazon Kindle; these novels are not part of the official Alloy series and offer alternative plots to the TV series. But it is not only Smith's unofficial novels that break with the narratives' sense of unity: In fact,

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wasn't to necessarily promote the product . . . , it was more to introduce viewers to the concept of vampires living in mainstream society . . . Real-life products possessing the vampire likeness made their existence more realistic" (True Blood Wiki, "TrueBloodJobs.com").

<sup>75</sup> Similarly, a central merchandise product for *Twilight* fans was Bella's engagement ring, replicas of which could be purchased after Edward gave the ring to Bella in the *Eclipse* movie adaptation.

there is a great number of differences between the original novels and the television series, most obviously differences in plot structure, characters' names, their characteristic features and their overall function within the narrative (Lindgren Leavenworth, "Transmedial Narration" 317). Maria Lindgren Leavenworth argues that these differences are "likely the result of a conscious transmedial strategy to present a story evolving in different directions rather than merely offering the TV series as an adaptation" ("Transmedial Narration" 317). Thus, writers Kevin Williamson and Julie Plec draw on general elements of the story world as well as central themes, such as the feud between the Salvatore brothers and the question of what constitutes a good or evil vampire (Lindgren Leavenworth, "Transmedial Narration" 319), to narrate their own stories in the TV series: "Focusing on the 'story world' rather than the 'story as narrative' allows the various Alloy owned *Vampire Diaries* stories to coexist" (Bridgeman 6).

At the same time, there are also a number of transmedia narratives that flesh out certain aspects of the *Vampire Diaries* TV series and thereby contribute "pieces to the overall puzzle" (Lindgren Leavenworth, "Transmedial Narration" 316): A series of novels called *Stefan's Diaries*, attributed to L.J. Smith but actually ghostwritten, functions as an extension of the TV series that "recount[s] Stefan's back-story in detail which is only relayed in brief flashbacks on screen" (Bridgeman 4). A number of short stories published on Smith's official website are also tied in with the television narrative. Moreover, the spin-off TV series *The Originals* (*The CW*, 2013-2018) not only expands the *The Vampire Diaries* universe but also contains crossover episodes where characters from one show make cameos in the other and vice versa. Viewers of one show lose nothing if they do not watch the respective episodes of the other series; rather, these crossover instances allow "consumers to engage at whatever level they cho[o]se" (Anyiwo 166).

Active engagement with the narrative is spurred and fan investment invited by the creators of the series in a number of further ways. For instance, *The Vampire Diaries* carefully cultivates a certain ambivalence towards Elena's relationship with the Salvatore brothers, which is presented as a perpetual love triangle. While the relationship between Stefan and Elena is initially foregrounded within the narrative, a reading that privileges the Damon-Elena pairing is also possible. Through this openness to alternative readings, viewers are encouraged to choose which of the romances they want to support; in this way, audiences are prompted to actively engage with the text and discuss their position with other fans (R. Williams 93). Furthermore, viewers might process their alternative

readings in fan fiction. Lindgren Leavenworth argues that fan-produced, unsanctioned works should be perceived as on a par with the original text because “they contribute new associations and interpretations to the extended storyworld” (“Transmedial Narration” 315). As fan fiction narratives draw on elements of the same story world as the official text and “hold the possibility of influencing each reader’s and viewer’s reading of the canon material” (Lindgren Leavenworth, “Transmedial Narration” 328), they can be seen as additions to the transmedia project *The Vampire Diaries*.

These arguments apply to the *Twilight* Saga as well. Needless to say, the latter is well-known for its encouragement of ‘Team Edward’/‘Team Jacob’ fan discussions, i.e. viewers’ active involvement with the text. The Saga has also spawned an unusually large number of fan fictions offering alternative constructions and subversions of elements of the original text (Lindgren Leavenworth, “Variations” 69).<sup>76</sup> In this way, besides transgressing boundaries of genre and media, paranormal romance also complicates mutually exclusive definitions of producers and consumers. Strikingly, “[t]he varied fan-created products (fan fiction, fan films, and fan art) and the different approaches to the canon suggest that readers are both active and critical” (Lindgren Leavenworth, “Variations” 69), which disproves popular views on paranormal romance consumers that are explored in the following subchapter.

### **3.5. The Gendered Dismissal of (Teen) Paranormal Romance and Its Consumers**

The visceral public reaction to teen paranormal romance can hardly be overlooked in a discussion of the genre. Teenage fiction, as Waller writes, is generally not deemed part of ‘high culture’; instead, the teenager is rather located in the sphere of popular culture and subculture (10). Teen paranormal romance, it seems, is additionally bound to the realm of ‘low culture’ in the opinion of a majority of critics due to both its paranormal and romance features. The public reaction to the genre as well as its fans can be illustrated very well through the example of the *Twilight* series. Particularly the novels but also the film versions of the series have been received with a tremendous amount of hostility, scorn and mockery. As several academics have noted, the dismissal of the *Twilight* franchise has been distinctly gendered (Click et al. 5). For instance, Anne Morey argues

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<sup>76</sup> E. L. James’ *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy (published in novel form between 2011 and 2012) originated as *Twilight* fan fiction and has by now become a phenomenon of its own.



that “[b]ecause Meyer is working with a combination of low-status genres – the vampire tale, the romance, the female coming-of-age story – the political aspects of the Saga’s genre are both prominent and inextricable from gender” (2). The public discourse, which ridicules the novels and films, fails to take the *Twilight* narratives seriously and follows “a familiar pattern of degrading media that girls and women find appealing” (Click et al. 5). Thus, the novels are typically judged for Stephenie Meyer’s poor style of writing, their formulaic structure and their focus on melodrama and interpersonal conflict. The series is also often considered to be teaching “dangerous life lessons and unhealthy sexual attitudes” (Crawford 183) to young girls, which Mark Jancovich aptly describes as “a situation in which predominantly (although not exclusively) male critics adopt the mantle of feminism to condemn women” (27) and their chosen media products.

In addition, the public discourse surrounding the *Twilight* franchise frames female audiences as impressionable and “somehow mentally inferior, if not crazy” (Siebert 220). The vocabulary that is used to refer to ‘Twi-Hards’ (i.e. passionate *Twilight* fans) is telling. Thus, “the mainstream has belittled the reactions of girls and women to the *Twilight* series . . . , frequently using Victorian era gendered words like ‘fever,’ ‘madness,’ ‘hysteria,’ and ‘obsession’ to describe Twilighers” (Click et al. 6). Here the audience of girls and women, which is thought of as a homogeneous group,<sup>77</sup> is perceived as irrational and out of control, expressing pleasure by screaming wildly, giggling and sighing. As Jancovich puts it, instead of “engaging in cerebral forms of aesthetic appreciation” (27), which would presumably be a way of consuming cultural products associated with rationality/‘masculinity,’ fangirls are “depicted as consuming wantonly” (27). Strikingly enough, the physical enjoyment and sexual desire that is rather openly displayed by female *Twilight* lovers is met with incomprehension and even disgust (Jancovich 28). Maria Verena Siebert points out that the aim of these kinds of critiques of Twi-Hards’

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<sup>77</sup> In contrast, distinctions within *Twilight* audiences have been drawn and discussed by a variety of authors in an academic context. For analyses of the paradoxical *Twilight* anti-fandom, ‘Lolfans,’ ‘Twi-Hards,’ ‘Twi-Haters,’ and relationships between different audience groups who define themselves against each other (inter-fandom), see: Gilbert, Anne. “Between Twi-Hards and Twi-Haters: The Complicated Terrain of Online ‘Twilight’ Audience Communities.” *Genre, Reception, and Adaptation in the “Twilight” Series*, edited by Anne Morey, Ashgate, 2012, pp. 163-179; Godwin, Victoria. “*Twilight* Anti-Fans: ‘Real’ Fans and ‘Real’ Vampires.” *The Twilight Saga. Exploring the Global Phenomenon*, edited by Claudia Bucciferro, The Scarecrow Press, 2014, pp. 93-106; Hills, Matt. “‘Twilight’ Fans Represented in Commercial Paratexts and Inter-Fandoms: Resisting and Repurposing Negative Fan Stereotypes.” *Genre, Reception, and Adaptation in the “Twilight” Series*, edited by Anne Morey, Ashgate, 2012, pp. 113-129; Sheffield, Jessica, and Elyse Merlo. “Biting Back: *Twilight* Anti-Fandom and the Rhetoric of Superiority.” *Bitten by Twilight. Youth Culture, Media, & the Vampire Franchise*, edited by Melissa A. Click, Jennifer Stevens Aubrey, and Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz, Peter Lang, 2010, pp. 207-222.

passionate reactions is to inspire shame and to prompt fans to hide or give up their consumption of the *Twilight* narratives altogether (222).

Furthermore, these female readers and viewers are commonly considered passive, mindless consumers (Click et al. 8) so ‘entranced’ by their favorite media franchise that they cannot differentiate between reality and fiction (Jancovich 27). McRobbie has shed light on these assumptions about female fans in her influential work *Feminism and Youth Culture* (1991). In her book, she examines how girls have been neglected in academic research on subcultures, and have either been completely ignored or treated with contempt because they are seen as non-rebellious and conformist cultural consumers (*Feminism and Youth Culture* 1, 12). Objecting to the assumption that female consumers are uncritical, McRobbie argues that “[g]irls negotiate a different leisure space and different personal spaces from those inhabited by boys. These in turn offer them different possibilities for ‘resistance’” (*Feminism and Youth Culture* 14). Nevertheless, it seems that the public commentary still frequently “positions girls and women as unexpected and unwelcome media fans” (Click et al. 6). This became clear for example when various groups of people protested the attendance of *Twilight* fans at a large fan convention in San Diego in 2009. The protesters held up signs saying “Twilight ruined Comic-Con” (Ohanesian), a gesture by which they claimed a male-dominated space for only themselves and insisted that fan activities should be exclusively reserved for fanboys.

Not only is the *Twilight* franchise scorned for supposedly limiting male consumers’ exclusive access to fan culture, but it is also accused of having “‘ruined’ vampires and/or vampire fiction” (Crawford 223) in general. Thus, Stephenie Meyer is frequently derided by her critics for departing from established vampire lore (Crawford 179): Vampires in the *Twilight* series are, quite literally, ‘de-fanged’ (they do not possess fangs but have unbreakable teeth with razor-sharp edges), and instead of burning in the sun, their skin scintillates in it.<sup>78</sup> A web campaign launched in 2010 called ‘Real Vampires Don’t Sparkle’ is illustrative of the often ostentatious opposition against Meyer’s vampire mythology (Spooner, “*Gothic Charm School*” 146). As Spooner points out, “[s]parkly

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<sup>78</sup> Meyer has publicly stated that she had little knowledge about or interest in vampire narratives when she wrote *Twilight* (Crawford 178). In an interview she did for the *School Library Journal* in 2005, she said: “I do like to say it’s a vampire book for people who don’t like vampire books” (Margolis). Crawford interprets this as a crucial factor for the success of the novels: “By divorcing the vampire romance from most of the traditional trappings of vampire fiction, Meyer was able to tap into an enormous audience of readers” (180).

vampires are divisive: they incite adoration from fans and loathing from their detractors” (*“Gothic Charm School”* 147).<sup>79</sup>

The strong resistance to the *Twilight* narratives can be interpreted within the frame of generic expectation. Thus, Nia Edwards-Behi traces the widespread critical attacks back to the Saga’s hybrid generic categorization, which raises certain expectations that may then not be met, consequently disappointing readers/viewers (42). Critical commentaries which consider the books and films of the franchise to be “failed horror products” (Edwards-Behi 42) imply that consumers categorize *Twilight* as a ‘pure’ horror narrative and then judge the series solely according to the standards of this genre.<sup>80</sup> Crawford also argues that “the *Twilight* debate was, at base, primarily a debate over the legitimacy of different reading strategies. *Twilight*’s fans . . . interpreted and evaluated [the novels] in terms of the conventions of romance fiction” (221), while others were referring to the rules of horror. This clearly echoes debates that took place around *Dark Shadows*’ Barnabas Collins and *Buffy*’s Spike. Thus, the *Twilight* Saga’s generic hybridity appears to be both a blessing and a curse at the same time, since each of the movie adaptations “can appeal individually to different segments of its audience, and simultaneously frustrate spectators by undermining what they anticipate in a viewing experience” (Clayton and Harman 4).

However, once again, gender plays into the understanding of these different genres: Horror is still seen as a ‘masculine’ genre (Edwards-Behi 44), while the *Twilight* Saga is consistently gendered feminine, which “can of course be attributed to the high visibility of its female fans” (Harman 51) as well as its use of romance conventions. As a feminine-gendered text employing elements from ‘masculine’ genres like horror and action, the *Twilight* series oversteps gender-based boundaries. Viewed in this light, the harsh

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<sup>79</sup> Interestingly, an explicit distancing from *Twilight* and its sparkly vampires occurs within *The Vampire Diaries* as well. In the episode “Family Ties,” Damon flicks through the first *Twilight* novel (as is implied) and has a short conversation with Caroline about it. Through this scene, *The Vampire Diaries* positions itself in a presumed cultural hierarchy of vampire narratives above *Twilight* and alongside Anne Rice’ *Vampire Chronicles*. Damon: “What’s so special about this Bella girl? Edward’s so whipped.” Caroline: “You’ve got to read the first book first, it won’t make sense if you don’t.” Damon: “Uh, I miss Anne Rice, she was so on it.” Caroline: “Hey, how come you don’t sparkle?” Damon: “Because I live in the real world where vampires burn in the sun . . . This book . . . has it all wrong” (“Family Ties”).

<sup>80</sup> Needless to say, this conception of horror ignores the fact that genre formation is an ongoing process and that horror, like any other genre, continually changes (Altman 70). For a detailed list of changes in vampire lore over time, see e.g.: Auerbach, Nina. *Our Vampires, Ourselves*. University of Chicago Press, 1995; Kane, Tim. *The Changing Vampire of Film and Television. A Critical Study of the Growth of a Genre*. McFarland, 2006, particularly pp. 192-218; and: Zanger, Jules. “Metaphor into Metonymy: The Vampire Next Door.” *Blood Read. The Vampire as Metaphor in Contemporary Culture*, edited by Joan Gordon, and Veronica Hollinger, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997, pp. 17-26.

rejection of *Twilight* can be considered “an attempt to restore order to gender and genre hierarchies” (Larsson and Steiner 16), in the sense that boundaries are re-emphasized and *Twilight* is intentionally pushed out of the realm of ‘real’ horror. Furthermore, the dismissal of the “glittering” (S. Meyer, *Twilight* 228) vampire is also gendered: Hannah Priest suggests that “‘glitter’ is highly symbolic of teen female sexuality . . . Glitter is, in the twenty-first century, hyperfeminine . . . At once childlike and adult, innocent and sexualized, glitter has become part of the uniform of teen sexuality” (Priest). In this sense, the mocking of sparkly vampires is also an indirect devalorization of ‘femininity’ and young adult women’s sexuality. It is these dynamics which reveal that the *Twilight* Saga and, by extension, paranormal romance, is deeply involved in contemporary politics of gender.

*The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* are equally subject to the culturally constructed gender and genre order: “each text is positioned within a cultural hierarchy predicated on subject matter and imagined audience” (R. Williams 89). Commonly, *The Vampire Diaries* is located in between the *Twilight* Saga and *True Blood* in reviews and online commentaries. Since it addresses a more mature audience than the former but a younger one than the latter, *The Vampire Diaries* is described as the “perfect middle ground” (Hughes) between them. As Rebecca Williams argues, “*Diaries*’ less graphic depictions of sexuality and violence, coupled with its status as a teen drama, make it less likely to appeal to male audiences and, relatedly, less likely [to] be constructed and viewed as quality television” (90). In contrast, *True Blood* enjoys a higher cultural status because of its position at the pay TV channel *HBO*, which is “regarded as the premier site for what has come to be called ‘quality television,’ and hailed critically as well as by audiences” (Leverette et al. 1). Shows that are broadcast on *HBO* are often associated with positive features such as aesthetics, narrative ambiguity, a pushing of boundaries, and depth (Jowett and Abbott 11) – this is also the case for *True Blood*.

The gendered dismissal of teen paranormal romance like the *Twilight* Saga and (partly) *The Vampire Diaries* mirrors reactions to its forerunner genres, Gothic romance and 20<sup>th</sup> century popular romance. Both have been associated with predominantly female readers and writers, and commented upon in nearly the same way as, for instance, *Twilight*. As is well documented, at the time of its creation and throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Gothic romance was viewed as entertainment for (mostly white) middle-class female readers (Vargo 233). The genre was formed at the same time as the literate population was expanding considerably (M. Williamson, “Let Them All in” 80).

According to Kate Ferguson Ellis, “the female reading public was made possible by the separation of spheres that released women, at least ideally, from physical work” (x). Due to the separation of spheres, middle-class women had the time to indulge in leisure activities, and thanks to the education they obtained, they were able to find pleasure in reading (Ferguson Ellis xi).<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, texts belonging to the genre were often female-authored, a fact that led Ellen Moers to refer to the genre as “Female Gothic”<sup>82</sup> (90).

As a literary genre, Gothic romance was “downgraded in the cultural hierarchy of the day because of the association with femininity, the irrational and the supernatural” (M. Williamson, “Let Them All in” 79). In the context of the French Revolution, Gothic romance became “something of a lightning rod for fears concerning social order, feminine propriety and the borders of literary taste and moral decency” (Chaplin 200). Lacking literary credibility, the novels were often subject to ridicule but also caused serious concern among contemporary thinkers as to their supposedly morally corrupting effect on the minds of readers, especially young female ones. For instance, Samuel Johnson took a critical stance towards the consumption of Gothic romance, wishing for an “antidote to these women’s Poison!” (qtd. in Chaplin 199). The notion prevailed that “romance could so distort a reader’s perception of reality as to constitute a kind of ‘insanity’” (Chaplin 200). A doctor wrote in the *Monthly Review* in 1773: “a young girl, instead of running about and playing, *reads*, perpetually reads, and at twenty becomes full of vapours, instead of becoming qualified for the duties of a good wife, or nurse”<sup>83</sup> (qtd. in Ferguson Ellis 15). Here it becomes clear that the call for the performance of proper female duties played a significant role in the denigration of Gothic romance as a genre. Unlikely as it may seem, the same accusations are levelled at adult female fans of the *Twilight* franchise over two centuries later: Thus, an entry in the online urban dictionary describes ‘*Twilight* moms’ as a “group of 40 something pre-menopausal women who have been neglecting their children, spouses, jobs since 2008 to post their ramblings about a dazzling 107 year old vampire” (qtd. in Siebert 222).

When it comes to romance, similar criticisms have been the norm. Considering the widespread popularity of romance fiction across decades of the twentieth and twenty-first

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<sup>81</sup> Their leisure time was also made possible through the employment of servants; Ellis describes the “enlargement of the servant class as one index of increasing middle-class wealth” (*The Contested Castle* 10).

<sup>82</sup> Moers defined ‘Female Gothic’ as “the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic” (90).

<sup>83</sup> Emphasis in the original.

centuries, it is perhaps surprising how little acceptance and respect it is awarded in the larger culture (Regis xi). Joanne Hollows summarizes the most frequent points that make up the romance genre's reputation: "It has become part of contemporary 'common sense' that romantic fiction is a 'formulaic' 'trivial' and 'escapist' form read by 'addicted' women" (70). Many of these derogatory views can be traced back to mass culture criticism which emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In mass culture criticism, popular culture is considered to be standardized and formulaic, therefore easily consumed by passive audiences who cannot tell the difference between reality and the fantasies they consume. It is exactly these assumptions that are commonly made about romance audiences as well as women in general (Hollows 70-71). Thus, as we have seen, women are not taken seriously as cultural consumers (Dines and Humez 162). Hollows comments that "in debates about mass culture, feminine qualities – emotion, sentiment, passivity – are used to signify the worthlessness of mass culture" (71). 'Feminine' qualities are viewed as inferior qualities here, and romance as a genre is completely devalued.

The denigration of the genre was also responsible for the unusually slow maturation of the academic study of popular romance (Selinger and Frantz 2). Research on the subject goes back to the 1960s and early 1970s, when the field was opened. Germaine Greer published one of the first feminist analyses of romance, entitled *The Female Eunuch*, in 1971 (Selinger and Frantz 2). Hers and other second wave feminist works dealing with romance were notable for their comprehensive condemnation of the genre. For these feminists, "romantic fiction was politically dangerous, a mechanism through which patriarchal culture was reproduced" (Hollows 68). Greer described romance novels as the "escapist literature of love and marriage voraciously consumed by housewives" (240) – the latter being readers who, according to Greer and other feminist critics of the time, accepted the fantasies they consumed all too naively. Thus, Greer referred to romance as "dope for dupes" (qtd. in Weisser 4), implying that female readers were victims of a false consciousness, while in reality romantic love was an ideology that kept women oppressed and dependent on men. In this way, she saw women as complicit in their subordination to men because they let themselves be lured into a fantasy that to her was obviously an exploitative trap: "This is the hero that women have chosen for themselves. The traits invented for him have been invented by women cherishing the chains of their bondage" (202). As Hollows points out, this strong rejection of romance must be understood in the context of a wider critique of romantic love within second wave feminism: "Romance was not only seen as a mechanism to secure women's domestic exploitation in the

patriarchal family, but also legitimated the emotional and sexual exploitation of women” (72).<sup>84</sup>

Hollows draws attention to the fact that these critiques of romance and romantic love were problematic because they treated romance “as a monolithic and unchanging ideology. This ignores the ways in which, despite continuities, there are a range of romantic narratives both within and between historical periods” (Hollows 73). Furthermore, the claim that readers not only unquestioningly accept romance’s supposed ideology but are also unable to distinguish fiction from real life is based on the outdated ‘hypodermic syringe’ model of media effects (Hollows 73). As pointed out already, in this model, female audiences are pictured as particularly vulnerable to the messages and effects of media. In defining fantasy solely as “false ideas about how life ‘really’ is” (Ang, *Living Room Wars* 106), critics “failed to understand the importance and pleasures of romance as fantasy” (Hollows 73) since they did not take into account that desires which are otherwise socially unacceptable can be explored and elaborated in fiction.

As can be concluded, the relatively new genre of (teen) paranormal romance is shaped by its hybrid history and generic forerunners in a striking way. The fact that narratives such as the *Twilight* Saga are so fiercely contested and inspire such heated debates around issues like gender, sexuality, genre and fan culture indicates that there is something larger going on here. After all, the debates described above confirm that (teen) paranormal romance’s cultural politics are worth studying.

### **3.6. (Teen) Paranormal Romance and Postfeminism**

So what are (teen) paranormal romance’s cultural politics, and what is the genre’s link to postfeminism? As became clear throughout the preceding subchapters, paranormal romance is, historically speaking, an inherently hybrid genre concerned with destabilizing boundaries in terms of its thematic deconstruction of binary configurations. Through transmedia storytelling, it also blurs the distinction between reality and fiction by playing with the idea that, like in the fictional text, vampires may be part of the global human community (Ndalianis 181). “[R]eal world events that include the placement of posters and advertisements on billboards, and the pervasive use of the urban landscape as a theatrical space that requires our performance as actors” (Ndalianis 12) play a decisive

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<sup>84</sup> For instance, in one of the key texts of second wave feminism, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970), Shulamith Firestone refers to romanticism as “a cultural tool of male power to keep women from knowing their condition” (147).

role in the dissolution of boundaries between real life and text. By taking paranormal romance's formal and textual defining features into account, "it becomes possible to consider how this genre might register real, contemporary social anxieties about unstable boundaries" (McLennon par. 52). Thus, due to its defining characteristics, paranormal romance is particularly prone to incorporating and negotiating fears around the destabilization of modern binary categories. In this way, it ideally lends itself to carrying postfeminist ideas.

As discussed in chapter 2, it is in a climate of increasingly deconstructed cultural categories that postfeminism has emerged. A category that plays a central role in postfeminist discourses is the one of gender, whose binary configuration is subject to the same destabilization processes as other categories are. Thus, among other factors, postfeminism has developed "because of the influence of postmodern thinking which refuses the 'grand narrative' of gender difference" (Pilcher and Whelehan 106). In the same vein, Negra argues that postfeminist popular culture has arisen as a response "to the destabilization of social, familial, and national identities" (27). For instance, new traditionalist strands of postfeminist discourse can be seen as a reaction to the gains of the second wave feminist movement and an attempt to re-install traditional gender roles in society. As became clear in chapter 2, postfeminism within this dissertation project is understood as a contradictory phenomenon that entails both the risk of neo-conservatism as well as the potential for subversive resignification (Genz and Brabon 8). In its plurality and liminality, postfeminism is a typical 'post-discourse:' 'Post-discourses,' developing out of the "deconstruction of current hegemonic systems" (de Toro 16), essentially create "a transitory space, a space other, a third space that is not here/there, but both" (de Toro 20). In this sense, postfeminism is not purely "a new utopia" (Genz and Brabon 8), nor does it consist only in a nostalgic backlash.

Due to their common context, the connection of paranormal romance and postfeminism is not a surprising one. In fact, both Gothic and romance, the generic forerunners of contemporary paranormal romance, can be aligned with postfeminism on the basis of the contradictory, liminal nature which they all share. In 2007, Brabon and Genz coined the new critical category of "postfeminist Gothic" (5). In their collected edition by the same name, they explore the intersection of postfeminism and Gothic in contemporary popular culture (1), Brabon and Genz emphasize conspicuous parallels between the two concepts, namely "the evasiveness and multiplicity of meaning exhibited by both terms" (1); according to Genz, "[p]ostfeminism and Gothic are . . . worthy



companions as they both eschew easy categorization and definition” (70). This ambivalence is at the core of both phenomena, which may explain the current proliferation of postfeminist paranormal narratives. As Carole Veldman-Genz puts it, Gothic as a liminal discourse “provides a particularly fitting backdrop for twenty-first-century feminisms’ muddled politics of contradictions” (“Serial Experiments” 46).

Building on previous scholarship on the links between feminism and Gothic, Brabon and Genz propose the category of postfeminist Gothic with reference to the term Female Gothic: Their book aims to re-assess the relationship between feminism and Gothic against the backdrop of a “new critical space beyond the Female Gothic (and its ghosts of essentialism and universalism)” (7). As briefly mentioned earlier, the notion of Female Gothic was first brought up by Ellen Moers in her influential study *Literary Women* (1976). In works that followed Moers’ feminist analysis of Gothic romance novels, Female Gothic was distinguished from Male Gothic not only in terms of the gender of the respective authors, but also in terms of narrative technique, plot and the predominance of terror vs. horror. Thus, a Female Gothic narrative was stereotypically associated with a “female point of view, happy ending, explained ghosts and an adherence to terror” (Smith and Wallace 2).<sup>85</sup> Following Moers’ lead, feminist readings of Gothic romance novels have elaborated on the genre’s function as an articulation of female experience and oppression in a male-dominated society. In her book, Moers reads the narratives of Female Gothic novels as subversive commentaries on women’s problematic position in patriarchal society, particularly in terms of their confinement to the domestic sphere, and as articulations of anxieties about birth.<sup>86</sup>

*Literary Women* kicked off a wave of similar-minded analyses in literary and Gothic studies, among them *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* by Kate Ferguson Ellis (1989). Like Moers, Ferguson Ellis demonstrates how the typical Gothic setting, the dark and haunted castle, can be seen as a symbolic representation of the actual social spaces that contemporary female readers were confined to.<sup>87</sup> She argues that Gothic romance texts simultaneously constructed and

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<sup>85</sup> Critical debates have focused on the term Female Gothic because of its essentializing nature, and as a result of the consolidation of poststructuralist thinking at universities in the 1990s, the term is now considered obsolete or is at least widely problematized (Smith and Wallace 1). The term will be used in the following in order to summarize Moers’ main arguments.

<sup>86</sup> Moreover, Moers places Gothic novel authors in a genealogy of previously neglected female writers in an attempt to re-write the male-dominated literary canon from a feminist perspective.

<sup>87</sup> With industrialization processes, the growth of city populations and the emergence of the middle-class family from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the home was increasingly conceptualized as a sphere separate from the world of work. The home, idealized as a space of “domestic happiness” (Ferguson

subverted “an ideology that imprisons [female readers] even as it posits a sphere of safety for them” (x). Thus, the “Gothic novel of the eighteenth century foregrounded the home as fortress, while at the same time exposing its contradictions” (Ferguson Ellis xi): The supposedly safe castle, which works as a stand-in for the domestic realm, can easily turn into its opposite, namely into an enclosed space or a prison exposing the Gothic heroine to violence without any opportunity of escape (Ferguson Ellis 45). Ghosts of a concealed past may haunt the place, and in the hands of the villain, “the home becomes not a sanctuary from terror but a source of it” (Ferguson Ellis 46). In this way, Ferguson Ellis concludes that the central issue of Gothic romance novels was “the struggle for control over and within the domestic sphere” (219).

While fears of rape, incest and physical or emotional abuse by overbearing fathers or other family members could not be voiced in the ‘realist’ form of the novel, in Gothic romance, authors found a genre in which they were able to critique on a symbolic level the separation of private and public spheres in contemporary society and the powerlessness of women within that construction (Ferguson Ellis xii). For instance, Gothic villains feature prominently as cruel or indifferent parents in many Gothic romance novels; these villains can be read as critiques of authoritarian fathers and mothers that female readers may have encountered in their own lives (Ferguson Ellis 82). The action is moved to the past and associated with a medieval setting and society, which makes it seem like “a residue from a more primitive, unenlightened era” (Ferguson Ellis 51). At the same time, it is “also sufficiently visible in the present time of its readers to elicit their recognition” (Ferguson Ellis 51). As Ferguson Ellis suggests, the “subversive nature of this Gothic secret may best be understood . . . if we see in it a way of resolving, in fiction, problems and tensions in the world of the reader arising from the polarization of work and home” (51).

These feminist analyses of the ways in which Gothic romance addresses gender inequalities and shifts are still insightful for the examination of paranormal romance today. As Brabon and Genz point out, “gender and the relationships between the two sexes remain important issues that postfeminist Gothic engages with” (8). Rather than

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Ellis ix), became the realm of – and for – privileged women. As anxieties about women’s physical safety, especially within the city space, abounded, the home was viewed as a safe refuge from the dangers and temptations of the surrounding areas (Ferguson Ellis xi). Indeed, the “emergence of a waged labor force, which drew working women increasingly out of the home, made those women particularly vulnerable to assault and rape” (Ferguson Ellis xi). The realm of the domestic was to shelter middle-class women and “keep them ignorant of corruption, immorality, and violence” (Ferguson Ellis 11), which was, among other things, driven by the notion that women were ‘naturally’ less sexual beings than men.

focusing on women's confinement to the domestic sphere assigned to them by patriarchal society, I argue that contemporary paranormal romance gives voice to the contradictory aspects of 'femininity' and 'masculinity' in postfeminist culture. Thus, contemporary gender roles under postfeminism are impacted by feminist ideas of gender equality as well as neo-liberalist ideas of consumer capitalism. Besides, postfeminist "individualism highlights the plurality and contradictions of contemporary female (and male) experience" (Genz and Brabon 39). How exactly these ambivalent postfeminist gender configurations are mirrored in and circulated by prominent paranormal romance texts is the subject of this dissertation.

The antithetical nature inherent in postfeminist culture and politics also finds its equivalent in contemporary romance narratives. Thus, the postfeminist move "from the exclusionary logic of either/or to the inclusionary logic of both/and" (Rutland 74) is paralleled in the conflicting messages about gender and sexuality that are usually ascribed to the genre by romance scholars. Thus, Kathleen Therrien argues that

[t]he heterosexual romance narrative is . . . frequently a site where competing ideologies . . . are brought into conflict. But it is also a place where these conflicts may be ultimately, if only imaginatively, negotiated out 'safely.' That is, some culturally resistant ideas – such as greater agency and/or sexual freedom for women – may be voiced and validated within the world of the text, but some dominant and apparently contradictory ideas, such as the absolute centrality of marriage for all women and the rightness of at least some basic class and gender privileges, may also be validated . . . Romances are therefore ultimately 'both/and' texts" (165)

Setting a precedent for this interpretation of romance as a deeply contradictory genre was the work of Tania Modleski and Janice A. Radway, which will be surveyed on the following pages. The survey of Modleski's and Radway's landmark publications will elucidate how this dissertation both takes its cue from these influential romance studies and sets itself apart from them, finding its own approach to analyzing the *Twilight Saga*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*. Furthermore, the summary will demonstrate the ways in which romance, like the Gothic, mirrors and presents positive images of (female) audiences' experiences of/in the culture. Modleski's *Loving with a Vengeance* (1982) and Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984) interrupted the previous second wave feminist rejection of romance that was briefly mentioned in the previous subchapter. Both works explicitly set themselves apart from outright dismissals of 'women's genres' and instead intend to take these genres as well as popular culture in general seriously (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 221). In *Loving with a Vengeance*, Modleski focuses on three different genres primarily targeting female audiences, namely Harlequin romances, Gothic novels and soap operas. Through a textual analysis of exemplary texts of the respective genres

and the application of psychological and psychoanalytical theories, she tries to determine what kinds of pleasures these texts offer to women. She suggests that the genres “speak to very real problems and tensions in women’s lives” (*Loving with a Vengeance* 14) and sets out to “look at the varied and complex strategies women use to adapt to circumscribed lives” (*Loving with a Vengeance* 38). In this way, Modleski clearly conceives of romance readers as active consumers who draw pleasure from the “temporary, magical, fantasy or symbolic solutions” (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 221) which the novels offer.

For instance, according to Modleski, one ‘real problem’ of women that romances deal with is men’s aggression and condescension. Romance narratives typically dramatize situations where male characters assert their superiority; usually, the hero is initially presented as mocking or angry, and the heroine is hurt by the way he treats her. This is where the readers’ knowledge of the romance formula plays a crucial role. Readers may identify with the heroine because of their own similar experiences with male derision, but due to their familiarity with the typical progression of events (pre-eminently the happy ending), they are simultaneously “intellectually *detached* from her and [do] not have to suffer the heroine’s confusion”<sup>88</sup> (Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance* 41). Instead of suffering alongside the heroine, audiences can derive pleasure from outwitting her by guessing the hero’s true motif – which is that he already loves the heroine, he is just not able to admit it to himself yet. As Modleski argues, “the reader, acquainted with the formula . . . , is always able to interpret the hero’s actions as the result of his increasingly intense love for the heroine” (*Loving with a Vengeance* 40). In other words, the reader can make sense of the hero’s repelling behavior “as resulting from his resistance to the increasing power of her charms” (Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance* 42).

This is where a second opportunity to derive pleasure comes in. One of Modleski’s main conclusions is that romance provides pleasure for audiences by narratively enacting a sort of symbolic revenge. She emphasizes the great deal of anger that characterizes the heroines of the romance novels she analyzes (*Loving with a Vengeance* 44). In this way, she breaks with the common assumption that romance heroines are passive; instead, she understands them as active protagonists who “rebel against the male authority figure” (*Loving with a Vengeance* 44) and maintains that “the smallest liberty . . . taken by the heroine is described as a real act of resistance” (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 222) in the texts. Heroines may be affected by the hero’s dismissive attitude towards her, but the hero equally suffers considerably when he realizes he has fallen in love with the heroine.

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<sup>88</sup> Emphasis in the original.

Readers enjoy the way in which the heroine assumes power over her love interest by gradually becoming the centre of the man's world. As Modleski writes, a "great deal of our satisfaction in reading these novels comes . . . from the elements of a revenge fantasy, from our conviction that the woman is bringing the man to his knees" (*Loving with a Vengeance* 45). In the end, the heroine finds herself in the position to generously accept the hero's love and forgiveness.

What is interesting is that, according to Modleski, these female revenge fantasies "depend upon the man's retaining all his potency while loving and suffering desperately. He must need her in spite of all his strength, rather than because of his weakness" (Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance* 46). In this way, the hero, despite his loss of power to the heroine, can retain his 'masculinity.' This reassurance of the hero's 'masculine' traits is also important considering a third pleasure that female readers can draw from their romance novels: the opportunity to feel like they are nurtured and taken care of. Modleski, employing the work of the feminist psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow, suggests that women are commonly expected to give men the kind of nurturing love and attention they received from their own mothers as children. Since men are not expected to do the same thing for them, women lack this type of care in their adult lives (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 223). Although romance heroes, as already discussed, certainly retain their 'masculinity,' they assume a 'feminine' caretaking role for the heroine: "In romances, this inequality of emotional care is resolved in fantasy through the figure of the nurturing male lover who can meet her needs and satisfy them" (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 223). Once again, 'real problems' in women's lives are acknowledged and resolved in the romance narrative.

While Modleski takes seriously the reasons why female readers would seek out fantasy solutions in the form of romance narratives, she is also critical of the ways the genre eases women into accepting patriarchy. For example, she problematizes the fact that readers' privileged knowledge as experts of the genre can make even clearly precarious aspects acceptable to them: As they are "prepared to understand the hero's behavior in terms of the novel's ending" (Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance* 41), they may be ready to approve of male sexual violence because they read the hero's aggression as an actual signal of his love. Modleski warns that some novels "perpetuate ideological confusion about male sexuality and male violence . . . The rapist mentality – the intention to dominate . . ., which . . . is often disguised as sexual desire – is turned into its opposite – sexual desire disguised as the intention to dominate and hurt" (*Loving with a Vengeance*

42-43). In this sense, the narrative strategy in question condones and furthers rape-cultural myths about men's impulsive sexuality and sexual assaults as 'crimes of passion.'

Modleski further criticizes that although heroines are presented as rebellious and active, their anger is eventually neutralized within the narrative: They are often belittled by the hero for their expression of resentment, so that their frustration is "constantly turned into a way of pleasing men, of keeping them . . . 'entertained'" (*Loving with a Vengeance* 47). The readers' desire for a happy ending then puts them into a tricky dilemma – on the one hand, they empathize with the heroine's anger, on the other hand, "a part of us wants the man to see the heroine as a pert, adorable creature rather than as a true rebel" (Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance* 47). Modleski underlines the "double-edged nature of women's revenge fantasies" (*Loving with a Vengeance* 47). As long as female protest against male authority remains set in a world in which heterosexual relations are still granted a centrality, romances "can hardly be said to perform a liberating function" (Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance* 47). At the same time, she points out that "the very fact that the novels must go to such extremes to neutralize women's anger and to make masculine hostility bearable testifies to the depths of women's discontent" (*Loving with a Vengeance* 58).

Thus, when it comes to her evaluation of romance, Modleski draws contradictory conclusions. On the one hand, she takes seriously the complexity of the genre and its female readers, thereby disrupting previous feminist dismissals of romance texts. What she clearly acknowledges is the novels' way of exposing "some of the contradictions of women's oppression and . . . signalling forms of female discontent" (Hollows 77), which she sees in a positive light. On the other hand, she finds that the energy romance readers summon up for the "intensely active psychological process" (*Loving with a Vengeance* 58) of eventually defeating themselves would be better invested in "efforts to grow and to explore ways of affirming and asserting the self" (*Loving with a Vengeance* 58). Thus, Modleski ultimately considers the fantasy solutions that romance offers to women's 'real problems' inadequate. In her opinion, female readers are deceived by "convinc[ing] themselves that limitations are really opportunities" (*Loving with a Vengeance* 38) and would be better advised to turn to feminist 'real life' action.

Although Radway's method differs from Modleski's, her assessment of romance turns out to be similar. Her ground-breaking analysis of the genre, *Reading the Romance*, primarily relies on reader-response criticism and looks at the complex relations between publishing industries, romance texts and romance readers. After interviewing romance

readers about their favorite texts and undertaking her own textual analyses, Radway draws conclusions about the “characteristics that are the essence of the romance’s power and attraction for these readers” (119). Her ethnographic study centers on a group of readers whom she refers to as the ‘Smithton women.’<sup>89</sup> In taking seriously the female readers she questions, Radway distances herself from superficial rejections of romance and its fans, and places emphasis on romance reading as an important cultural practice. What is crucial in her eyes is the escape provided by the act of romance reading itself: “the practice of reading is a form of *resistance* to [the readers’] social and material situation in patriarchy”<sup>90</sup> (Hollows 81). As wives and mothers, Radway’s interviewees are urged to take care of domestic and familial tasks around the clock, so that romance reading becomes a way of withdrawing from these kinds of pressures and attending to their own needs and interests. As Radway writes, reading permits her interviewees “to focus on themselves and to carve out a solitary space within an arena where their self-interest is usually identified with the interests of others and where they are defined as a public resource to be mined at will by the family” (211). In this sense, female readers actively use the genre as a tool which helps them to “cope with the features of the situations that oppress them” (Radway 11).

Like Modleski, Radway also concludes that the typical romance narrative “represents real female needs within the story” (138), which are thereby acknowledged and taken care of. Thus, she claims that romances function as the symbolic demonstration of a process most women go through. It is a woman’s journey to female identity “*as that particular psychic configuration is constructed and realized within patriarchal culture*”<sup>91</sup> (138). To speak with Frye, this would be ‘woman’s vision of her own life as a quest.’ While the female protagonist’s search for identity is the principal concern of the narrative, this story is progressively intertwined with the developing relationship with her love interest. In the end, the heroine successfully establishes her “now-familiar female self, the self-in-relation” (Radway 139); female identity is defined in relation to a male partner. In Kay Mussell’s words, the heroine receives “both love and adult identity in the same package” (138). Here Radway (like Modleski) uses Nancy Chodorow’s theories of female personality development, which define female personality as demanding “the balance and completion provided by other individuals” (137), while they simultaneously attest to men

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<sup>89</sup> What the interviewees have in common is that they all consume romances regularly and enthusiastically, and that they have all used the services of Dot, an employee of their local book store who advised them on which novels to purchase (Hollows 77).

<sup>90</sup> Emphasis in the original.

<sup>91</sup> Emphasis in the original.

an “inability . . . to function as completely adequate relational partners” (138). This supposedly ‘real dilemma’ is addressed and resolved in the romance plot. The fact that the romance heroine’s basic needs are fulfilled within a heterosexual relationship provides reassurance for readers: “satisfaction is possible because men really do know how to attend to a woman’s needs” (Radway 140). The hero turns out to be a man who is reciprocally nurturing and protective of the heroine in an almost maternal way. Through this symbolic recovery of maternal love and total security, the heroine is then finally enabled to embrace her adult womanhood. Radway criticizes that this concept of adult womanhood is based in patriarchy, bolstered for instance in patriarchal parenting agreements (147).

Thus, Radway’s conclusions about romance are comparable to Modleski’s in the sense that they are contradictory.<sup>92</sup> On the one hand, she argues that romance reading can be understood as ‘combative’ because it allows female readers to actively escape from their social lives in which they are expected to negate their own interests for the sake of the patriarchal family. Romances, according to Radway, also provide wish-fulfilment fantasies that address ‘real-life’ needs: In identifying with the heroine, readers can both find acknowledgement of male aggression against women, which they may have experienced in their own lives, and reassurance that some men only appear to be threatening women but are in truth able to provide nurturing and loving care for them (140-41). As Radway notes, romance reading can be conceived of as “an activity of mild protest and longing for reform” (213) – a reform that is necessary since patriarchal institutions fail to satisfy the emotional needs of women. Thus, romance reading functions as “an act of recognition and contestation whereby that failure is first admitted and then partially reversed” (Radway 213).

On the other hand, Radway writes that “it is tempting to suggest that romantic fiction must be an active agent in the maintenance of the ideological status quo because it ultimately reconciles women to patriarchal society and reintegrates them with its institutions” (217) – and she ultimately succumbs to this ‘temptation.’ Radway suggests that the narrative structure of romance does not challenge the hierarchy of control upon which patriarchal society is built (216); on the contrary, it is indicative of its “conservative ideology” (186). Furthermore, she adds that ideal romance novels display the benefits of conforming to the image of femininity prescribed by Western cultures and promote “the

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<sup>92</sup> In her last chapter, Radway notes: “I have deliberately refrained from the formulation of a definitive conclusion” (209).



desirability, [and] naturalness . . . of that role” (208). As they symbolically represent female needs within the story and then show their satisfaction to lie within traditional heterosexual marriage, romances leave unchallenged the status quo and instead confirm “the inevitability and desirability of the entire institutional structure within which those needs are created and addressed” (Radway 138).

Like Modleski, Radway ends up disapproving of romance readers’ strategies because she comes “from the vantage point of a feminism that would like to see the women’s oppositional impulse lead to real social change” (213). Thus, although she seems to wish to avoid it, she frames her interpretations of romance and its readers in the light of her own world-view (Hollows 79). In repeatedly referring to romance readers’ pleasure as ‘vicarious,’ she positions it as ‘only temporary’ and “somehow not really real” (Ang, *Living Room Wars* 104). Radway’s emphasis is on the ‘illusion’ that romances provide to their female readers because while they are reading romances, the problems in their ‘real’ lives, which romances acknowledge and narratively resolve, remain unchanged. In her words, romance reading “supplies vicariously those very needs and requirements that might otherwise be formulated as demands in the real world and lead to the potential restructuring of sexual relations” (213). As Ien Ang puts it, “[r]eal’ social change can only be brought about, Radway seems to believe, if romance readers would stop reading romances and become feminists instead” (*Living Room Wars* 103). Implicit in Radway’s argument is the existence of “two parties with fixed identities: that of a researcher/feminist and that of interviewees/romance fans” (Ang, *Living Room Wars* 101). This oversimplification denies individual and micro-level everyday practices that may open up agency positions for women outside of political arenas, and unquestioningly poses feminism “as the superior solution for all women’s problems, as if feminism automatically possessed the relevant and effective formulas for all women to change their lives and acquire happiness” (Ang, *Living Room Wars* 103). In a similar way, Radway’s (and Modleski’s) reliance on Chodorow’s trajectory of female personality development “annihilates social and cultural differences between women readers” (Hollows 77), which can be seen as one of the major quandaries of white second wave feminism.

This survey of prominent critical romance scholarship has shown that although scholars such as Modleski and Radway were the first to acknowledge the complex and contradictory nature of romance narratives, they also “implicitly framed their work as an updated, feminist version of a very old, patently moralizing question: ‘Are these books good or bad for their readers?’” (Selinger and Frantz 5). In this way, they distanced

themselves from romance readers and effectively patronized them. Glen Thomas points out that this approach is “behaviorist in its orientation” (207). More precisely, it is based on a media effects model which “assumes a direct correlation between consumers and their behavior” (Thomas 206). Thus, Radway wonders “how much of the romance’s conservative ideology about the nature of womanhood is inadvertently ‘learned’ during the reading process” (186). In this model, romance audiences apply strategies used to deal with romance texts to their own lives; they are trapped in a false consciousness that critics see through.<sup>93</sup>

Instead of a behaviorist media effects model, this dissertation follows Thomas, who proposes an approach that devises romance as a creative industry, which “suggests the possibilities of moving beyond the elite/mass, art/entertainment, sponsored/commercial, high/trivial distinctions” (211). Here popular culture is seen as an industry with both a production and consumption component. Consumer demands play a crucial role in determining the supply side of the romance industry, which is visible for example in the existence of a whole range of hybrid or sub-genres (Thomas 212). While the media effects theory proceeds from a top-down model in which marketing experts decide what is in demand and trick consumers into purchasing certain products, the creative industries model “regards the consumer as an actor, a causal factor in creative production” (Thomas 213), adopting a “bottom-up approach where producers deliver to consumers what consumers want” (Thomas 213). In this sense, readers’ desires and choices are not only key factors to be taken into account by producers in order to ensure the success of their product, but are also, for these readers, “one element in constructing and shaping a complex reading position and identity” (Thomas 213). Thus, within the creative industries approach, watching or “reading romance is an act of consumption in which the reader-consumer participates actively and deliberately as an aspect of identity formation”

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<sup>93</sup> Romance texts are further positioned as bad habits or guilty pleasures that women are unable to give up. In this way, readers/viewers are framed as “addicts” (Thomas 207) and “slaves to the genre” (Thomas 207). For example, Modleski claims that Harlequins “inevitably increase the reader’s own psychic conflicts, thus creating an even greater dependency on the literature” (*Loving with a Vengeance* 57). She also likens romance novels to a drug whose dosage must constantly be increased “in order to alleviate problems aggravated by the drug itself” (*Loving with a Vengeance* 57). Other, more celebratory analyses have suggested that romance novels “make women’s lives a lot more interesting” (Thomas 210), for instance by improving their sex lives as they set readers in the right mood (Thomas 210). Whether the genre is criticized or celebrated, all interpretations return to the same themes. As Thomas writes, “[b]oth the critical and the supportive positions . . . predicate their assumptions on a psychological behaviorist model of media effects that assumes a scholarly superiority to the audience” (210). What condemnations and defenses of romance fiction share is the idea that it “holds a singular message which will be carried unproblematically to the audience” (Gauntlett) and that “the mass media will commonly have direct and reasonably predictable effects upon the behaviour of . . . human beings” (Gauntlett).

(Thomas 212). Selecting romances that particularly assist in defining their identity, audiences may appropriate certain elements of texts and distance themselves from others, while also participating in communities of people who are fans of the same popular cultural products. As Thomas points out, “[c]onsuming romance is an aspect of identity formation akin to participating in a political party, joining a church, or volunteering for the Red Cross” (212). Hence, from the perspective of a creative industries approach, consumption is understood as an action, not a behavior.

What further ties in with this idea of active consumption is the notion of competent consumers who are well-versed in genre conventions and activate this knowledge in the reading or viewing process. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, genres rely on audiences to have knowledge about generic classifications at their disposal. In other words, “genre reading is system reading” (Roberts, qtd. in Selinger and Frantz 6), and audiences “take their pleasure in individual texts by reading them at once within and against the traditions and possibilities of that system” (Selinger and Frantz 6). Thus, Thomas J. Roberts argues that experienced consumers deal with the elaborate interplay among various texts and thereby enter into a “dialogue with earlier texts in the genre, with texts in other popular genres, and with canonical literature” (Selinger, “How to Read a Romance Novel” 35). In accordance with current conceptions of genres as containing both repetition and difference, it is interesting that An Goris locates romance’s “success precisely in its ability to integrate familiarity with innovation, thus offering its readers experiences of both comfort and surprise” (76). As she writes, new elements are implemented in romance texts “on the level of the concrete, individual embodiment of the abstract generic conventions” (78). This is particularly striking in consideration of the common image of romance fiction as predictable and bound to the ever-same formula. Thus, it is important to note that alongside repetition, variation is equally crucial to romance and audiences’ enjoyment of the genre.

The ideological textual analyses that will be conducted in the subsequent chapters will shed light on both repetitions and variations in the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*. Thus, particularly chapter 6 will interrogate these popular cultural products in terms of their adherence to generic conventions surrounding the figures of the romance hero and heroine, and will ask where and how the products deviate from these conventions. In this way, this research will highlight the texts’ continuities with conventional gender norms as well as moments of innovation which are included in the examined vampire romances. Here the narratives’ playful approach to genre tropes

will play a decisive role; this is particularly the case for *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*. The contradictory make-up of the analyzed texts will be linked with postfeminist hybridity. Thus, within this dissertation, current paranormal romance will be understood “as a site of struggle over the meanings of feminism and the reconceptualisation of a postfeminist political practice that, unlike second wave feminism, . . . highlights the multiple agency and subject positions of individuals in the new millennium” (Genz and Brabon 25). Ann Rosalind Jones, who has examined the ways in which romance novels of the early 1980s incorporate feminist ideology in her essay “Mills & Boon meets feminism” (1986), finds that different kinds of contradictions on the story level occur as a result of the “conflict between feminism as emergent ideology and romance as residual genre” (204). Although Jones does not use the term ‘postfeminist’ to characterize these newly emerging ambivalent features, her conclusion is similar to Gill’s and Therrien’s:

Compensatory mechanisms are at work in these novels . . . but a new, more liberal conception of feminine potential is none the less at work. It seems, in fact, so difficult to assess any of these novels as regressive or progressive in its totality that I’ve concluded such judgments aren’t the point. Taken as a group, the texts prove that the genre is flexible, but not at every point” (214)

The crucial point is that contemporary (paranormal) romance narratives are characterized by conventional formulas but also by an engagement with feminist ideas (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 5), which is what marks them as distinctively postfeminist. The “entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas” (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 269) in romance echoes postfeminism’s “double movement” (Genz and Brabon 8) between utopia and backlash. According to Genz and Brabon, this double movement is characteristic of postfeminism, as the latter “adopts a politically ‘impure’ stance between complicity and critique” (40).

Due to its ambiguous, liminal nature and its refusal to decide between utopia and backlash, postfeminism has been referred to by Shelley Budgeon as a “politics of becoming” (“Emergent Feminist (?) Identities” 22). This is particularly interesting because it can be linked to the centrality of female teenaged protagonists in the teen paranormal texts which are the focus of this dissertation. These teenaged protagonists are equally in a state of becoming – sometimes, they are ‘simply’ becoming more mature, sometimes they are on the point of becoming vampires. As discussed earlier, “[t]eenageness is a significant ‘in-between’ period” (Moseley 54). Strikingly, by some critics, “the ideal postfeminist subject is seen to be a . . . girl” (Genz and Brabon 7). Postfeminism’s occupation with girlness and youthful femininity is most obviously

expressed in the 1990s Girl Power movement (Genz and Brabon 42), the theme of “time anxiety” (Negra 47) linked to the ageing female body, and the centrality of generational metaphors in postfeminist discourses (Tasker and Negra 18). Sarah Projansky argues that “postfeminism depends on girlness, is defined by it in fact” (43). As she explains,

girlness – particularly adolescent girlness – epitomizes postfeminism. If the postfeminist woman is always in process, always using the freedom and equality handed to her by feminism in pursuit of having it all (including discovering her sexuality) but never quite managing to reach full adulthood, to fully have it all, one could say that the postfeminist woman is quintessentially adolescent” (45)

One can conclude that the ubiquitous presence of teen paranormal romance in contemporary culture is hardly coincidental. Media texts like the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* respond to and mirror current postfeminist discourses which are characterized by their simultaneous potential for liberation and backlash. As we have seen, Gothic and romance, the historical precursors of contemporary paranormal romance, are both inherently ambivalent genres torn between conservative generic conventions and feminist subtext. Displaying a tendency to transgress boundaries of genre, media, audiences and content, (teen) paranormal romance has a particularly great “potential to register and reflect contemporary socio-cultural anxieties, such as the shifts in post- and third-wave feminism, globalisation, and posthuman shifts in technology, environment and community” (McLennon par. 50). The result is a genre that is neither progressive nor regressive, with a “style of politics [that] is . . . testament to the complexity of its cultural moment” (Pender 43).

## 4. Between Subject and Object: The Politics of Looking

As addressed in chapter 3.5, one of the most striking things about *Twilight* is the exceptional amount of derision, ridicule and disdain it has faced on the part of critics and self-declared anti-fans. Jancovich notes in his article ““Cue the Shrieking Virgins’?: The Critical Reception of *The Twilight Saga*” (2014) that the dismissal of the *Twilight* franchise has been unmistakably gendered:

One reviewer describes the audience as ‘a cinema full of young girls who . . . giggled, sighed and exhaled with a passion’ . . . It is therefore common for critics to suggest that the films are little more than female pornography . . . However, no one explains why this is bad, or why it is any worse than the materials directed at male teenagers. (27)

Jancovich’s apt analysis of the media discourse around *Twilight* provides an excellent segue into an investigation of its gender politics. As I argue, one of the reasons for both the immense popularity and the simultaneous widespread dismissal of the *Twilight* Saga in the public arena is its privileging of a heterosexual female gaze, by which the film series manages to address female (teen) viewers and to complicate, maybe even subvert, patriarchal power structures. Similarly, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* can be said to turn the tables when it comes to the power dynamics of looking: These shows, too, refrain from (exclusively) representing straight male desire through a conventional male gaze but instead stage instances in which the male body is displayed as visual spectacle. This active female gaze in the paranormal romance texts presents a challenge to the dominant patriarchal culture that frequently dismisses women’s and girls’ desire and sexual expression, and can be tied back to contemporary postfeminist culture in which women, according to Gill, are “presented as active, desiring sexual subjects” (*Gender and the Media* 258).

In what follows, this chapter investigates how postfeminist discourses surrounding sex-positivity, female pleasure and sexual empowerment are appropriated and negotiated in the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*. Drawing on feminist film theories concerning the male gaze, this chapter examines the ways in which the texts strategically represent and privilege a female point of view. In this context, I explore how the male body is rendered the sexualized object of a straight female gaze. More precisely, I posit that the figure of the vampire is employed by the analyzed narratives to trigger and invite said gaze. The strategies of camp and parody, which two of the texts use to playfully disrupt traditional structures of looking, will also be delved into. In addition, it will be

shown how the depiction of the experience of being gazed at, which is recounted from the perspective of the female subject, works to further complicate conventional binaries of the gazer and the person-to-be-looked-at. The chapter first gives an overview of feminist film theory dealing with the male gaze in narrative cinema, and discusses the significance of a female gaze in a cultural context which tends to make male characters the protagonists of narratives and to render invisible the experience and desire of women and girls. Close readings of exemplary scenes from the different series as well as a discussion of the analyses in the context of postfeminist culture follow.

#### **4.1. The Male Gaze in Feminist Film Theory**

The study of the male gaze, which emerged in feminist film theory in the 1970s, begins as an investigation of the ways women are objectified in film narrative. In her influential essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” first published in 1975, Laura Mulvey suggests that our fascination with Hollywood cinema is traceable to the pleasure in looking (scopophilia). According to Mulvey, watching Hollywood films involves two contradictory mechanisms: On the one hand, spectators derive pleasure from identifying with the screen image, which means that the distance between spectators and protagonists on screen tends to dissolve (“Visual Pleasure” 17); on the other hand, spectators indulge in an active gaze at a sexualized object, which requires a distance between themselves and the object (“Visual Pleasure” 16). Basing her analysis of cinema on psychoanalysis, Mulvey claims that the gaze in a patriarchal society can only be male: “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (“Visual Pleasure” 19). The woman presents an “element of spectacle” (Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure” 19), while the man is the “bearer of the look” (Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure” 20). Cinema, Mulvey says, functions as a site of patriarchal power where the determining male gaze controls the female figure on screen: “In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*”<sup>94</sup> (“Visual Pleasure” 19). Male heterosexual fantasy is projected onto the female character, who is represented accordingly, namely as a sexual object: “she holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire” (Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure” 19).

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<sup>94</sup> Emphasis in the original.

Mulvey differentiates three different levels of the cinematic gaze: that of characters looking at other characters within the film narrative, that of the camera as it records the action, and that of the audience as it watches the film in the cinema surrounding (“Visual Pleasure” 25). Spectators are encouraged to identify with the gaze of the male protagonist, thereby indirectly “gaining control and possession of the woman” (Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure” 21) on screen. This identification is supported by the fact that in the conventional narrative structure of Hollywood cinema, the male character is established as “the active one . . . advancing the story, making things happen” (Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure” 20). In this way, “the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look” (Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure” 20). Anneke Smelik notes that by making female characters the object of the male heterosexual gaze, “cinema has perfected a visual machinery suitable for male desire such as that already structured and canonised in the tradition of western art and aesthetics” (591).

While men in Hollywood film drive the story forward, Mulvey argues that women’s “visual presence tends to work against the development of a story-line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation” (“Visual Pleasure” 19). This power of disrupting the narrative by drawing the male gaze “poses a threat to patriarchal domination, and . . . Hollywood cinema attempts to contain that threat in one of two ways” (Benshoff and Griffin 246). According to Mulvey, women will either be subjected to sadistic voyeurism or be made into fetishistic objects in film (“Visual Pleasure” 21). The first strategy, sadistic voyeurism, involves the narrative structure of Hollywood movies and is based on a process of investigating and gaining control over a female character by means of the male gaze: “In many films the male characters (and hence the male viewers as well) are able to diminish, if not totally negate, the female’s power by uncovering and unveiling her mysterious allure” (Benshoff and Griffin 246). In a second step, “[t]he woman’s ‘guilt’ will be sealed by either punishment or salvation and the film story is then resolved through the two traditional endings made available to women: she must either die (as in *Psycho*, 1960) or marry (as in *Marnie*, 1964)”<sup>95</sup> (Smelik 592).

The second way, fetishism, provides that the represented female character is turned “into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous” (Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure” 21). While Mulvey acknowledges the sadistic aspect of voyeurism in her essay, it can be argued that fetishistic scopophilia also displays cruelty towards the female body.

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<sup>95</sup> Emphasis in the original.



Through the conventional cinematic technique of close-ups, the image of the female figure is fragmented. By successively focusing on single body parts, such as lips, eyes, breasts, and legs, women are virtually dismembered (Schöblier 149). Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin argue that by “valuing certain parts more than the whole, patriarchal culture subtly refuses to recognize women as whole and entire human beings” (248).

In the aftermath of “Visual Pleasure,” Mulvey was widely criticized for her inflexible model of a gender binary that stipulates men as active agents “around whom . . . the look gets organised” (Smelik 591) and women as passive objects of desire. In a second essay, first published in 1981, she therefore addressed a question she had neglected in her first essay: that of female spectatorship. In “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ Inspired by King Vidor’s *Duel in the Sun* (1946),” Mulvey argues that women do not only identify with the passive female character on screen. They are also likely to be “secretly, unconsciously almost, enjoying the freedom of action and control over the diegetic world that identification with a hero provides” (Mulvey, “Afterthoughts” 29). Thus, according to Mulvey, female spectators are used to identifying with male protagonists: “for women (from childhood onwards) trans-sex identification is a *habit* that very easily becomes *second nature*”<sup>96</sup> (“Afterthoughts” 33). Arguing that “[i]n-built patterns of pleasure and identification impose masculinity as ‘point of view’” (“Afterthoughts” 29), she disavows the possibility of a genuine female gaze in Hollywood cinema. Basing her arguments on psychoanalysis, she claims that “the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like” (“Visual Pleasure” 20). Instead, Mulvey advocates for a complete abandonment of conventional cinematic techniques and narrative structures in order to challenge the system of the male gaze in film (“Visual Pleasure” 25). Because the whole cinematic apparatus is assumed to be fundamentally patriarchal, for Mulvey, the only solution of dismantling the prevailing male gaze can be to “engage in experimental practice: thus, women’s cinema should be a counter-cinema” (Smelik 492). The result would be a self-aware avant-garde film that “destroys the satisfaction, pleasure and privilege of the ‘invisible guest’”<sup>97</sup> (Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure” 26).

Within feminist film theory of the 1980s and beyond, Laura Mulvey’s two influential essays are taken as both basis and starting point for further investigations.

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<sup>96</sup> Emphasis in the original.

<sup>97</sup> The “invisible guest” (Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” 26) refers to the (male) spectator. In “Visual Pleasure,” Mulvey elaborates on the ways that the “conditions of screening and narrative conventions give the spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world” (17) without in turn being seen by the characters on screen.

Several works on the gaze in film were published in the wake of Mulvey's theory, and what they initially seem to have in common is the conclusion that a female gaze is impossible within the prevailing psychoanalytic structure of seeing (Smelik 495). For instance, Ann Kaplan argues in *Women and Film* (1983) that female protagonists may be able to take on the role of bearer of the gaze in film and even make male characters the object of their gaze, but they must shed all their 'feminine' characteristics in the process – "not those of attractiveness, but rather of kindness, humaneness, motherliness" (29). Thus, according to Kaplan, the "gaze is not necessarily male (literally), but to own and activate the gaze . . . is to be in the 'masculine' position" (30). There is no thinking outside of the underlying binary structure of dominance and submission. Furthermore, Kaplan suggests that a female gaze cannot exist as the equivalent of the male gaze since patriarchal culture ensures that "the woman does not own the desire, even when she watches" (27). While "[m]en's desire naturally carries power with it" (Kaplan 29), women's desire lacks power, which means that they can "conceive of 'love' only as 'submission'" (Kaplan 29).

Likewise, Mary Ann Doane argues that woman, due to her marginalized position in society, is only allowed a passive look, rather than an active gaze (Paul par. 6). "[B]ecause the woman is so forcefully linked with the iconic and spectacle" (Doane, "Subjectivity and Desire" 174), she cannot establish any distance between herself and the screen image (Doane, "Subjectivity and Desire" 174). Through this over-identification with the image, female spectators are confined to the "passive desire to be the desired object" (Smelik 495). According to Doane, in contrast to male spectators, female spectators are therefore unable express or even possess a desire of their own (Paul par. 6). There is no other choice for them but to desire to desire, a conclusion which Doane captures in her book title *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (1987).

In *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (1984), Teresa De Lauretis also agrees with Mulvey in that she argues that identification processes are not as straightforward for female spectators as they are for male ones (141). She, too, understands 'femininity' and 'masculinity' as "not . . . so much . . . qualities or states of being inherent in a person" (142) but as "positions occupied by the subject in relation to desire" (143). Following Freud, de Lauretis suggests that women alternate between these two positions when viewing films in the cinema. Female spectators identify with both "the look of the camera and the image on the screen, the subject and the object of the gaze" (de Lauretis 142) at the same time, thus feeling "desire for the other, and desire to

be desired by the other” (de Lauretis 143). According to de Lauretis, the fact that female spectators always also identify with the female object of the gaze – in addition to the subject position of the gazer, with which male spectators apparently solely identify – is precisely the mechanism by which cinematic texts “seduce women into femininity: by a double identification, a surplus of pleasure produced by the spectators themselves for cinema and for society’s profit” (143). In summary, it seems as if feminist film theory of the 1970s and 80s were focused on “the unrepresentability of woman as subject of desire” (Smelik 496).

As already pointed out, feminist film theory has received much criticism for its use of essentialist psychoanalytic theory and its recourse to the heteronormative binary model of male/female. For instance, Smelik points out that a “limitation of the exclusive focus on sexual difference within psychoanalytic film theory is its failure to focus on other differences such as class, race, age and sexual preference” (497). An often-observed gap in feminist film theory has been the representation of gay, lesbian and bisexual desire (Smelik 497). Furthermore, ignorance of intersections between different identity categories has been widespread in feminist film theories of the 1970s and 80s. This lack of taking into account intersections is criticized for example by Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment: “Can we really assume that audiences identify on the basis of gender (or even sexual orientation) rather than on the basis of other categories that contribute to the construction of our identities?” (7).

Looking at prominent gaze theories, it is important to acknowledge that “most discussions of spectatorship have been about white audiences” (Smelik 497). Criticizing this fact, Jane Gaines maintains that a film theory based on sexual difference alone is “unequipped to deal with a film which is about racial difference and sexuality” (402). Gaines draws attention to the fact that the male gaze is also informed by race and class factors, and that the “position white women occupy over black men as well as black women” (404) should not be disregarded. She thereby problematizes Mulvey’s central hypothesis that all men objectify all women on screen by pointing towards “the less privileged black male gaze. Racial hierarchies of access to the female image also relate to other scenarios which are unknown by psychoanalytic categories” (Gaines 408). Invoking the historical construction of black men as rapists as well as their castration and lynching as a punishment for (supposedly) sexually desiring white women during slavery times and long after, Gaines emphasizes that “some groups have historically had the license to ‘look’ openly while other groups have ‘looked’ illicitly” (409). All in all,

Gaines' work drives the point home that feminist film theory must expand its horizon and take into account intersections between gender, race and class categories. This dissertation will bear in mind Gaines' arguments and aim to avoid the fallacies of Mulvey's original essays. For instance, the ethnicity of different characters in the analyzed media products will be taken into account. More precisely, subchapter 4.3.2 discusses the differences in the portrayal of white character Edward Cullen and non-white character Jacob Black in the *Twilight* Saga, and investigates the role which Jacob's Native American heritage plays in his representation as sexualized object of Bella Swan's gaze. This research acknowledges and problematizes the fact that all three of the analyzed popular cultural texts centralize white, heterosexual, cis experiences.

## 4.2. Beyond the Male Gaze: Conceptualizing a Female Gaze

As became clear in the preceding subchapter, the idea that women could actually have an active gaze of their own was a widely disregarded concept in feminist film theory of the 1970s and 80s. In fact, Suzanne Moore comments that "to suggest that women actually look at men's bodies is apparently to stumble into a theoretical minefield which holds sacred the idea that in the dominant media the look is always already structured as male" (45). An interesting contribution to the debate comes from Carol Clover, who theorizes female spectatorship further in the 1990s, exploring the question of cross-gender identification. Clover, whose book *Men, Women and Chain Saws* (1992) deals with the modern horror film, provides an interesting argument concerning the identification of female and male viewers with the protagonist in slasher films, the so-called Final Girl. The latter is chased and wounded by the killer but turns out to be the sole survivor at the end of the movie (Clover 35). Because the Final Girl "(1) undergoes agonizing trials, and (2) virtually or actually destroys the antagonist and saves herself" (Clover 59), she is gendered both female and male over the course of the respective movie. While events at the beginning of the narrative are presented from the perspective of the killer whose "assaultive gaze" (183) rests on his victims, Clover notes that this mechanism is reversed after a while. Thus, slasher films provide an active female gaze, at least increasingly towards their ending; not one that sexualizes any given male character, but one that makes the Final Girl an active agent in her own story: "her triumph *depends* on her assumption of the gaze"<sup>98</sup> (Clover 60). Since she is the character through whose eyes we see the killer towards the end of the movie, i.e. who "assumes the 'active investigating gaze'" (Clover

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<sup>98</sup> Emphasis in the original.

60), the Final Girl invites viewer identification (Clover 60). Thus, as Clover argues, slasher films are based on the process of the predominantly male audience adopting the perspective of the central female character and drawing pleasure from this identification: “At the moment that the Final Girl becomes her own savior, she becomes a hero; and the moment that she becomes a hero is the moment that the male viewer gives up the last pretense of male identification” (60). Clover’s analysis is intriguing because it argues for the existence of a female gaze in cinematic texts and theorizes the possibility of a double identification of male viewers as well as female ones.

John Ellis suggests that identification processes are even more complex, “multiple and fractured” (43). He conceptualizes media narratives as offering various different positions to viewers, both passive and active ones. According to Ellis, spectators can identify with contradictory positions at the same time: “identification involves both the recognition of self in the image on the screen . . . and the identification of self with the various positions that are involved in the fictional narration: those of hero and heroine, villain, bit-part player, active and passive character” (43). In a similar vein, Benshoff and Griffin write that “[m]ost likely spectatorship is a far more free-floating and complex process than Mulvey first theorized” (255). They consider that identification processes may vary for spectators: Some may feel close to one character for a while, then switch to another one; others may not identify with any character at all (255).<sup>99</sup> However, even if spectatorship and identification function in more complex ways than originally assumed by feminist film theorists, a brief glimpse at popular film and television today reveals that men continue to dominate the screen in terms of protagonism and point of view – an inequality that is likely the result of the fact that the majority of creators, directors and writers is still male, white, and heterosexual.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Benshoff and Griffin further question whether “subjective shots really create an absolute link of identification between the character and the spectator” (255), considering the active resistance of some male viewers to identify with protagonists in female-driven movies despite the fact that these movies’ “narrative, cinematography, and editing all work to encourage such identification” (255). While women are regularly expected to watch films from a male point of view, “[m]any male filmgoers refuse even to attend movies about women and women’s issues” (Benshoff and Griffin 255). This rather obvious phenomenon highlights the fragility of the gaze theory by problematizing “the very concept of cinematic identification in the first place” (Benshoff and Griffin 255).

<sup>100</sup> For instance, a content analysis of the 100 top domestic grossing films of 2017 conducted by The Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film located at San Diego State University shows that females comprised 24% of protagonists; Black females comprised 16%, and Latinas and Asian females 7%, respectively (Lauzen, *It’s a Man’s (Celluloid) World* 1). The report suggests that whoever makes a movie has an influence on whose perspective is represented and foregrounded in the text: “in films with at least one woman director and/or writer, females comprised 45% of protagonists. In films with exclusively male directors and/or writers, females accounted for 20% of protagonists” (Lauzen, *It’s a Man’s (Celluloid) World* 5). A report by the Media, Diversity, & Social Change Initiative states that

Significantly, the question of whose stories are told and whose gaze is privileged in media texts revolves around the issue of subjectivity (Smelik 496). According to Mulvey's theory, men are regularly granted subject status when it comes to Hollywood cinema, but this is also true of American culture in general: "As in Hollywood narrative form, men in Western culture are taught that it is their birthright to *do* things (run, jump, desire, look) while women remain relatively immobile in order to be the object of the male gaze"<sup>101</sup> (Benshoff and Griffin 240). The momentousness of texts privileging a straight female gaze becomes clear if one considers that "subjectivity is not a fixed entity but a constant process of self-production. Narration is one of the ways of reproducing subjectivity" (Smelik 496). According to de Lauretis, every narrative is generated from the subject's desire; in other words, narrative is desire turned into a quest (112). With reference to Sigmund Freud, de Lauretis sees the traditional narrative as "prompted by men's desire for woman, and by men's desire to know" (111) – much like Mulvey describes the process of the hero subjecting the heroine to sadistic voyeurism in Hollywood film. In this configuration, woman herself is both the riddle that man tries to solve and the object he desires (Smelik 496).

At the same time, women are excluded from asking the question and solving the mystery themselves because they are already the object of the riddle (de Lauretis 111). If the desire to know and the desire to see, both pleasures provided by cinema and television, are dependent on "an engagement of the spectator's subjectivity, and the possibility of identification" (de Lauretis 136), it is of utmost importance that the *Twilight Saga*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* all feature female protagonists whose perspectives shape the stories that are told in these series. The insertion of female protagonists into the narratives offers an opportunity of identification for female (teen) viewers in particular. As de Lauretis suggests, the "importance of the concept of identification . . . derives from its central role in the formation of subjectivity . . . To identify, in short, is to be actively involved as subject" (141). Thus, texts that privilege a heterosexual female gaze and thereby invite identification with a female character can be said to participate in the construction of straight female subjectivity.

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"[a] total of 1,438 content creators worked across the 100 top films of 2016. Only 17.8% of these jobs were filled by women, 82.2% were filled by men" (Smith et al. 7). For the medium of TV, the numbers show that "[i]n 2016-17, women comprised 28% of all creators, directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, and directors of photography working on broadcast network, cable, and streaming programs" (Lauzen, *Boxed In 2016-17* 3).

<sup>101</sup> Emphasis in the original.

Despite its shortcomings, Mulvey's theory simply cannot be ignored in a scholarly analysis of the gaze in media texts. For instance, Benschhoff and Griffin conclude that Mulvey's feminist film theory remains a standard and useful framework to analyze film texts in terms of their form and content. Besides critically engaging with Mulvey's theory, for example by taking into account intersections between gender, race and class categories, this dissertation's approach will draw on an additional contemporary gaze theory. Thus, Mulvey's theory will be complemented by Jill Soloway's theory of the female gaze here. American writer and director Jill Soloway<sup>102</sup> has made a case for the realization of a female gaze that encompasses three aspects, namely what they<sup>103</sup> term "the feel with me gaze, the being seen gaze [and] the I SEE YOU gaze truth gaze" (Soloway). In a keynote at the Toronto Film Festival in 2016, Soloway presented their vision of the female gaze, which is conceived as "a political platform" (Soloway). First, this gaze requires an embodied camera work which invites viewers to identify and empathize with a female protagonist, for instance through the use of subjective shots. Second, Soloway argues that the female gaze conveys to viewers the experience of being gazed at, as this experience structures and affects most women's lives to a greater or lesser degree.<sup>104</sup> This part of the gaze also extends to the narrative level; Soloway gives the example of a coming-of-age narrative which might trace a young female character's process of entering adulthood. Along the way, the female protagonist would invite viewers to "come feel with me specifically how I become . . . what men see" (Soloway). Third, the female gaze, in Soloway's conception, entails the reversal of gendered object and subject positions by allowing women to return the gaze – as Soloway puts it, "[i]t's not the gazed gaze. It's the gaze on the gazers" (Soloway). Through combining the portrayal of what it feels like to be the object of the gaze with the experience of gazing, the female gaze thus illustrates "how women are frequently put in the position of

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<sup>102</sup> Soloway is most known for creating, writing, executive-producing and directing the Amazon original series *Transparent* (2014-running), which focuses on the transitioning process of transgender parent Maura Pfefferman and the lives of her queer family members. More importantly, Soloway recently created the Amazon series *I Love Dick* (2016-17) together with Sarah Gubbins, a show which is notable for its privileging of the female protagonist's subjective gaze. As Soloway said in an interview with *The Guardian*: "if *Transparent* was about the trans community then *Dick* is really about the female gaze. This really is a celebration of the feminine" (Freeman).

<sup>103</sup> Soloway has publicly stated that they prefer "to be referenced with gender-neutral pronouns (they/them/their)" (Freeman), which is why this dissertation uses these pronouns in reference to Soloway.

<sup>104</sup> Fiona Vera-Gray lists a range of studies attempting "to measure the frequency with which women and girls experience intrusion from unknown men in public space" (7); these intrusions include uninvited gazing (7-9).

experiencing their bodily-self as both object and subject”<sup>105</sup> (Vera-Gray 154) at the same time. All in all, the female gaze is understood by Soloway as a sociopolitical “justice-demanding way of art making [sic]” (Soloway) which, by making women the protagonists of their own stories and relaying their experience, creates empathy on the part of audiences and ultimately works as a “privilege generator” (Soloway) for women. Here Soloway emphasizes the impact of popular cultural products on broader sociopolitical discourses.

In the following paragraphs, both Mulvey’s and Soloway’s theories will be used to make visible the ways in which the *Twilight Saga*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* stage instances not of a conventional male gaze but a heterosexual female gaze; the latter will be conceived as an expression of a postfeminist attitude which “addresses women as knowing, active and heterosexually desiring subjects” (Genz and Brabon 91). The examined popular cultural products thereby function as spaces in which alternative configurations of desire can be explored and experienced by viewers. In the course of the analysis, Mulvey’s basic arguments will be applied to film as well as television texts. This transfer from the medium of film to the one of television may not be considered valid by some scholars. For instance, Ellis has argued that “[g]azing is the constitutive activity of cinema. Broadcast TV demands a rather different kind of looking: that of the glance. Gazing at the TV is a sign of intensity of attention that is usually considered slightly inappropriate to the medium” (50). However, it is worth noting that Ellis’ argument dates back to the early 1980s, before technological innovations such as DVRs, the DVD, streaming services, and increasingly bigger and better display devices and sound systems for home entertainment purposes came onto the market. With the advent of ‘quality TV’ with its complex narratives and its alignment with ‘high-brow’ media like literature and cinema, assessments by Ellis like “[t]he cinema image is routinely more elaborate and detailed than the TV image” (53) and “TV viewing is typically a casual experience rather than an intensive one” (162) do not ring true any longer. As Marcus Recht argues, both film and TV consist of animated pictures, and both can provide scopophilic pleasures (75). The user behavior that Ellis ascribes to TV viewers may still be observable with genres like reality TV, but the gaze is no longer constrained to the realm of cinema today (Recht 76). This is why an application of Mulvey’s theory to television narratives like *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* is as legitimate as its application to the film

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<sup>105</sup> Vera-Gray defines the bodily-self as follows: “Our living body is always at the same time a bodily-self, our body indivisible from our self ‘living’ it. This brings together self and body, entangled with and in each other conceptually in the same way in which they are lived” (58).



narratives of the *Twilight* Saga. Soloway's arguments are not confined to either film or TV. As a creator, showrunner, director and writer, Soloway works with both media, and does not differentiate between them in their theory. To interrogate the representation of the male body as visual spectacle, the analysis will further draw on arguments developed by scholars Richard Dyer and Steve Neale.

### **4.3. Female Subjectivity and Desire in the *Twilight* Saga**

#### **4.3.1. Bella, Subjectivity and the 'Gazed Gaze'**

Especially the first instalment of the *Twilight* film series is conspicuous for its privileging of a female point of view. The *Twilight* Saga almost exclusively revolves around its heroine, Bella Swan; clearly, the films tell her story and relay her experience to the audience. The way the films achieve this is first and foremost by point of view (POV) shots and voice-overs, which are both techniques creating interiority and encouraging viewers to identify with the character on-screen. In POV shots, "the character is shown and then the camera occupies his or her (approximate!) position" (Branigan 73); this is how subjectivity can be created in film. In *Point of View in the Cinema* (1984), Edward Branigan defines subjectivity as "a specific instance or level of narration where the telling is *attributed to* a character in the narrative and received by us *as if* we were in the situation of a character"<sup>106</sup> (73). Branigan argues that the POV structure enables viewers to gain an insight into a character's motivations and personality (109). Most importantly, the subjective shot "implies the existence of a sentient observer in whose viewpoint we may participate" (Branigan 104) and whose "state of . . . awareness" (Branigan 109) is revealed to us through this technique. This sentient observer becomes a subject "through an act of vision directed toward an object" (Branigan 77).

In *Twilight*, Bella's interiority is created through the repeated use of POV shots from her perspective. Generally speaking, the film abounds not only with scenes in which people look, stare or ogle at other people, but also with verbal references to the act of looking. This preoccupation with looking can be seen as an aspect taken over from Stephenie Meyer's novel, which exhibits an obsession with all sorts of gazes in the sense that "Forks High School is rather grotesquely animated by eyeballs in motion as glances are thrown, given, caught and exchanged while eyes roll, dart about and fix themselves on people, and stares are lingering, smouldering, piercing and unreadable," as Kim

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<sup>106</sup> Emphasis in the original.

Edwards puts it (26). Particularly in scenes that are set at school, Bella and her fellow students constantly exchange looks.<sup>107</sup> Bella has recently moved from Phoenix to Forks and is therefore new to Forks High School, a fact that draws attention to her when she joins classes in the middle of the school year. Being shy and socially as well as physically awkward, Bella is made uncomfortable by being the center of a vast number of looks, some of them merely curious, some judgmental, some favorable or even impressed. When she is approached by Eric, who introduces himself as “the eyes and ears of this place” (*Twilight*) and wants to write a front-page story about Bella for the school newspaper, she adamantly refuses. During her first day at school, she manages to attract no less than three male suitors whose gazes linger on her while she is walking through the school hallways, taking part in gym class and sitting down to have lunch at the cafeteria. Besides, Bella also becomes the object of Angela’s ‘professional’ look. Like Eric, Angela works for the school newspaper as a photographer and startles Bella by taking a photo of her before even introducing herself: “Sorry, I needed a candid for the feature” (*Twilight*). Thus, Bella finds herself placed into a close-knit grid of looks; in this grid, she is often the receiver of looks and gazes, some of which she reciprocates but most of which she intentionally avoids and ignores.

Soloway’s conception of the female gaze can be drawn on to make sense of what *Twilight* is doing here. First, the film employs the subjective camera to narrate events from Bella’s point of view. This is in keeping with Soloway’s assertion that the female gaze “uses the frame to share and evoke a feeling of being in feeling, rather than seeing – the characters” (Soloway). Second, the film shows us what it feels like to become the object of the gaze by making Bella the focus of a variety of gazes, mostly male ones. These male gazes function as the embodiment of a paternalistic attitude that aims to govern Bella’s actions and, more precisely, her sexuality. Thus, Bella’s romantic and sexual relationship with Edward is continuously policed by a number of male characters, including her father Charlie, Billy Black, who is an elder of the Quileute tribal council and therefore a representative of the werewolves, Jacob, Edward’s romantic rival, and Mike, a classmate of Bella’s who is also romantically interested in her. Because the story is narrated from Bella’s perspective, we experience with her what it feels like to be at the center of this much uninvited attention.

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<sup>107</sup> Edwards locates this pronounced array of looks in American high school culture where the “inherent teenage fear of – and attraction to – looking and being looked at” (28) culminates and “watching and being watched are essential skills to practise” (26).

Without being asked, Mike lets Bella know that he does not approve of her dating Edward: “So, you and Cullen, huh? That’s...I don’t like it” (*Twilight*). Over the course of the film series, Jacob also barges into Bella’s life decisions a number of times. In *Twilight*, he still acts as a mouthpiece for his father, Billy Black, who is bothered by Bella being with a vampire and wants to persuade her to end her entanglement with Edward. Otherwise, she is told, she will be under surveillance from the Quileute shapeshifters. “We’ll be watching you,” is the message Billy has Jacob deliver to Bella. This comment makes the paternalistic gaze directed towards Bella explicit. Later, Jacob develops his own romantic interest in Bella. When he learns at the end of *New Moon* that her wish is to be turned into a vampire, he threatens that “I won’t let you”, pointing out that Bella’s transition will lead to a war between vampires and werewolves. In *Breaking Dawn – Part 2*, he is similarly enraged when he realizes that Bella intends to consummate her marriage with Edward during their honeymoon while she is still human. Infuriated, he grabs her so aggressively that he must be held back by three of his fellow tribe members who fear he might lose control of his temper. Moreover, Bella’s father Charlie is portrayed as protective of Bella’s virginity at two points in the Saga. This becomes clear when Edward formally introduces himself to Charlie when picking up Bella for a date in *Twilight*, and once again in *Eclipse* when Charlie tries to have a sort of ‘birds and the bees’ talk with Bella.<sup>108</sup> These scenes, in which Charlie ostensibly performs his dislike of Edward because the latter might have a sexual relationship with his daughter, function as comic relief within the films. Nevertheless, this set-up drives home the point that Bella’s sexuality is monitored by a variety of male characters in the Saga, and her father is no exception.

There are three further scenes in the first movie which allow audiences to experience with Bella how she becomes the sexualized object of the male gaze and (almost) the victim of assault in connection with this gaze. The first incident takes place in Port Angeles, where Bella spends a day out shopping with two of her friends from school. While Jessica and Angela are trying on prom dresses in a shop, a group of young men walks by the store window, staring at the girls’ bodies, making objectifying comments and drawing attention to themselves by knocking on the glass. Angela and Jessica are visibly embarrassed, as the men’s unsolicited gazes and comments are not

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<sup>108</sup> In *Twilight*, Charlie is in the midst of cleaning his police rifle when Edward arrives and, upon her leaving, asks Bella whether she has “still got that pepper spray.” In *Eclipse*, Charlie inquires if Bella and Edward are using protection, and when he learns that Bella is still a virgin, he murmurs to himself that he is “liking Edward a little bit more now.”

welcome; Angela awkwardly turns her back to the window, Jessica voices that “that is uncomfortable” and Bella remarks: “That’s disgusting” (*Twilight*). By including this scene that is absent in the novel, the *Twilight* film puts particular emphasis on the way the bodies of the three young women become the sexualized object of the male gaze in the public arena, and how they feel about this objectification. Strikingly, the film seems intent on underlining that although Bella’s friends are shopping for dresses that enhance their sexual attractiveness – right before the men walk by, Jessica has found a dress she likes because it “makes my boobs look good” (*Twilight*) –, this is not the kind of attention and sexualization they desire or deserve.

Later that day, Bella has the misfortune of once again running into the same group of young men. After dark, she exits a book store and walks back by herself to meet up with her friends, whom she left at the dress store. Although careful to avoid them, Bella encounters the group of men who go on to harass her in the deserted street, addressing and following her, then blocking her way. When they circle and start to encroach on her although she tells them to stay away, it is clear that Bella is in serious danger of being sexually assaulted. Meanwhile, the camera cuts back and forth quickly between the perpetrators’ perspective on Bella and her own point of view. In a number of subjective shots, we experience Bella’s view of some of the men looking at her, with the camera shifting from one man to the next. The perpetrators are looking straight into the camera, with provocative grins, leering and yelling: “There she is. . . What’s up, girl? Where are you going? . . . You’re pretty. . . Cute” (*Twilight*). The close-up shots are cut together in a way that conveys Bella’s feeling of being trapped in this circle of sexually aggressive gazes, with her stumbling and looking frantically from one face to the other. One last shot shows the face of one of the men, contorted with pain, after Bella has defended herself by punching him in the gut: “Don’t touch me!” (*Twilight*). This is when the scene is interrupted by Edward arriving in his silver Volvo and coming to Bella’s rescue.

Later in the same movie, Bella finds herself in the clutches of an evil vampire, James, who has lured her to a deserted ballet studio. James takes a perverse pleasure in emotionally and physically torturing Bella; part of this pleasure for him is to watch her suffer. As Kim Edwards observes, Bella’s confrontation with James is “paralleled visually” (30) to the earlier near-rape scene described above. Thus, Edwards describes the scene as follows:

The gang first saw Bella through a window, and James' appearance in a hall of mirrors recalls both this moment and the spiralling camera view of faces from the other attack. This mirroring is emphasised further when the climactic attack is deliberately sexualised and encoded as another attempted rape. Bella is pushed against the wall as James leers lasciviously at her, she turns away her face as he whispers in her ear, she shrinks from the horror of a camera's eye as he begins filming her, porn-style. (30-31)

Again, a range of POV shots relay Bella's experience of being gazed at, with James looking directly into the camera. His gaze is multiplied by the mirrors in the ballet studio, which makes the gaze even more powerful and threatening. It is also underlined by James' use of a portable camera with which he films the violence he inflicts on Bella "to make things more entertaining . . . and action!" (*Twilight*). Karen Backstein observes that the vampire's use of a camera "is one of *Twilight*'s several interesting and negative references to still and movie cameras in relation to women" (40). By referring to Bella as "[b]eautiful. Very visually dynamic" (*Twilight*), James aims to reinforce her *to-be-looked-at-ness* on a verbal level. Meanwhile, audiences are invited to empathize with Bella, fearing for her and being relieved when Edward suddenly enters the scene and saves her life once more. Thus, the film demonstrates in a number of instances how Bella experiences herself as an object exposed to a controlling male gaze, while it simultaneously emphasizes her subjectivity through the representation of her individual perspective.

### 4.3.2. Female Desire and the Reversal of the Gaze

#### 4.3.2.1. Gazing at Edward

The preceding subchapter broached how viewers of the *Twilight Saga* are encouraged to identify with Bella, the female protagonist of the Saga, through the use of subjective shots and voice-overs. It was then argued that the film series, and the first film in particular, employs a female gaze which conveys to audiences the experience and feeling of being gazed at. However, Bella also becomes the bearer of a desiring and investigative gaze, which implies her status as an active agent in her own story. To elaborate on this is the purpose of this subchapter.

Most prominently in *Twilight*, Bella either gazes at Edward, whom she is increasingly interested in, or looks around in his absence, searching for him. It is through Bella's eyes that we see Edward and his family for the first time. Bella is sitting in the school cafeteria when he and his siblings approach the building and enter. This scene lends itself to a more detailed analysis, as it illustrates further the use of subjective shots to signify Bella's interiority. Bella is having a conversation with a group of fellow

students when the Cullens suddenly catch her attention. A shot that shows Bella looking at something or someone off-screen is followed by a shot of the Cullen siblings arriving in pairs, with the camera panning from left to right and back, following Alice and Jasper as they walk towards the entrance of the cafeteria. This shot sequence implies that viewers share Bella's point of view: She is observing the Cullens through the cafeteria window as they walk alongside the building and, one couple after the other, open the door to come inside. Rosalie, Emmett, Alice and Jasper are presented in a medium shot from the waist up and walking in slow-motion, both of which are techniques that dramatize the impact their sight has on Bella and, by extension, the viewer. At last, Edward arrives; Bella's question "Who's he?" (*Twilight*), his presentation in a larger medium shot, the slow-motion as well as the swelling music all underline the special position he occupies among the Cullens for Bella. She cannot take her eyes off him, gazes after him as he walks past the group of friends, and even turns her head and looks over her shoulder to see him sit down at a table far across the cafeteria with his siblings. Meanwhile, Jessica's words introduce Edward as a boy desired by many girls, including Jessica, who tries to mask her frustration that Edward apparently has been unavailable to her: "That's Edward Cullen. He's totally gorgeous, obviously. But apparently, nobody here is good enough for him. Like I care, you know. So, yeah. Seriously, like, don't waste your time" (*Twilight*). Although Bella answers that she "wasn't planning on it," her continuous gazing at Edward suggests otherwise. The last shot of the scene shows Edward's face in a close-up; he finally returns Bella's look across the cafeteria hall, his facial expression seeming unexpectedly hostile and confused. Since "the close-up view of an object . . . bestows and conveys a dramatic significance" (Beaver 70) in film, this last shot of Edward's face suggests that there must be more to him than Jessica's description implies. Besides, the fact that a faint smile lit up his face during Jessica's speech insinuates that he somehow managed to hear her words over a large distance. Thus, from the beginning, viewers, together with Bella, learn that Edward is shrouded in mystery.

In the subsequent scenes, Edward behaves in an extremely unfriendly way and acts dismissively towards Bella.<sup>109</sup> Edward's inexplicable behavior is what drives Bella to find out what this mysterious stranger's secret is. An extreme close-up of Edward's dark pair

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<sup>109</sup> Their next encounter is in biology class, in which they share a table. Here Edward treats Bella as an outcast and escapes from the classroom at the first ring of the bell. What neither Bella nor the members of the audience know at this point (unless the latter are also readers of the novels) is that Bella's blood is particularly enticing to Edward and that he is struggling to control his impulse to kill her instantly. After the lesson, Bella overhears a conversation between Edward and a secretary in the school office; she realizes that he is trying to switch his biology class because of her presence in this class.

of eyes staring directly into the camera is cut in-between two different scenes, fading out into a white screen; viewers familiar with cinematic conventions know what this signifies: Bella is thinking of Edward. She has decided to “confront him and demand to know what his problem was” (*Twilight*), as the voice-over tells us. Thus, Bella assumes an “‘active investigative gaze’ normally reserved for males and punished in females when they assume it themselves” (Clover 48). In this way, *Twilight* provides an interesting counter-example to the sadistic voyeurism which Mulvey identifies as one strategy of asserting power over female characters in traditional Hollywood film. As Benschhoff and Griffin argue,

attempts to ‘figure out’ and thus control the dangerously beautiful woman have structured many Hollywood movies. This process of investigation often entails and encourages a more intense employment of the male gaze. Men stare harder at these mysterious women in the hope that the power of the male gaze will penetrate the female’s beautiful armor. At times, once her shell is cracked by the male gaze, the woman can then be reclaimed by the hero. (256)

*Twilight* reverses this paradigm, putting Bella in the powerful position to gaze at Edward in order to figure out his mysterious allure. Edward’s secret is, of course, that he is a supernatural creature. Here the figure of the vampire serves as the ‘dangerously beautiful’ man’s secret identity and is employed to justify the investigative/desiring female gaze. Following de Lauretis, the narrative of *Twilight* is generated by Bella’s desire to know Edward; her narration is based on her quest for knowledge and the fulfilment of her desires.

At first, Bella’s investigative gaze comes to nothing: She searches for Edward at school every following day, her gaze wandering across the schoolyard and the cafeteria, but he is absent. When he returns, Edward is like a different person: polite, accommodating, chatty. During their first conversation, both Edward and Bella look at each other attentively. As Branigan writes, “[w]hen the object of a glance is also a person, then it is possible to alternate POV structures – as in a conversation – centered about two or more points. This is the reciprocal POV” (117). While the reciprocal POV is used in this scene, Bella’s point of view is nevertheless foregrounded by close-ups and extreme close-ups of Edward’s face, especially his eyes, now colored in light amber. Interestingly, this first conversation between Bella and Edward takes place during biology class. The setting not only alludes to the budding teenage sexuality in this scene but also provides the opportunity for another reference to the realm of looking: In their first lesson, Bella and Edward were “observing the behavior of planaria aka flatworms” (*Twilight*); in the second one, they are looking at onion root tip cells under the microscope and labelling

them into phases of mitosis – a task both of them master easily. Bella’s expertise in recognizing prophase and anaphase is mirrored in her ability to look closely at Edward. While nobody else seems to notice, she sees that Edward’s eye color has changed since their last encounter: “Hey, did you get contacts? Your eyes were black the last time I saw you, and now they’re like, golden brown” (*Twilight*). When Edward saves her life by stopping a car from crashing Bella with his bare hands, she trusts her perception despite his attempts to deny what happened: “I know what I saw” (*Twilight*). Bella’s “unexpected power in looking (at him) disturbs Edward, and he tries on various occasions to undermine her ability to believe her eyes and interpret what she sees” (Edwards 29), but Bella is not deterred.<sup>110</sup>

Despite his attempts to make her distrust her vision, Bella continues to investigate Edward. Here it is important to note that the camera is “reproducing and thus validating her gaze” (Edwards 29), so that Bella’s perception “is supported by the audience’s own viewing experience” (Edwards 29). After learning about the legends of the Quileute, a Native American tribe settled near Forks, which include stories about the “palefaces” (*Twilight*), Bella finds a book store in Port Angeles to do further research on this topic.<sup>111</sup> At home, she further draws on the resource of the Internet for her inquiries. The scene in which she researches the legend of the “Cold ones” (*Twilight*) on her computer once again features a number of subjective shots, extreme close-ups and zooms that convey Bella’s perspective. The camera attempts to recreate her reading process by moving across the web pages and highlighting specific words which garner her attention. The latter is primarily achieved by the use of zooms. According to Branigan, a “zoom would be analogous to a character’s sudden discovery and heightened interest in an object” (81). At the same time, these images are quickly intercut by repetitions of shots that occurred earlier in the film – Bella is remembering details of her encounters with Edward and putting the pieces together. Together with her, viewers come to the realization that Edward must be a vampire.

Besides the investigative gaze driven by the quest for knowledge, the *Twilight* Saga also represents a heterosexual female gaze that is more distinctly offering viewers the

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<sup>110</sup> Meanwhile, Edward is frustrated because Bella is the only person whose thoughts he is unable to hear. Since he cannot resort to his supernatural gift with her, he must rely on looking at her face and interpreting her behavior in order to understand her, which is why he asks her numerous questions: “I’m sorry, I’m just trying to figure you out. You’re very difficult for me to read” (*Twilight*).

<sup>111</sup> This is the trip during which she is almost assaulted.



pleasure of looking at male characters in a desiring way.<sup>112</sup> In numerous instances, Bella gazes at Edward, simply being fascinated and enjoying looking at him. In addition, Jacob's body is frequently put on visual display throughout the series. In the scenes involving Edward, it is worth noting that *Twilight* is indebted to a more traditional approach by focusing on Edward's face and eyes rather than his body. As Natalie Perfetti-Oates writes, the focus of the desiring female gaze in romantic comedies and romantic dramas used to be not on the protagonist's abs or buttocks, but on his handsome face. She argues that this pattern was replaced at the beginning of the new millennium by the proliferation of "scenes which position the male lead's body as a source of visual pleasure for his spectators" (par. 4). Seen in this light, it is interesting that *Twilight* regularly shows close-ups of Edward's eyes but his body is usually concealed under his elegant, classic clothes. Nevertheless, he often wears tight-fitting jeans and shirts that hug his physique, hinting at his lean body. Furthermore, there are a number of scenes which put Edward's vampiric body on display.

After Bella has confronted Edward with her knowledge about his secret, he tries to convince her that she should not be pursuing him because he is dangerous. In order to demonstrate his Otherness, he steps into a clearance in the forest, revealing that his vampire skin glistens and sparkles in the sun: "This is why we don't show ourselves in the sunlight. People would know we're different. This is what I am" (*Twilight*). While Bella is staring at him with gaping mouth, Edward turns around to face her, his shirt unbuttoned. In a medium shot, the camera first shows his sparkling face and neck. Another shot of Bella gasping reminds us that she is gazing at Edward's body. Besides, the fact that her face is shown in a close-up emphasizes the importance of her emotions at this moment: As Frank E. Beaver points out in his *Dictionary of Film Terms* (1994), "[e]motions, feelings, and nuances can be suggested by the close-up by merely magnifying and isolating an individual in an intensely dramatic moment" (70). While Bella is visibly trying to wrap her head around what she is seeing, the camera slowly pans upwards over Edward's naked torso, signifying Bella's desiring gaze. She then proceeds to put her desire into words by commenting on Edward's attractiveness: "You're

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<sup>112</sup> Mukherjea, who carried out a survey with self-identified American *Twilight* fans (published in 2011), found that "[g]azing upon the men . . . , whether in the words on the page or on the screen of the film, was a central feature of the pleasure all the respondents took in *Twilight*" ("Team Bella" 76), and that "[r]eveling in this scopophilia can also be a social bonding activity" ("Team Bella" 77). Further, Mukherjea concludes that "[a]ccepting Edward and Jacob as ready objects of desire, then, allowed these fans to be desiring subjects and to indulge some pleasurable actions of desire – the looking and fantasizing and talking about" ("Team Bella" 78).

beautiful” (*Twilight*). Once again, the camera reproduces Bella’s gaze by panning over Edward’s upper body in a close-up. As soon as he realizes that she is not repulsed by his sight as he had expected, Edward withdraws from Bella’s field of vision and re-buttons his shirt.

As already mentioned, Edward’s vampire nature functions as a catalyst for Bella’s investigative gaze. His mysterious allure and his strange behavior, which are rooted in his being a vampire, drive her to look at him more closely. In the scene described above, it becomes clear that the vampire body expressly invites the female gaze: It is for the purpose of demonstrating his vampire nature that Edward presents his naked upper body to Bella. The fact that his skin sparkles “like diamonds” (*Twilight*) in the sunlight explicitly marks his body as visual spectacle. Furthermore, through the use of dramatic lighting, Edward’s body is positioned as connoting *to-be-looked-at-ness* in the same way that female bodies have been positioned in Hollywood film. Traditionally, the technique of three-point lighting has been used to guide viewers’ gazes and enhance actresses’ visual appeal. This technique includes the employment of three sources of light, key light, fill light and back light, which serve to illuminate the body of the female star (Benshoff and Griffin 245). In the forest scene in *Twilight*, the use of the back light creates a so-called “halo effect” – a glowing outline around the star’s hair and body, as if the light was radiating directly out of them” (Benshoff and Griffin 245), which makes Edward more attractive to the straight female gaze. The lighting technique also emphasizes his sparkling skin. Thus, Edward, based on his vampire nature, occupies the position of erotic object in *Twilight*. Strikingly, this finding is in accord with an argument Recht makes in his study of the visual construction of masculinities in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. According to Recht, the vampire characters Angel and Spike are able to break the gender binary based on their vampire status and their position as Others (41). Their Otherness as vampires links them to ‘femininity,’ which has traditionally been referred to as the Other,<sup>113</sup> on a visual level. Similarly, vampire Edward Cullen takes up a position that is traditionally seen as synonymous with ‘femininity’ in *Twilight*.

Interestingly, the fact that Edward is a vampire is also the reason that Bella’s desiring gaze becomes a substitute for sexual acts: Because Edward fears he might physically harm Bella in an intimate encounter, the couple must resort to gazes in order to communicate their mutual desire to each other and the audience. On the one hand,

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<sup>113</sup> See, for example, Simone de Beauvoir: *The Second Sex*, first published in 1949 under the French title *Le Deuxième Sexe*.

through this aspect, the *Twilight* Saga positions itself in a long problematic tradition of cultural texts framing male sexuality as predatory and dangerous. On the other hand, this plot point enhances and intensifies the female gaze: Bella cannot touch but she can look. Edwards has noted that “it is the erotic pleasure of looking that replaces sex in the film . . . we look upon a series of deferred, controlled or purely symbolic sex acts. The movie abounds in these ‘surrogate’ sex scenes, where eyes are the ultimate active and erogenous element” (31). A scene that illustrates this perfectly is the one set at Edward’s and Bella’s secret meadow. In this scene,

[t]he fecund, over-colourised landscape of the hidden meadow . . . is replete with the iconography of sex, including the slow lie-down, the heaving breaths and then nothing but long hypnotic gazes into each others’ eyes, followed by a ‘post-coital’ cut to Bella in her room as she lies spent across her bed, ruffled and languid. (Edwards 31)

Here, once again, Bella gazes at Edward when rays of sunshine touch his face and neck, making his skin scintillate. This scene is particularly illustrative of the connection between the gaze and sexual desire.

While *Twilight* is replete with subjective shots signifying Bella’s investigative and desiring gaze and transmitting her interiority, the subsequent films of the Saga are characterized by a steady decline of Bella’s subjective gaze. The beginning of *New Moon* features a scene in which Bella pleurably gazes at Edward walking towards her in slow-motion, with the guitar-heavy soundtrack giving the situation an upbeat undertone. This is the last instance in which viewers, through Bella, are offered the opportunity to gaze extensively at Edward in a desiring manner.

Later in the same movie, viewers are invited to look at Edward’s naked torso sparkling in the sunlight once more. However, this scene is different from the clearance scene cited earlier. Edward, under the impression that Bella is dead, has decided to commit suicide by provoking the Volturi<sup>114</sup> to kill him. To achieve this, he is planning to expose the existence of the vampire race by stepping into a crowded town square in Volterra, Italy, at noon, thereby committing an offense that is punishable by death by the vampire royalty. Edward’s body may be the object of viewers’ gazes in this scene; as in the clearance scene, the sunlight accentuates his face, bare shoulders and torso. However, his facial expression and posture convey the emotional state he is in: Grieving and weary of life, he actually looks rather sick than sexy. More importantly, the camera is not reproducing Bella’s desiring gaze here, as she is not looking at Edward as an erotic object

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<sup>114</sup> The Volturi are a kind of vampire royalty; in the *Twilight* Saga, they enforce the laws of the vampire world.

in this moment. Instead, she is desperately trying to get to him in time in order to prevent him from exposing himself to the crowd of humans. If one follows Steve Neale, the structure of this scene actually works against the presentation of Edward's body as a sexual object. With reference to Neale, the Volterra scene could be characterized as one of those "moments of spectacle, points at which the narrative hesitates, comes to a momentary halt" ("Masculinity as Spectacle" 285) but which are equally "points at which the drama is finally resolved, a suspense in the culmination of the narrative drive" ("Masculinity as Spectacle" 285). The fact that the moment of erotic contemplation is simultaneously the climax of the narrative works as a strategy "to disavow any explicitly erotic look at the male body" ("Masculinity as Spectacle" 285) according to Neale.

*Breaking Dawn – Part 1* includes a scene in which Bella, unnoticed by Edward, gazes at him, but this moment is very brief; Bella is interrupted by Alice who moves into her field of vision. Besides, this gaze is also not an entirely pleasurable one: Bella is confused by something she observes in Edward's demeanor. In the subsequent scene, she asks him whether he has "second thoughts" (*Breaking Dawn – Part 1*) about their upcoming wedding. Moreover, a large part of *Breaking Dawn – Part 1* privileges Jacob's perspective instead of Bella's; this is clearly an attempt to transfer a similar change of focal character in the novel to the film adaptation. In *Breaking Dawn – Part 2*, subjective shots are used to convey Bella's experience as a newborn vampire to viewers. For instance, the movie starts with Bella opening her red vampire eyes, which are shown in a series of close-ups. A sequence of zooms at different objects in the room tells viewers that Bella now has the supernatural ability to perceive an abundance of details about everything; her senses of sight, touch and smell are exceptional. However, it is important to note that there are no more scenes featuring Bella's erotic gazing at Edward.

What is interesting is that the use of voice-over in the *Twilight* Saga mirrors the use of subjective shots which convey Bella's female gaze. While the first instalment makes heavy use of Bella's voice-over to suggest her thoughts while she is shown on screen (Beaver 355), which

continually positions the viewer to identify with her perspective, . . . Weitz's *New Moon* reduces this identification by changing the nature and function of that type of voice-over, and Slade's film [*Eclipse*] diminishes that identification still further by effectively eclipsing Bella's voice through the limited and forgettable use of narrating voiceover. (Kapurch, "'I'd Never Given'" 183)

At various points in *Twilight*, Bella's voice-over informs viewers about her emotional life, giving them an insight into what she is thinking and feeling about where her life is

going and, most importantly, about Edward, whom she increasingly falls in love with. Thus, the voice-over primarily serves to give audiences access to Bella's inner thoughts and desires. As Katie Kapurch writes, "Bella's narrating voiceover as a subjective-internal sound signifies the character's interiority" ("I'd Never Given" 186). At the end of the first movie, Bella comments: "No one will surrender tonight, but I won't give in. I know what I want" (*Twilight*). Here she is referring to her desire to become a vampire, and to be with Edward for the rest of her immortal existence. The placing of this inner monologue at the very end of the first instalment of the 5-part-series suggests that the narrative in the subsequent movies will show Bella pursuing and finally satisfying her desires – which is indeed what happens in the course of the *Twilight* Saga.

As Kapurch analyzes in detail, Bella's interiority becomes increasingly weak over the course of the series: Not only is the voice-over technique used less frequently in every new instalment, but it also comes to serve other functions than in *Twilight*. While the first movie allows Bella to "articulate her own motives and emotional perspective" (Kapurch, "I'd Never Given" 187), the primary function of Bella's voice-over in the following movies is to describe and summarize the action on-screen. Since the plot is already evident due to the images and the dialogue between characters, "Bella's narration . . . becomes redundant and obvious, rather than a chance for the viewer to share her interior perspective" (Kapurch, "I'd Never Given" 193).<sup>115</sup> Hence, the decline of the female protagonist's voice-over parallels the growing dissolution of her gaze over the course of the *Twilight* Saga. A possible explanation for this phenomenon is given by Kapurch, who points out that Summit, the film production company of the *Twilight* Saga, sought to attract "a broader audience – one beyond the female fans" ("I'd Never Given" 194) with *Eclipse*. Whether the gradual decline of Bella's female gaze over the course of the movies is connected to the filmmakers' choice to invite more male viewers cannot be determined here. However, as Kapurch writes,

noting how a female protagonist's articulate voice is diminished progressively throughout the second and third male-directed cinematic installments while the studio openly sought a male demographic raises concerns about the sexist treatment of female youth – whether as characters or as consumers of media. ("I'd Never Given" 195).

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<sup>115</sup> Another aspect that Kapurch explores is the role of voice-over in the opening sequences of the films. In *Twilight*, Bella's voice-over foreshadows events that occur later in the movie: "I'd never given much thought to how I would die. But dying in the place of someone I love seems like a good way to go." While this narrating voice-over directly conveys Bella's interior perspective, the subsequent movies have Bella reciting quotes from literary sources, such as Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in *New Moon*, in order to shape the audience's expectations of the upcoming film. This strategy "silences the pervasive and determining I-Voice quality present in the opening sequence of *Twilight*. . . . Bella's first words are not even her own thoughts since she is quoting Shakespeare's tragedy" (Kapurch, "I'd Never Given" 188).

#### 4.3.2.2. Gazing at Jacob

Despite the gradual weakening of Bella's gaze across the series, viewers are still invited to gaze at another male character: The body of Jacob Black, who is Edward's rival for Bella's affection, is regularly put on display for the visual pleasure of audiences. Here the camera does not reproduce Bella's gaze but rather incidentally presents Jacob's muscular torso at various points throughout the Saga. The sexualization of Jacob's body is an aspect the *Twilight* films are both notorious for and very self-aware of: In *Eclipse*, characters comment on Jacob's continual toplessness not just once but twice. First, Edward remarks sarcastically: "Doesn't he own a shirt?", and at another point, Jacob taunts Edward with a rather obvious play on words: "Let's face it, I am hotter than you." The circumstance that Jacob is frequently shown shirtless is narratively attributed to the fact that he is a werewolf/shapeshifter. For one thing, as a shapeshifter, he can transform into a wolf at any time; as is established in *New Moon*, members of the pack may suddenly take wolf form either intentionally or if they lose their temper; their transformation is not dependent on the presence of the full moon. In the process, they naturally shred their clothes into pieces, which is assumably why they are not wearing much clothing in the first place. For another thing, the Quileute shapeshifters are characterized by a heightened body temperature, as Bella notices with Jacob: "You're really hot. You feel like you have a fever" (*New Moon*). Due to his unusually high body temperature, Jacob is portrayed as 'naturally' not needing any overgarments; hence also the above-cited comment of him being "hotter than" (*Eclipse*) the undead Edward. Thus, in a similar way that the vampire body is used as a focal point of the female gaze in *Twilight*, Jacob's presentation for the visual pleasure of (female) audiences is justified by his supernatural status as a werewolf.

A troubling aspect that comes in here is the way werewolf mythology is conflated in the *Twilight* series with the real Quileute guardian spirit mythology – the Quileute are not Stephenie Meyer's invention but a Native American people living in Washington state whose mythology Meyer has appropriated in her novels. As several scholars have noted, the Quileute characters and myths in the *Twilight* series are "a product of . . . the romantic and patronizing Western stereotype of the 'Noble Savage'" (Jensen 92). The *Twilight* film adaptations transfer this problematic depiction to a different medium and continue it on a narrative as well as visual level. Thus, Jacob's representation as being in a constant state of undress is in keeping with historical portrayals of Native Americans in American film and literature (Wilson, "Civilized Vampires" 65). These portrayals dictated that Native Americans' "power derives not from their intellect but from their bodies or their closeness

to nature” (Wilson, “Civilized Vampires” 63). In contrast to Edward, whose whiter-than-white body is usually concealed by clothing, Jacob’s non-white and nude body is portrayed as less ‘civilized,’ more animalistic and having a greater potential for violence and the loss of control. Needless to say, Jacob’s last name is ‘Black,’ he literally turns into a wolf and, as Natalie Wilson puts it, “the werewolves’ lack of clothing . . . emphasizes their status *as bodies*”<sup>116</sup> (“Civilized Vampires” 64).

While the Cullens are associated with high culture<sup>117</sup> and can be read as revealing “the links between white privilege and class privilege” (Wilson, “Civilized Vampires” 58), Jacob is working class, his “non-whiteness [associated] with physicality and manual labor” (Wilson, “Civilized Vampires” 59). This is the case for example in the scenes in which Jacob repairs two motorcycles for himself and Bella in *New Moon*. Yvonne Tasker points out that “the kinds of male body – black and white working class – that have traditionally been displayed within western culture are those that are *already sexualised*, perceived through an accumulated history of sexual myths and stereotypes”<sup>118</sup> (79). In this light, it must be taken into account that while the *Twilight* Saga provides potentially subversive spaces for the application of a female gaze onto male sexualized objects, it simultaneously stands in the harmful and discriminatory tradition of representing the Native American man as a Romantic Savage: “passionate, *always* attractive, . . . and yet, still exotic, still at one with nature, and still – if threatened – capable of savage violence”<sup>119</sup> (Burke 208). The fact that Jacob is both non-white and working class explains why his body is more overtly sexualized throughout the film series than Edward’s. The latter is a character who enjoys a variety of race and class privileges and who is the one whom Bella finally chooses as her romantic partner.

An interesting aspect are the situations in which Jacob’s body is put on visual display. In the 1980s, both Richard Dyer and Steve Neale have examined “the conditions under which the eroticization of the male body becomes acceptable” (Caughie and Kuhn 262). They argue that since the representation of women as bearers of the look and men as objects to-be-looked-at constitutes a violation of conventional codes of looking in Hollywood film, movies and other media which are based on this unconventional kind of structure employ specific strategies to deny the objectification of the male body (Caughie

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<sup>116</sup> Emphasis in the original.

<sup>117</sup> The Cullens are introduced as a wealthy family whose “activities and tastes tend toward those things associated with high culture: they like classical music, appreciate art, value education, like to travel, and have sophisticated fashion and home décor know how” (Wilson, “Civilized Vampires” 58).

<sup>118</sup> Emphasis in the original.

<sup>119</sup> Emphasis in the original.

and Kuhn 262-263). While Dyer analyzes the representation of male pin-ups in women's magazines, Neale focuses on the male homoerotic component of the gaze that objectifies the male figure in film. Neale argues that "male homosexuality is constantly present as an undercurrent, as a potentially troubling aspect of many films and genres, but one that . . . has to be repressed" ("Masculinity as Spectacle" 286). One would expect the repressive element to be particularly pronounced in a film series like the *Twilight* Saga, which, as discussed, privileges a female gaze and constantly puts the male body on display. However, it is striking that when it comes to Jacob, the Saga hardly resorts to any of the strategies to repress or disavow male eroticization that are identified by Dyer and Neale in their 1980s essays.

As Neale argues, "in a heterosexual and patriarchal society the male body cannot be marked explicitly as the erotic object of another male look: that look must be motivated in some other way, its erotic component repressed" ("Masculinity as Spectacle" 281). A well-established strategy to suppress the erotic component of scenes that put male bodies on display is the focus on a combat or fight. On the one hand, man-to-man combat functions as a pretext for the presentation of the scantily clad male body (Tasker 79-80). As Benschhoff and Griffin note, "in action movies and Westerns . . . it has become something of a cliché that the hero's shirt will be torn open during a particularly rough fight with an opponent" (254). On the other hand, attention is drawn away from the body itself and directed towards the reactions of the characters involved; those reactions often do not consist of desire but of fear or aggression (Neale, "Masculinity as Spectacle" 285). Strikingly, the display of sexualized male bodies within action or fight scenes serves as a masculinization strategy, as the *mise-en-scène* associates these bodies with activity (Dyer 270). This is a mechanism that usually cannot be found with female characters who become the object of the male gaze:

women get undressed and stand passively before the camera's gaze with the slightest narrative excuse . . . When men disrobe in Hollywood film, it is frequently part of an action sequence. In other words, when the male body is on display, it is as an active, powerful, and dangerous (as well as sexy) weapon wielded against other men. (Benschhoff and Griffin 254)

Thus, through the presentation of male bodies as active and strong, characters on display are distanced from the convention of the passive female object of the gaze and instead re-emphasized to be 'masculine.' As Dyer argues, "it remains the case that images of men must disavow this element of passivity if they are to be kept in line with dominant ideas of masculinity-as-activity" (269).



Looking at scenes in which Jacob's body is presented as a sexualized object for the straight female and/or homosexual male gaze, it becomes clear that these scenes do not function in the manner described in the previous paragraph. Arguably, the erotic component of the scenes is decidedly not repressed but unashamedly offered to the audience. As Perfetti-Oates notes, "*New Moon* does not often invite its viewers to gaze at Jacob's . . . sexualized body in action. Rather, it displays his body in scenes when he simply talks to Bella, such as during a conversation that takes place in her bedroom or another that takes place in the rain" (par. 7). It is true that Jacob generally has more agency than Bella in the story due to his supernatural abilities. However, when it comes to his shirtless scenes, he is often shown standing passively in front of the camera. With the exception of one scene at the beginning of *Breaking Dawn – Part 1*, in which he opens the film by removing his shirt while running and immediately phasing into wolf form, no action elements distract viewers from gazing at Jacob's sexualized body. The *Twilight* Saga does not resort to any narrative excuse for the presentation of Jacob's naked torso besides the general fact that he is a shapeshifter with a high body temperature. As Moore comments, "[w]hat seems to be happening is that now we are seeing the male body coded precisely as erotic spectacle but *without* the accompanying narrative violence" (53).

What is interesting is that Jacob is both gendered 'masculine' and 'feminine' in his topless scenes. On the one hand, the fact that his body is extremely muscular marks Jacob as particularly 'masculine.' As Dyer points out, "it is still the case that muscularity is a key term in appraising men's bodies. . . . Muscularity is the *sign* of power – natural, achieved, phallic"<sup>120</sup> (273). The notion that men are 'naturally' more muscular than women "legitimizes male power and domination" (Dyer 274). Fittingly, in *Eclipse*, Jacob reveals that he is the descendant of Ephraim Black, a Quileute chief and werewolf Alpha. In *Breaking Dawn – Part 1*, he embraces his heritage and claims the position of Alpha, rejecting the current pack leader: "I am the grandson of Ephraim Black, I am the grandson of a chief. I wasn't born to follow you or anyone else." The portrayal of Jacob as a 'born' leader underlines the 'naturalness' of his social as well as physical power. Besides, in *New Moon*, it seems as if Jacob's muscles have mysteriously appeared on his body overnight. His sudden physical change from normal teenager to bodybuilder is commented on by Bella: "Jake, you're like, buff. How did that happen, you're like sixteen, I don't get it." Thus, the *Twilight* Saga depicts the muscular body as Jacob's 'natural' build, which he automatically assumes after the activation of his werewolf gene.

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<sup>120</sup> Emphasis in the original.

At the same time, it is conspicuous that in a variety of scenes which showcase Jacob's bare torso, he is either standing around passively – as already pointed out – or he actually assumes a caretaking role for Bella, both of which would conventionally be associated with 'femininity.' In *New Moon*, Jacob removes his shirt after Bella has an accident with a motorcycle. Perfetti-Oates underlines: "Note that he does not become shirtless in the process of saving her from the crash, but in order to dab the blood from her head afterward" (par. 7). In other words, Jacob's body is not displayed in an action scene that underlines his 'masculinity' but is shown instead in a moment in which he adopts the more 'feminine' role of looking after Bella. In *Eclipse*, he carries Bella around, cradling her in his arms. This is part of an elaborate ploy to trick the evil vampire Victoria: By carrying Bella to a safe place away from the supernatural action, Jacob hopes to mask her human scent with his werewolf scent which is perceived as nasty by vampires. Later in the same movie, he cradles Bella again while she is resting in a tent in the wintry mountains: Due to his werewolf body temperature, he is able to warm the human Bella and thereby prevent her from freezing to death. Thus, after Jacob's transformation into a werewolf, the supernatural narrative appears to serve as a backdrop that necessitates his assuming a caretaking role for Bella. In this way, Jacob can be said to follow the formula of the ideal romance hero, whom Radway has described as crossing gender boundaries: His "spectacular masculinity underscores his status as [a] heterosexual lover" (147) while he also exhibits "extraordinary tenderness and capacity for nurturance" (147).<sup>121</sup> An unusual aspect in the representation of this romance hero is the fact that his constructed masculinity is undermined by the way in which he routinely offers his body as erotic spectacle. By repeatedly catering to the female gaze, the *Twilight* Saga is able to subvert conventional gendered power relations. At the same time, the Saga upholds the white tradition of "[g]azing on the half-naked body of the exoticized Indian male" (Burke 207) that stretches back to the American Revolution, and perpetuates and naturalizes age-old ideas associating "indigenous people with animality and primitivism" (Wilson, "Civilized Vampires" 55).

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<sup>121</sup> Edward's character is also indebted to these kinds of romance conventions, as will be discussed in subchapter 6.4.

#### 4.4. Female Subjectivity and Desire in *The Vampire Diaries*

As discussed in the previous subchapter, a heterosexual female gaze can be found in the *Twilight* Saga on two of the levels Mulvey identifies: There is the gaze of protagonist Bella Swan at the male object of her desire, Edward Cullen, as well as the gaze of the camera at the sexualized body of Jacob Black; the latter gaze is not necessarily attached to any particular character. The third level of the gaze would be “that of the audience as it watches the final product” (Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure” 25). *The Vampire Diaries* functions in a similar manner. The series features both the gaze of Elena Gilbert, the female human protagonist, and a camera gaze that more generally provides viewers with the pleasure of looking at the male body as eroticized object. Here, too, the bodies of vampires and other supernatural creatures, like werewolves and vampire hunters,<sup>122</sup> are presented in an objectifying way to viewers, more so than the bodies of human characters. First and foremost, *The Vampire Diaries* aims to titillate its audiences by inviting their gaze at the bodies of the two vampire protagonists, Damon and Stefan Salvatore.

##### 4.4.1. Stefan and Damon as Objects of Elena’s Gaze

*The Vampire Diaries* begins with a setting similar to *Twilight*’s: Elena Gilbert, a teenage girl, is introduced as the main female character of the series. Her subjectivity is generated on an auditory as well as visual level. Thus, we often listen in on Elena writing her diary: Her thoughts are presented to us through her voice-over, a technique that is regularly used in the course of the show. More importantly, Elena’s interiority is created by the frequent representation of her gaze in the text. Although Stefan Salvatore equally serves as a character with whom viewers are encouraged to identify,<sup>123</sup> the audience is explicitly invited to share Elena’s point of view at the beginning of her love story with Stefan. For instance, the pilot episode follows Elena on her way to school at the beginning of the new school year. In a scene that mirrors a similar set-up in *Twilight*, Elena and her friend

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<sup>122</sup> Comparable to Jacob’s body in the *Twilight* Saga, the naked bodies of male werewolves like Tyler Lockwood are often presented in a sexualizing manner before or after they morph into animal form; the same cannot be said for female werewolves (compare, for instance, Tyler’s transformation in season 2, episode 11, to Jules’ transformation in episode 12). Also, when Jeremy, Elena’s (originally human) younger brother, becomes a vampire hunter in season 4, he suddenly acquires a muscular physique and is presented more often as visual spectacle. Throughout the season, not only is he shown in training for his new duties, but his body is repeatedly objectified and dissected by the camera gaze because it comes to bear the so-called hunter’s mark, a supernatural tattoo which functions as a map to the location of Silas’ tomb.

<sup>123</sup> Stefan, too, has a habit of keeping a journal, which allows us to catch a glimpse of his emotional life. This is also where the title of the series stems from.

Bonnie see Stefan, who has transferred to Mystic Falls High School as a new student, for the first time in the school office: “All I see is back,” says Elena, and Bonnie adds: “It’s a hot back” (“Pilot”). Although Bonnie watches him turn around first, it is only when Stefan bumps into Elena that viewers get to see what his face looks like. Thus, the audience shares Elena’s perspective when it comes to looking at Stefan.

Incidentally, there are a number of similarities between the *Twilight* Saga and *The Vampire Diaries* with regard to the evolution of the central romance. Several scenes in the first episodes set the tone for the rest of the show by establishing the pleasures of gazing as central. In the first two episodes, Elena and Stefan playfully exchange looks during class, with Elena being the one initiating the exchange. At the same time, their nonverbal communication is observed not only by Matt, Elena’s ex-boyfriend, but also by Bonnie, who informs Elena in a private text message: “HAWT-E STARING @ U” (“Pilot”). This prevalence of gazes and looks is reminiscent of the conspicuous focus on who is looking and who is being looked at within the high school culture depicted in *Twilight*. Furthermore, by characterizing Stefan as having “that romance novel stare” (“Pilot”), *The Vampire Diaries* deliberately locates itself within the romance genre.

Episode 3 then gives exclusive priority to the female gaze. Thus, “Friday Night Bites” features a scene in which Elena secretly gazes at Stefan playing football, granting her the position of active bearer of the gaze and rendering him the object of this gaze. When she takes a break from her own cheerleading practice, Elena’s attention is caught by Stefan jogging towards the field. A shot that shows her looking off-camera is followed by a shot of Stefan in sports gear, implying that this is a POV shot from Elena’s perspective. This pattern is repeated a couple of times, underlining the fact that we are sharing Elena’s gaze. In addition, the recurring shots of her face and upper body convey her reaction to us and thereby reveal her growing affection for Stefan. Intrigued by what she observes, Elena strolls closer to the action, picking a hidden spot next to the bleachers from which she can gaze at Stefan more extensively. Her facial expression tells us that she is impressed by his athletic ability, and she is clearly enjoying herself. Besides indicating the importance of Elena’s gaze, the scene establishes Stefan as being in excellent physical shape; the rock tune playing in the background characterizes him as cool and attractive. During this football practice, he surprises not only Elena but also the coach and his team mates. The fact that he is unaware of being the object of Elena’s desiring gaze at this moment is striking: As Elena is standing in a spot in which she remains hidden from the men on the field, they cannot return her gaze. In this way, Elena

is able to occupy the position of the desiring subject without in turn becoming the object of Stefan's gaze, which was the case in the scenes taking place in class.

A scene that occurs later in the series repeats this scenario of Elena being the bearer of an unreturned gaze at Stefan, the object of her desire. Here the couple is lying in bed in the morning. While Stefan is still half asleep and lying on his back with his eyes closed, Elena is awake and facing him. A POV shot encourages viewers to share her perspective. "You're staring," Stefan complains. She corrects him: "I'm gazing." "It's creepy," he objects. Elena insists: "It's romantic" ("Plan B"). This dialogue between Stefan and Elena makes the pleasures of the heterosexual female gaze, in which the show heavily revels, explicit.

Like Bella, Elena turns her active, investigative gaze towards Stefan, whose secret she is initially not aware of. When inexplicable phenomena pile up, her quest for knowledge is triggered. In "Friday Night Bites," Elena witnesses how Stefan cuts his hand when he is trying to accommodate a quarrel between two of his fellow students. What she does not know is that due to his vampire nature, Stefan's wound heals instantly. When he tries to convince Elena to believe that he was not injured at all, she insists: "No, no, no, I saw it. The glass cut your hand" ("Friday Night Bites"). Furthermore, she repeatedly notices that Stefan's eyes change when he is around blood.<sup>124</sup> Stefan attempts to hide from Elena's look but he is unsuccessful. Elena's perceptiveness parallels Bella's acumen and tendency to be exceptionally observant when it comes to Edward in *Twilight*. Interestingly, as discussed earlier, it is also a change in Edward's eye color that Bella notices and that brings her closer to unravelling Edward's vampire identity.

A scene in "You're Undead to Me" (episode 5) recalls the moment Bella has her epiphany about the reason for Edward's strange behavior. After interviewing an elderly citizen of Mystic Falls who believes to recognize Stefan as someone he met in the 1950s, Elena taps her resources to access the archives of the local TV station to gather evidence of a supposed animal attack at the Salvatore boarding house in 1953. Similar to the respective scene in *Twilight*, the *Vampire Diaries* scene features several subjective shots, close-ups and extreme close-ups that convey Elena's perspective. Like Bella, Elena uses a computer to research details about her suitor. In the meantime, Stefan is given some advice about Elena, one of whose characteristics Matt describes as her active and relentless investigative drive and her strong motivation to see through people: "She's big

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<sup>124</sup> In *The Vampire Diaries*, when vampires feel the urge to feed on humans, their eyes turn red, dark veins become visible around their eyes and cheekbones, and their elongated fangs pop out.

on trust. So whatever you're holding back from her, the more you try to hide it, the more she won't stop 'till she figures it out" ("You're Undead to Me"). A striking detail is that it is through the visual medium of a video report from the 1950s that Elena figures out Stefan's secret. She spots Stefan's blurry face in the background of a black-and-white video and zooms in on the detail on screen, a process that can be considered a literal representation of the active investigative gaze she directs at the boy she desires.

The scene that visualizes Elena's realization of Stefan's vampire identity, which follows a couple of minutes later, is again constructed in a similar manner as in *Twilight*: Detail shots of scenes from the previous episodes are inserted into a scene that shows Elena alone in her room, pacing around and tearing her hair, thinking. These insert shots, which are embedded "for informational purposes or to provide dramatic emphasis" (Beaver 194) according to film convention, represent relevant moments Elena is remembering; these are all the things she has seen and noticed. At the same time, her voice-over spells out her thought process for us: "It's not possible. I'm not a believer. I can't be. But how can I deny what's right in front of me? Someone who never grows old. Never gets hurt. Someone who changes in ways that can't be explained. Girls bitten. Bodies drained of blood" ("You're Undead to Me"). Elena comes to the conclusion that Stefan is a vampire. Through the power of her own active investigative gaze and her insistence to know the person who has become important to her, she has figured out her 'dangerously beautiful' man's secret identity. In this way, *The Vampire Diaries*, like *Twilight*, reverses the paradigm of the male gaze that is usually directed at a mysterious female character in Hollywood film. For this purpose, the series employs the figure of the vampire which invites the investigative/desiring female gaze.

Over the course of the seasons, Elena becomes more and more infatuated with Stefan's brother, Damon, who is also a vampire. Her sexual and romantic interest in both brothers is an aspect the series continually plays with, sometimes very openly, sometimes more subtly. The love triangle is carefully cultivated by the showrunners, as it invites and fuels the involvement of viewers and strengthens their relationship to characters. As early as in season 1, Caroline confronts Elena with the fact that she might desire both Stefan and Damon: "So what, is this like a threesome now? You and the Salvatore brothers?" ("Unpleasantville"). By setting up this male/female/male triangle, *The Vampire Diaries* offers a "romance scenario [in which] the heroine is . . . an independently desiring subject whose desire propels most action and whose point of view governs [viewer] identification. . . . Her choice expresses a confident and determining female gaze and a

knowing, autonomous subjectivity” (Veldman-Genz, “Serial Experiments” 111). Season 3 features a scene that makes Elena’s attraction to Damon unambiguously clear by putting her desiring gaze front and center. In “Heart of Darkness,” she and Damon go on a road trip together to pick up her brother; in the run-up to this episode, the sexual tension between them has visibly increased, and Elena hopes to come to grips with her unresolved feelings for Damon during the trip. When they stop at a motel for the night, she has the opportunity to gaze at Damon’s body at length. In a direct reversal of Mulvey’s claim that the visual presence of a woman on screen “tends to work against the development of a story-line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation” (“Visual Pleasure” 19), this scene has little relevance to the plot of the episode but instead celebrates the pleasures of the straight female gaze and the fetishization of the male (vampire) body.

The scene opens with a medium shot of Damon exiting the bathroom and entering the motel room. He is only wearing jeans, and as soon as he steps out of the dark hallway, his naked torso is bathed in the dimmed light of the bedroom, accentuating his muscles. When he arrives at the bed, the camera shows only his upper legs, crotch and stomach, which initially seems like an odd perspective. With the next shot, the camera reveals that it is in fact Elena’s point of view that we are sharing. As it turns out, she is lying in bed, pretending to be asleep and secretly following the unsuspecting Damon with her eyes. The latter walks across the room to the table, loosely puts on a shirt, pours himself a cup of bourbon whiskey and sits down, lounging in a motel chair. In a series of medium shots, close-ups and extreme close-ups, the camera focuses on Damon’s body, almost caressing his features. It pans upwards from his hands to his chest and head, then once again traces the full length of his body, starting from his feet and moving up to his upper body. A close-up of his hands holding the plastic cup is followed by a close-up of his face when he raises the cup to his mouth and takes a sip. Cut in-between are close-ups of Elena’s face, which not only reminds viewers that they are watching Damon through her eyes but also gives away her fascination with and attraction to him. The fact that Damon is unaware of Elena’s gaze once again allows her to fully occupy the position of the gazer in this situation, rendering Damon the eroticized object of her desire.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> This effect is broken when Damon suddenly notices and returns her gaze. Caught in the act of exercising an active desiring gaze, Elena immediately lowers her gaze and pretends to go to sleep.

#### 4.4.2. Damon as Object of the Camera's Gaze

Generally speaking, it is Damon's body that is most frequently and most markedly objectified in *The Vampire Diaries*. Although Stefan is also regularly presented in various states of undress, most often in white fine-ribbed underwear, showing off his muscles and sixpack, Damon provides a more interesting example because he is frequently displayed as deliberately and openly offering himself up to either Elena's or the camera's gaze. By becoming the object of the gaze and by presenting himself in situations and poses that are commonly associated with 'femininity' rather than 'masculinity,' he occupies a position that is usually reserved for the female star in traditional Hollywood film.

As already pointed out, the scenes in which Damon functions as erotic spectacle have little narrative purpose but rather pause the action in order to provide audiences with the visual pleasure of gazing at the male body. As with Jacob in the *Twilight* Saga, the erotic component of the scenes is paraded rather than repressed; in *The Vampire Diaries*, we do not find any of the conventional strategies identified by Neale and Dyer that are meant to disavow male eroticization. On the contrary, Damon in particular is marked explicitly as erotic object of the gaze. Benshoff and Griffin point out that "[f]ilmmakers often find (sometimes very contrived) ways to get female characters out of their work clothes and into bikinis, underwear, or sheer negligees. Hence, every aspect of an actress' bodily appearance receives the utmost attention" (245). *The Vampire Diaries* deliberately reverses this paradigm. Generally speaking, a great many episodes depict the events of one single day in the lives of the characters, beginning in the morning and ending at night. This episode structure allows spectators to regularly gaze at the Salvatore brothers during their daily morning routine, which involves fixing themselves up and getting dressed. Other instances in which Damon is pointedly sexualized include him dancing<sup>126</sup> and playing strip poker<sup>127</sup> – none of these are scenes that underline his 'masculinity' but instead place him in the traditionally 'feminine' position of the person who is being looked at.

Comparable to Jacob in the *Twilight* Saga, Damon's body is rarely put on eroticized display in action or fight scenes. Instead, the narrative often creates situations in which Damon must go home and change clothes because he has either been injured or his shirt has been sullied, for example by blood. Thus, his body is not sexualized in the active, 'masculine' pursuit of violent fighting but rather in the aftermath of the action; the soiled

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<sup>126</sup> See episode "Lost Girls."

<sup>127</sup> See episode "Isobel."



shirts provide a welcome narrative excuse for Damon to present himself bare-chested to the audience. One such instance occurs in the episode “Know Thy Enemy.” After carrying the unconscious Jonathan Gilbert over his shoulder and spilling blood all over his clothes, Damon must clean himself up and removes his shirt in the process. In the scene in his bathroom, he is deliberately positioned as facing the camera, giving viewers full visual access to his well-toned upper body.

In “The Rager,” Damon has been pierced by an arrow and comes home to get cleaned up, only to find Elena in his bedroom.<sup>128</sup> While talking to her, he casually takes off his shirt and has a look at the almost healed-up wound on his chest. Deliberately teasing Elena (and the audience of the show), he sets out to unbutton his pants as well. Here the camera pans over Damon’s upper body in a close-up, coming to a halt in his crotch area, where his hands have already opened his belt. This shot is followed by a close-up of Elena’s face and her moving eyes. She is looking Damon over from head to toe. The movement of her eyes echoes the earlier movement of the camera, both gazes appreciating the contours of Damon’s body, which he so readily offers for the purpose of visual pleasure. Clearly enjoying the fact that he is the object of Elena’s desiring gaze, Damon ostentatiously unbuttons his pants, slowly hitting one button after the other: “Are you staying for the show or...?” (“The Rager”). Through this provocative comment, he indicates that he is knowingly performing for Elena and the straight female gaze.

Another example can be found in the episode “Daddy Issues,” which begins with Damon taking a shower in the morning. As in “The Rager,” the camera pans over his bare torso, this time from the bottom up. Through the use of extreme close-ups which focus on different parts of Damon’s torso, his unclad body is fragmented, mirroring a technique commonly employed for female characters in mainstream film: “In Hollywood films, fetishization can occur when the female body is broken by the camera and editing patterns into a collection of smaller objectified parts: hands, feet, legs, hair, breasts, etc.” (Benshoff and Griffin 247). Thus, Damon’s body is fetishized here, and his presentation for the camera is intended to cater to the sexual pleasure of the female gaze. A comparison of this scene with one that takes place only two episodes later makes clear that the straight female gaze is given much more room in the series than the straight male gaze. In “The Dinner Party,” Katherine, who is Elena’s doppelganger and the Salvatore brothers’ former lover, is shown taking a shower; the scene is even set in the very same bathroom. Although she is certainly presented in a sexualized manner through her wet skin, hair and

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<sup>128</sup> Elena is looking for the last remaining White Oak stake that Damon has hidden.

make-up, the camera refrains from panning over Katherine's naked body and fragmenting it as it does Damon's. Damon, who has entered the bathroom, is shown scanning her body from head to toe, but it is striking that the camera does not provide a subjective shot from his perspective here. Instead, it stays focused on Katherine's head and shoulders, which means that she is not reduced to a sum of sexualized body parts in this scene. While the set-up of this situation could easily have been exploited for the pleasures of the male gaze, as one might expect to happen in many other TV programs, *The Vampire Diaries* refuses to make Katherine's body the object of the camera. In this way, the series' dedication to the heterosexual female gaze seems even more striking.

Damon does not only present himself as an object to be desired by Elena by frequently flirting with her. Interestingly, he is also afforded the role of seducer within the narrative of the third season. In the episode "Break on Through," Damon strategically employs his sex appeal in order to obtain important information. He must seduce this information from Rebekah Mikaelson, and because she is an extremely powerful Original vampire,<sup>129</sup> this task requires Damon's skill as a manipulator. He feigns sexual interest in Rebekah, openly flirts with her and invites her to his house for a drink, where he finally seduces her. When Rebekah lets her guard down in this moment of intimacy, Damon's accomplice Sage, also a powerful vampire, manages to access Rebekah's mind to retrieve the information they are looking for. In this episode, the common popular cultural script of the sensual seductress who uses her female sexuality to manipulate heterosexual men is turned on its head: The manipulative seducer is Damon, and the seduced person is Rebekah, a female teen vampire. The reversal may not be complete; in contrast to the fact that the conventional scenario is based on the notion that men can easily be manipulated with sex because they supposedly have a naturally high sex drive and prefer casual sex to relationships, "Break On Through" constructs a situation in which Rebekah can be manipulated with sex because of "her craving for affection and her pathological fear of being left alone" ("Break On Through"). Thus, Rebekah is not coded as 'masculine' here; on the contrary, her 'femininity' is actually reinforced by her depiction as being overly emotionally involved in her sexual encounter with Damon, which is framed as her Achilles' heel. As Sage puts it: "Rebekah may be an Original. But she's a girl. You find her weakness and exploit it" ("Break On Through"). Nevertheless, Damon assumes the

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<sup>129</sup> The Originals are the first generation of vampires from whom all vampires are descended. Being centuries old, they are known as the most powerful supernatural beings in the *Vampire Diaries* universe.

role of the manipulative seducer in this scenario, which is a role traditionally ascribed to women.<sup>130</sup> This ‘feminized’ representation of Damon on a narrative level complements his frequent positioning as sexualized object of the gaze. The effect is a blurring of gender norms and a challenge to gendered gaze paradigms.

In the subsequent episode, “The Murder of One,” Rebekah, after realizing she has been taken advantage of, takes vengeance for Damon’s manipulation by slowly torturing him. Incidentally, the depiction of torture is a further pretext for the representation of the sexualized male body in *The Vampire Diaries*. In this regard, the show is indebted to the earlier TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, in which the semi-naked, tortured male vampire body is a recurring motif (Recht 245). Recht has identified the representation of torture and/or crucifixion as a strategy to depict male vampire characters in a passive, objectified position (252). According to Recht, respective scenes in *Buffy* serve as a mechanism to demasculinize the vampires (253). At the same time, the tortured vampires are also masculinized through poses emphasizing their muscles; furthermore, Recht argues that crucifixion and torture allow the vampires to repent for their sins and to be elevated to the status of redeemed hero through the purifying effect of penance. Thus, he contends that vampires fluctuate between ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ positions in these representations in *Buffy* (253). An important observation by Recht is the fact that the tortured and/or crucified male vampire body tends to be sexualized: Despite severe wounds, the body is portrayed as beautiful, scantily-clad and vulnerable (252).<sup>131</sup>

As stated above, this visual representation of the sexualized tortured male vampire body can be found in *The Vampire Diaries* as well. For instance, in a scene in “Let the Right One in,” Stefan is tortured by a group of vampires; his hands are tied together above his head and his naked torso is cut and pierced by a knife. In “Disturbing Behavior,” he is once again physically abused by the witch Gloria. Here his body is presented in a crucifixion pose, lying on a table with extended arms, again with a bare torso, while

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<sup>130</sup> To be fair, the conventional trope of the sexually attractive, manipulative seductress can be found in *The Vampire Diaries* as well. Katherine’s character is regularly portrayed as conforming to this trope. Furthermore, Damon is the cunning seducer that he is because he was taught by his friend Sage, whom he refers to as “miss master seductress” (“Break On Through”).

<sup>131</sup> When it comes to human characters being tortured in *Buffy*, Recht finds that the actual torture, particularly the penetration of the body, is not shown. The male human body is not represented in open muscle poses but rather in poses that are closed; in addition, tortured humans are depicted as fully clothed (Recht 249). *The Vampire Diaries* also follows this paradigm, for instance in “Catch Me If You Can,” when Rebekah and Stefan torture an unknown human man or in “Into the Wild,” when Damon tortures Atticus Shane. Female vampires are also tortured in *The Vampire Diaries*; in fact, Caroline Forbes becomes a torture victim a number of times, for example in “Daddy Issues” (at the hands of werewolves) and “Before Sunset” (at the hands of ‘Evilaric’). Similar to the representation of human male characters, Caroline’s body is depicted in closed poses, remains completely dressed and is not sexualized in the torture scenes.

Gloria is slitting his wrists and collecting his blood, which is dripping down to the floor. Both scenes present Stefan in open poses which make visible his muscles despite the terrible injuries that are inflicted upon him. While Stefan's torture scenes noticeably depict him in a passive, vulnerable and objectified position, Damon is featured in a number of torture scenes which serve to showcase his sexualized body in a more ostensible way. The scene in which Rebekah takes vengeance on Damon for manipulating her is one of these.

Here Damon's body, too, is arranged in a crucifixion pose, his hands fixed by two steel traps that are hanging from the ceiling. Overall, the erotic undertone of the scene is much more overt than in Stefan's scenes. This is in large part due to the upbeat soundtrack, the sarcastic and playful dialogue that accompanies the scene, and, most importantly, Rebekah's sexualizing gaze as well as the pleasure she obviously draws from exerting complete power over Damon. With a quick gesture, she rips open his shirt and starts cutting into his flesh with a knife, penetrating his body. Damon's sensual moan and provocative facial expression situate this scene as a "kinky" ("The Murder of One") sex game rather than serious torture. In a similar way as in the previously analyzed scenes, the camera pans over Damon's naked, bloodied chest and fragments his body in a series of extreme close-ups. Following Recht and his analysis of comparable scenes in *Buffy*, this *The Vampire Diaries* scene is characterized by sadistic voyeurism and fetishistic scopophilia (273). Contrary to Mulvey's findings, here the sexualizing, sadistic power of the gaze is directed towards the male (vampire) body.

#### 4.4.3. Damon as Camp

As discussed in the previous subchapters, Damon frequently occupies the position of object to-be-looked at in *The Vampire Diaries*. The amount and variety of narrative excuses for the visual display of his sexualized body are striking, ranging from the Salvatore brothers' daily morning routine to the use of torture. In addition, Damon also performs the role of seducer on a narrative level, regularly propositioning Elena and using his sexual appeal to manipulate Rebekah. One further aspect of Damon's representation as the object of the straight female gaze in *The Vampire Diaries* is that it can be located within Damon's performance of camp. This aspect is particularly interesting because it underscores the subversive potential of Damon's body as visual spectacle. As defined in the *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society* (2009), camp

refers to styles, attitudes, and behaviors that are exaggerated, overstated and ironic. Originally used in relation to the behavior of homosexual men, the term now refers to self-conscious acts of subversion and parody in the context of society's gender norms. . . . Camp performances . . . can often destabilize norms and beliefs surrounding regulations that govern masculinity and femininity. (Purvis and Longstaff 104)

Thus, by exaggerating and/or contorting specific elements, camp draws attention to the constructedness of, for instance, gender roles. In this way, it may playfully disrupt the gender order. The roots of camp lie in gay culture and are based on what Jack Babuscio terms a “gay sensibility” (118). According to Babuscio, based on their stigmatization in society and “a heightened awareness and appreciation for . . . the distinctions to be made between instinctive and theatrical behaviour” (124), which arise from the mechanism of passing as heterosexual, gays have developed a particular view of the world, in which camp often functions as a way of dealing with marginalization (133). However, people who deliver camp performances need not necessarily be gay (Babuscio 119). Thus, although Damon Salvatore is portrayed as straight within the *Vampire Diaries* narrative, his character combines several features that constitute campness, such as humor, self-conscious irony and affectation (Masson and Stanley par. 2). Besides, as a vampire in a (teen) paranormal romance text, he disrupts several binaries, for instance those of life/death, attractiveness/repulsiveness, youth/old age, human/monster and hero/villain. The liminal position he occupies mirrors the status of queer people in society; as Babuscio writes (in the 1970s), “[s]ex/love between two men or two women is regarded by society as incongruous – out of keeping with the ‘normal,’ ‘natural,’ ‘healthy,’ heterosexual order of things” (119). Because Damon exists on the margins, his character is ideally suited to be open to a camp sensibility.

According to Babuscio, “[f]our features are basic to camp: irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humour” (119). When it comes to *The Vampire Diaries*, it is striking that Damon incarnates these camp features within the show in general, and with respect to his performance for the straight female gaze in particular. Words that have been used to define camp, “such as *affected*, . . . *exaggerated*, *ostentatious*, and *theatrical*”<sup>132</sup> (Purvis and Longstaff 104), also function as descriptions of Ian Somerhalder's performance of Damon Salvatore. In the pilot, Damon announces his presence by conjuring smoke and black crows to make a dramatic entrance. Stefan comments on his brother's extravagant performance: “Crow's a bit much, don't you think?” (“Pilot”). Here the series draws on tropes established in early cinematic adaptations of *Dracula* and plays with these

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<sup>132</sup> Emphasis in the original.

associations by exaggerating and verbally drawing attention to them. Interestingly, Babuscio argues that “[t]he horror genre, in particular, is susceptible to a camp interpretation” (121). This can be tied back to the emphasis on outrageous sentiments and excess that horror and camp share (Babuscio 121).

The strategy of linking horror tropes with camp is often made use of in the show; this serves a variety of functions. In “Growing Pains,” Damon attacks Matt in order to lure Pastor Young out of his home; he does so to gain access to the house in which Stefan and Elena are being held captive. In a deliberately affected manner, he calls the Pastor: “Yoo-hoo! Anybody home? Big bad vampire out here” (“Growing Pains”). The fact that Damon’s role as a dangerous predator is a performance is foregrounded in this scene. At the same time, although he has not killed Matt, Damon has not hesitated to sacrifice his wellbeing in order to achieve his own goals. The kind of self-parodying he engages in here is fairly camp. As Babuscio argues, “[t]o appreciate camp in things or persons is to perceive the notion of life-as-theatre, being versus role-playing” (123). Furthermore, theatricality and humor serve as strategies that allow us “to witness ‘serious’ issues with temporary detachment, so that only later, after the event, are we struck by the emotional and moral implications of what we have almost passively absorbed” (Babuscio 128). Thus, camp is frequently deployed in *The Vampire Diaries* to mitigate the horrors of Damon’s actions. It is not by coincidence that he is the character with the campiest performance; he is also the one who commits the most atrocities over the course of the seasons – all while remaining a vampire that is meant to be understood as sympathetic by audiences.

By introducing Damon as a camp vampire character, *The Vampire Diaries* once again follows in the footsteps of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. As Cynthia Masson and Marni Stanley argue, vampire Spike from *Buffy* has a camp sensibility, which “is predominantly evident in the sarcastic humour he brings to his focus on the aesthetics of others. Spike’s humour is often cruel – *biting* we could say – and this too is an inherent quality of camp”<sup>133</sup> (par. 16). Bitter-wit, defined by Babuscio as typically camp (126), is the main component of Spike’s humor, which he usually directs at other characters to mock them. Similarly, Damon is characterized by a sarcastic, arrogant type of humor. Within the series, he frequently provides snarky and derisive commentary on situations as well as behavior and looks of other characters. Damon’s snark contributes significantly to the overall tone of the show. One frequent victim of his commentary is Elena’s younger

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<sup>133</sup> Emphasis in the original.

brother Jeremy, whom Damon mocks in season 1 for being a stereotypical adolescent troubled by drugs and alcohol: “I have so many emotions, but I don’t have any way to express them. Being a teenager is so hard” (“Founder’s Day”). Another target of his derision is Stefan; the latter is ridiculed by Damon on a regular basis for his emotional and morally upright attitude, which is often presented as contrary to Damon’s standpoint: “Stefan is different. He wants to be human. He wants to feel every episode of *How I Met Your Mother*” (“Isobel”).

The preceding quote also illustrates another aspect of Damon’s camp commentary: popular cultural references and intertextuality. Thus, in the highly self-referential *Vampire Diaries*, references to other TV programs and movies are in large part dropped by Damon. For instance, when it turns out in season 2 that werewolves exist in the *Vampire Diaries* universe, he spells out the series’ connection to the classic cinematic horror genre by commenting: “If this wolfman thing is true, I’ve seen enough movies to know it’s not good. It means Mason Lockwood is a real-life Lon Chaney. . . . Which means Bela Lugosi, meaning me, is totally screwed” (“Bad Moon Rising”). Damon’s continual intertextual references as well as the self-conscious irony with which he addresses and thwarts genre tropes are part of his camp persona. Both are strategies that draw attention to the fictionality of the show. Like Spike, Damon points towards the constructedness of the whole TV series and the artifice of other characters. As Masson and Stanley write: “Gods, superheroes, and vampires should not be concerned with their hair – but in *Buffy* they are, and Spike is the one to point out the artifice of these aesthetic details while sporting the most artificial looking hair of all” (par. 16). Curiously, in *The Vampire Diaries*, Damon is equally concerned with mocking his brother’s hairdo, for example in season 2: “You better watch your back. ‘Cause I may just have to go get a hero hairdo of my own and steal your thunder” (“Daddy Issues”). Here a further aspect of camp becomes visible: Through an emphasis on style over essence, camp shifts attention “from what a thing or a person is to what it *looks* like; from what is being done to *how* it is being done”<sup>134</sup> (Babuscio 122).

Interestingly, Damon also mirrors Spike’s way of ridiculing other male characters for not being ‘masculine’ enough. Because Spike is insecure in terms of his own gender, he adopts a defensive attitude and mocks other men’s performance of masculinity (Masson and Stanley par. 17). The effect is striking: “the more he critiques masculine performance in others, the more the audience is aware of Spike’s own performance of

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<sup>134</sup> Emphasis in the original.

masculinity” (Masson and Stanley par. 18). Accordingly, the effect of Damon’s camp commentary is a drawing of attention to the artificiality of gender roles. Thus, Damon’s comments about Jeremy’s emotionality as well as Stefan’s sentimentality and beauty routine can be understood as mockeries of these characters’ performances of masculinity. At the same time, the comments clash with Damon’s own ‘flawed’ performance of traditional masculinity; he, too, often acts emotionally and is known for his careful cultivation of an elegant clothing style.

In a number of episodes, Damon performs for the straight female gaze in a deliberately camp manner. As can be argued, *The Vampire Diaries* manages to expose the constructedness of the category of gender through Damon’s camp performance. Thus, prominent aspects of many scenes which present Damon’s body as erotic spectacle are the humor and theatricality involved. This is important because, as Babuscio argues, “[h]umour constitutes the strategy of camp” (126). According to Babuscio, this humor “results from an identification of a strong incongruity between an object, person, or situation and its context” (126). In the case of *The Vampire Diaries*, the incongruity which is the basis of Damon’s camp consists of him occupying the conventionally ‘feminine’ position of being the sexualized object of the gaze. By taking a humorous and playful approach to Damon’s sexual objectification, the show indicates an awareness of traditional gaze paradigms, and deliberately destabilizes dominant notions of what the object of the gaze should and can look like.

A scene that comes to mind in this context takes place in the episode “The Birthday.” In this scene, Damon is enjoying a bubble bath and sipping champagne with visible pleasure. While his female partner, Andie Star, is getting ready for work, Damon relaxes in the bathtub, having a dreamy, contented expression on his face. The fact that the stereotypically female endeavor of taking a bubble bath is engaged in by Damon is further amplified by his intentional performance for the heterosexual female gaze. After realizing that the bottle of champagne is empty, Damon stands up in the bathtub, his naked body covered in bath foam. While – judging from his smug, provocative smile – he clearly enjoys his girlfriend’s gaze, the camera makes an effort to shield the lower part of his body by moving behind different objects, like a table in the bathroom.

Damon then prances through the hall and into the living room, with the camera continuing to conveniently position itself in ways which ensure that his private parts are never exposed. This seemingly random, yet very obviously strategic use of different camera angles has a comedic effect. The humor that accompanies this nude scene adds a



campy undertone to the already comic situation of Damon relaxing in a bubble bath. The latter is comic because, as already pointed out, it presents Damon in a stereotypically ‘female’ position; the bubble bath is usually associated with the ‘feminine’ realm of beauty treatments and self-care in a romantic atmosphere involving rose petals and romantic candle light.<sup>135</sup> In Babuscio’s terms, this scene could be characterized as ironic. As he writes, “[c]amp is ironic insofar as an incongruous contrast can be drawn between an individual/thing and its context/association. The most common of incongruous contrasts is that of masculine/feminine” (119).

When he enters the living room, Damon walks into Elena, who just arrived at the Salvatore house. Not surprisingly, he visibly relishes the moment she turns around to find him naked and covered in bath foam. Damon’s exhibitionism and extravagant self-presentation are integral parts of his theatrical performance. Moreover, the scene is based on the circumstance of Damon entering the living room just a few seconds after Elena’s arrival, so he can deliberately tease her. According to Babuscio, “[t]he art of camp . . . relies largely upon arrangement, timing, and tone” (120). Thus, the timing, which is crucial to the functioning of the scene, is a further aspect that marks this scene as camp.

On the basis of all these camp features, humor, irony, theatricality and timing, *The Vampire Diaries* manages to playfully destabilize gendered behavior and gaze paradigms. The overt ironic positioning of Damon as object of the gaze suggests that the show has an awareness of tropes and traditions of gender-specific representation. As we have seen, the above-described parody of stereotypically ‘female’ practices in this episode is part of Damon’s camp role in the series in general. As it draws attention to the constructedness of gender roles by juxtaposing ‘male’ and ‘female’ stereotypes, Damon’s camp performance for the straight female gaze can be read as a subversive strategy that undermines the gender order.

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<sup>135</sup> Notably, *True Blood* features a similar scene in “The Fourth Man in the Fire,” in which vampire Eric Northman takes a bath at Bill Compton’s house, surrounded by white candles and listening to Old Swedish folk music. The scene deliberately plays with viewers’ expectations: Bill comes home and is startled by the sound of music coming from upstairs. Suspicious, he sneaks up the stairs and to his (and the audience’s) surprise, instead of an attacker, he finds Eric in his bathtub, naked, eyes closed and fully relaxed. Eric, the former Viking warrior, is further portrayed as camp in season 2, when he spends parts of an episode walking around with aluminum foil in his chin-long hair; he is in the process of dyeing it platinum blonde. The episode expands the juxtaposition when Eric, after brutally killing and dismembering a man, is worried that blood spilled onto his hair because this would not only ruin the dyeing process but would also force him to have to apologize to Pam, his second in command and, apparently, his hairdresser.

## 4.5. Female Subjectivity and Desire in *True Blood*

Similar to the *Twilight* Saga and *The Vampire Diaries*, *True Blood* both features the gaze of its female protagonist Sookie Stackhouse and repeatedly presents the male body as eroticized object. The frequency and degree to which male characters are sexualized in the series surpasses the two previously discussed shows. Worth noting is the fact that the excessive manner in which the male body becomes spectacle in *True Blood* is linked with its being affiliated with the subscription-only cable channel *HBO*, which “has a reputation for cutting-edge, in-your-face television that employs liberal amounts of sex, violence and swearing as well as serious or adult themes in an artful and stylistic package” (Cherry, “Before the Night Is Through” 3). In *True Blood*, both female and male bodies are regularly depicted in overtly sexualized ways.<sup>136</sup> The fact that the show includes hyper-masculine bodies in this process of eroticization is unusual and differentiates *True Blood* from other TV series on both network and pay TV channels. Sookie’s desiring gaze exists primarily in the first season, in which Sookie makes vampire Bill Compton the object of her sexual and romantic desire. The first season also presents what Soloway refers to as “[t]he gazed gaze” (Soloway). This ‘gazed gaze’ can be subsumed under a wider definition of the female gaze. Thus, as discussed in 4.2, Soloway argues that one part of the female gaze is “using the camera to take on the very nuanced, occasionally impossible task of showing us how it feels to be THE OBJECT of the Gaze”<sup>137</sup> (Soloway). As will be shown, similar to *Twilight*, *True Blood* uses the strategy of the female gaze to make audiences empathetic to Sookie’s experience of being gazed at, particularly in the public space of Merlotte’s Bar and Grill.

### 4.5.1. Sookie and the ‘Gazed Gaze’

Merlotte’s Bar and Grill, where Sookie works as a waitress, can be compared to the high schools from the *Twilight* Saga and *The Vampire Diaries* in terms of the fact that all three

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<sup>136</sup> Here it is worth noting that a heterosexual male gaze is also prominent in the series. Thus, this ‘classic’ form of the gaze which marks the female body as object to-be-looked-at is present for instance in a scene in “Everything Is Broken,” in which Sookie and Bill take a shower. Through extreme close-ups, fragmentation and the movement of the camera, Sookie’s naked body is fetishized while Bill’s remains in the background. Recht has noted that a very similar scene in *Angel* (*The WB*, 1999-2004), in which Faith is taking a shower, references Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960, dir. by Alfred Hitchcock) (257); it can be argued that the scene in *True Blood* is similarly inspired by *Psycho*’s famous shower scene. In addition to featuring scenes catering to straight male audiences, it should be noted that *True Blood* also represents a gay male gaze, most obviously in sex scenes involving two male characters. Often, this gay male gaze overlaps with the straight female gaze to such a degree that the question arises whether a distinction between the two is possible or even worth drawing.

<sup>137</sup> Emphases in the original.

are social spaces dominated by a variety of gazes. As a public space in which the townsfolk of Bon Temps meet up regularly and in which “[t]he classes mix” (Amador 130), the bar is a site where social conflict plays out, gossip is shared and the social standing of individuals is negotiated and determined. All this finds expression in the vast array of gazes being cast, directed, held and avoided in the large room of the Bar & Grill. In this context, *True Blood* provides a portrayal of Bon Temps’ rural Southern community that is exaggerated and satirical. The series’ grotesque depiction of both “good country people and white/trailer trash” (Amador 124) can be tied back to its generic entanglement with Southern Gothic (Ruddell and Cherry 39). Thus, the population of the small town is represented as largely small-minded, misogynistic, racist, xenophobic and homophobic. This characterization is achieved in particular through the narrative ploy of Sookie’s telepathy, which allows viewers access to the prejudiced thoughts of Sookie’s fellow human beings.<sup>138</sup> That Sookie is somehow psychic or clairvoyant is suspected by the majority of the guests at Merlotte’s. As we learn in the first episode, Sookie is not only referred to as being “retarded” (“Strange Love”), but she is also under constant suspicious observation by the townsfolk thanks to her telepathy. Because her gift disturbs people, Sookie is stared at on a regular basis during her work hours.

In addition to this, Sookie is often the object of a male/patriarchal gaze in particular: In her daily work routine, she is confronted with sexist judgment concerning her appearance and (sexual) behavior, both from her customers and her boss and co-workers. In fact, *True Blood* makes misogyny a distinct theme running through the first season. Not only do viewers experience how Sookie is forced to handle situations in which she is treated in discriminatory ways due to her gender, but the murder mystery, which structures the whole season, is revealed to be rooted in male fear and hatred of women’s sexual autonomy. As it turns out in the last episode, Drew Marshall murdered several women, including his own sister, because he wanted to punish them for maintaining sexual relationships with vampires. As Kimberly A. Frohreich observes, Marshall “does not attack vampires (the racial other); nor does he attack human men who ‘mix’ with vampires” (41) – his victims are exclusively human women. In the finale, he attempts to kill Sookie as well but fails. In this way, the attempted murder, which is based in Marshall’s contempt of Sookie’s relationship with vampire Bill, reads like the extreme

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<sup>138</sup> For instance, in “Escape from Dragon House,” we hear the offensive thoughts of one of the residents of Bon Temps: “What the hell is this world coming to? Dead fucks, niggers and regular folk all living together. If God wanted it like this, he’d made us look the same. It ain’t good. Maybe these really are the end times.”

end of a continuum of sexist constraints and assaults that Sookie deals with on a daily basis. By illustrating the ways in which Sookie is confronted with a variety of actions situated along this continuum, *True Blood* addresses “both the ordinary and extraordinary practices evidencing men’s entitlement to act on women” (Vera-Gray 10). To this end, the series mobilizes the figure of the vampire, by means of which the sexual double standards of contemporary culture can be vividly demonstrated.

Sookie is well aware of the patriarchal gaze that lingers on her both literally and metaphorically. When audiences are first introduced to her character, she is working at Merlotte’s, carrying a tray with food and a glass of beer from the serving counter to her customers. Right before she enters the public section of the bar, Sookie adjusts her facial expression to form a fake but pleasant smile. This short introductory scene reveals that Sookie is aware of being the object of a variety of gazes and that she makes the conscious decision to model her behavior to people’s expectations. Thus, as becomes clear in a scene taking place only slightly later, Sookie navigates the difficult working environment she faces by trying to work it to her best advantage: “When I wear make-up, I get bigger tips. . . . And I get even bigger tips when I act like I don’t have a brain in my head. But if I don’t, they’re all scared of me” (“Strange Love”). Sookie’s strategy to conform to gendered expectations by grooming herself and exhibiting a pleasing and non-threatening attitude in order to gain financial and social benefit can be referred to as a “*patriarchal bargain*”<sup>139</sup> (Kandiyoti 275). The term ‘patriarchal bargain’ was coined by Deniz Kandiyoti who argues that “[d]ifferent forms of patriarchy present women with distinct ‘rules of the game’ and call for different strategies to maximize security and optimize life options with varying potential for active or passive resistance in the face of oppression”<sup>140</sup> (274). Sookie’s readiness to actively bargain with patriarchy marks her as an agent of postfeminism, which focuses on individual women’s (momentary) reward while simultaneously reinforcing a system that oppresses all women – some more and some less depending on differences in race, socioeconomic class, etc.

In other situations, Sookie is shown to be less accommodating and less willing to be policed by the constantly present male gaze. At her workplace, her conversations with Bill are monitored by her boss, colleagues and customers but Sookie nevertheless seeks Bill’s company. When Bill draws her attention to the fact that “every person in this establishment is staring at us right now,” she brushes off his concern: “Who cares what

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<sup>139</sup> Emphasis in the original.

<sup>140</sup> The text is printed in italics in the original.

they think?” (“Strange Love”). Time and again, Sookie must defend herself for her choice to build a social and, later, a romantic relationship with Bill, a vampire. With the exception of her grandmother, everyone around her lets her know that they disapprove of her choices; these people include her friend Tara, her boss and friend Sam, her co-worker Arlene, her brother Jason, funeral home director and coroner Mike Spencer, and the local sheriff Bud Dearborne. “Sookie, you’re a good girl. I hate to see you go down this path” (“The First Taste”), the latter tells her, and Spencer asks whether her “grandmother lets [Sookie] associate with a vampire” (“The First Taste”). For both of the men, Sookie has quick-witted retorts.<sup>141</sup>

When Sam intrudes himself into her affairs and demands to know whether she kissed Bill and possibly went even further with him, Sookie does not allow him to shame her; she reminds him: “That’s really none of your business” (“Sparks Fly Out”). Strikingly, Sam uses the collective gaze which rests on Sookie at Merlotte’s to make her comply with his patriarchal ideas concerning her ‘appropriate’ conduct with men in general and vampire men in particular. Thus, more than once, he puts Sookie in situations where she is under the pressure of the townsfolk’s gazes in order to compel her to act according to what he perceives as ‘best’ for her. In “Sparks Fly Out,” Sam asks Sookie out on a date while she is working at the bar. The fact that he asks her in front of everyone who happens to be sitting at the bar makes it less easy for Sookie to refuse the offer. Not only are the two in a hierarchically unequal relationship, with Sam being Sookie’s employer. Sookie also knows that the people who are interrupting their lunch in order to listen in on this private conversation are expecting her to accept Sam’s offer; unlike vampire Bill, Sam is a well-respected man among the community. “Everyone’s looking at us,” Sookie observes. “I know, you better say yes” (“Sparks Fly Out”), Sam replies.

In “Burning House of Love,” while she is waitressing at the crowded bar, Sam rips down Sookie’s scarf in an aggressive gesture to expose her vampire bite wounds, which Sookie acquired in the frame of her sexual relationship with Bill. Through this action, he not only demonstrates that he feels entitled to uncover a part of Sookie’s body that she herself chose to conceal, but he also aims to expose her sexual relationship with Bill to everyone at the bar – a relationship which she had kept private so far. After all, Sam knows very well that Sookie will be judged negatively by the prejudiced townspeople. As

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<sup>141</sup> To Spencer’s remark, Sookie replies: “You can take that up with her, Mike Spencer. I’m sure she’d just love to know that somebody thinks she’s not taking proper care of me” (“The First Taste”), and she stands up to the Sheriff as well: “Well, lucky for you, Sheriff Dearborne, nobody’s forcing you to watch” (“The First Taste”).

expected, she is ogled at by the whole community, as Sam's attack, which happens at the very center of the bar, causes a stir. Here the camera captures the critical looks of a number of men as their attention is attracted by the scene. As conversations pause, the music stops and everyone turns their head towards the conflict, Sam has managed to relegate Sookie to her 'rightful' place of being the spectacle of the gaze. In this moment, Sookie's "visual presence . . . freeze[s] the flow of action" (Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure" 19), without her choosing to do so in the first place. While Sam's physical attack in front of the eyes of the whole community is meant to shame and intimidate Sookie, she is not willing to accept his abuse: "Hey, you keep your hands to yourself, Sam Merlotte, you have no right to touch me. . . . What I do on my own time is no concern of yours, or any of y'all's. Yes, I had sex with Bill. And since every one of y'all is too chicken to ask, it was great" ("Burning House of Love").

This physical assault by Sam is not the only assault Sookie experiences in the course of the season(s). In "Sparks Fly Out," her grandmother is killed in her stead because she happens to be at home when the killer strikes. Sookie is inconsolable; she was the one to find her gran's body in her kitchen. In this situation, her brother Jason slaps her in the face and blames her for their grandmother's murder: "It's your fault! Gran's dead 'cause of you. It should have been you! . . . She's screwing a vampire. . . . A fucking vampire" ("Cold Ground"). Here Jason brings up Sookie's supposedly transgressive sexual activity for which, as he implies, Sookie essentially deserves a punishment such as murder. Although he tries to apologize for his attack later, Jason maintains a judgmental and condescending attitude towards his sister and her sexual choices throughout the following episodes: "My own sister. Nothing but a damn fangbanger. What, you saved it all these years for a fucking vampire?" ("Burning House of Love"). Sookie does not give in to Jason's patronizing attitude and rebukes him for his hypocrisy: "Bill is a gentleman. . . . He doesn't hit me, which is more than I can say for you" ("Burning House of Love").

Moreover, Sookie is also familiar with sexualized violence. In "The First Taste," a young male customer at Merlotte's feels entitled enough to grab her bottom. In "Release Me," Sookie is almost raped while being on an undercover mission to help her vampire business partners. Besides, as we learn in "Burning House of Love," Sookie was sexually abused by her uncle as a child. Strikingly, what happened to her is not verbalized by Sookie, who is having an honest conversation with Bill after their first sexual encounter. Instead, viewers are provided a flashback to Sookie's childhood, more precisely a situation in which she is alone with her uncle Bartlett. By revealing Sookie's past through

a flashback instead of explaining it in words, viewers are particularly encouraged to empathize with the female protagonist whose trauma of sexual abuse by a close family member continues to affect her adult life.

By inviting viewers to empathize with protagonist Sookie in situations in which she feels – and fights – the pressure and judgment of the male gaze, *True Blood* strengthens a female perspective, not only through POV shots but also through narrative devices. As I argue, throughout its first season, the series frames the male gaze, which Sookie is subjected to, as part of a continuum of actions, attitudes and ideas which allow sexualized violence and/or misogynistic violence to occur. In this way, the show portrays the male gaze as an expression of the larger issue of sexism. The consequences of the latter are felt by Sookie and, alongside her, by viewers not only through the gaze but also through sexualizing or demeaning thoughts and comments, the social pressure to adhere to a specific notion of ‘appropriate’ (sexual) conduct, invasions of space, sexual harassment on a verbal and physical level, sexual abuse, physical violence, attempted rape and even attempted murder.

To address and to illustrate issues of sexism, male structural power and the sexual objectification of women within patriarchal spaces, *True Blood* uses two elements of the supernatural, namely the figure of the vampire and Sookie’s telepathy. Thus, throughout the first season, women who associate and/or have sex with vampires face particular disdain as well as verbal and physical threats by the human population of Bon Temps in general and the male citizens, including Drew Marshall, in particular. By using the figure of the vampire, the show manages to dramatize and criticize the dynamics of a sexist culture which demands that young women be sexually attractive and sexually available while at the same time punishing them for (certain forms of) sexual activity.<sup>142</sup>

Furthermore, through Sookie’s telepathic abilities, the pervasiveness of sexism is brought to light to a degree that would not be possible without this supernatural element. From the male coroner who muses about a female murder victim’s “fine pair of perfect, natural breasts” (“Escape from Dragon House”) to Sookie’s date who thinks about the fact that he “can’t wait to see her naked. I wonder if she’s a natural blonde. Nothing worse than a blonde with a big, black bush” (“The First Taste”) – audiences encounter the casual sexualization and dehumanization of female characters everywhere. It is normally hidden under the surface but is dragged forth by Sookie’s power. Simultaneously, Sookie’s

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<sup>142</sup> As Frohreich argues, *True Blood* also employs the vampire figure to comment on issues of race and miscegenation (33). These issues are convoluted with the issues elaborated on in this subchapter.

telepathic abilities are her curse and her gift. Due to her telepathy, she has not been able to get close to any of the men she has dated because she was involuntarily exposed to their deepest secrets; she also implies that she had to quit all her previous jobs because each of her bosses' thoughts were tantamount to workplace harassment for her ("The First Taste"). At the same time, her gift allows her to discover clues about the identity of the killer ("I Don't Wanna Know") and to know when he is approaching to kill her, so she can take measures to defend herself ("You'll Be the Death of Me").

In addition, the voice-over which represents a particular person's thoughts often accompanies and amplifies the male gaze that Sookie experiences. For instance, this becomes clear in the scene in "The First Taste," when – or right before – a young male customer non-consensually touches her body (this is the scene referenced earlier). Here the objectifying gaze which the customer fixes on Sookie's body is complemented by his obnoxious train of thoughts. While he looks her up and down with a salacious grin on his face, we hear what he is thinking: "If you could serve them nachos off them perfect titties, we'd all be mighty obliged. Ain't nothing I like more than licking food off a girl's tits. And that's a fine ass, too" ("The First Taste").<sup>143</sup> By employing Sookie's telepathy to reinforce the way the man looks at her, *True Blood* represents the issues underpinning the male gaze in a particularly graphic and thought-provoking way. All the while, Sookie is the subject whose perspective and supernatural ability allow viewers to experience "how it feels to be THE OBJECT of the Gaze"<sup>144</sup> (Soloway) and to witness the effect that her presence causes in the world. Following Soloway, this female gaze that *True Blood* orchestrates here "says WE SEE YOU, SEEING US" (Soloway).

#### 4.5.2. Sookie's Gaze and Desire

Like Bella and Elena, Sookie is also the bearer of an active desiring gaze. This gaze is represented throughout the first season and provides opportunities of identification particularly for female viewers. Speaking with Soloway, this female gaze says: "I don't want to be the OBJECT any longer, I would like to be the SUBJECT, and with that SUBJECTIVITY I can name you as the OBJECT" (Soloway). In the case of Sookie

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<sup>143</sup> Right before Sookie's encounter with this invasive customer, Tara, who temporarily works as a bartender at Merlotte's, is shown to be criticizing Sam for expecting her to wear a uniform at the bar: "Sam, how come you don't wear a uniform? . . . how come Terry Bellefleur don't wear a uniform? . . . because you're a man! And Sam don't feel the need to sexualize the men in his employment the same way he do the women" ("The First Taste").

<sup>144</sup> Emphases in the original.



Stackhouse, the preferred object of her gaze is Bill Compton. Although she is depicted as a (sexual) subject here, in other, more ambivalent scenes, Sookie is portrayed as sexually empowered while her sexualized body is presented as visual spectacle at the same time. These different variations of sexual ‘empowerment’ will be examined in this subchapter.

Sookie first lays eyes on Bill when he enters Merlotte’s (“Strange Love”). She is in the middle of a conversation with Sam and Tara when a strange whooshing sound, which only Sookie seems to be hearing, makes her turn around to face the door. As it turns out, Sookie’s mind reading abilities do not work on vampires; assumably, the sound she hears when Bill approaches represents the lack of thoughts she usually hears aloud. The unusual silence attracts Sookie’s full attention. This capturing of her attention is represented by the camera’s panning from right to left and zooming in on her face, which exhibits a completely fascinated gaze. In the background, the rest of the bar, including the people she was just talking to, becomes blurry and indiscernible. Thus, sound and visuals work together here to convey the singularity and importance of what or whom Sookie is seeing. The object of her gaze is then presented to viewers as well; the shot of Sookie’s face is followed by a subjective shot suggesting her point of view. In three instances, the camera cuts closer to a man in a beige coat – Bill – who is walking across the bar and sitting down in a dining booth alone. This gradual cutting closer reveals the dramatic significance that this moment has for Sookie, and the slow-motion in which Bill is moving supports this effect. After sitting down, Bill returns Sookie’s gaze. The camera then cuts back and forth between both of their faces a number of times. In another one of Sookie’s subjective shots, the background behind Bill’s face fades to black, further emphasizing the hypnotic quality of their mutual gazing, which makes everything and everyone disappear in this moment.<sup>145</sup> This scene is repeated in a similar way towards the end of the episode, when Bill comes to the bar again.

Another scene that takes place later in the episode puts Sookie’s sexual desire for Bill in the foreground. In the middle of the night, she wakes up in her bed, apparently aware of Bill’s presence. She gets up and steps to the window. A subjective shot reveals to viewers what she sees outside: Bill is standing in the middle of her lawn, looking up to and smiling at her. When she meets him downstairs, the camera shows her being distracted by his body, which she is obviously attracted to. Her gaze is rewarded by Bill, who, without saying a word, starts to undress himself in front of her while she remains in

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<sup>145</sup> In addition, the melancholic piano soundtrack characterizes Bill as a dark but emotional personality, giving viewers a sense of what they can expect from this character.

her nightgown and bathrobe. “I never thought I would be having sex with you. At least not so fast” (“Strange Love”), Sookie utters, beginning to open her bathrobe and signalling her enthusiastic consent. The erotic tension of the moment is disrupted when Bill seductively licks his protracted fangs: “Who said anything about sex?” (“Strange Love”). It is at this point that Sookie starts from her sleep in her bedroom, and viewers realize that they were witnessing a sex dream of Sookie’s. In this way, they were experiencing her desire first hand by sharing an intimate fantasy with her.

The same method is used in “Mine,” when audiences once again become involved in one of Sookie’s erotic fantasies of Bill and herself. The scene begins with the subjective camera perspective of a person or creature approaching the Compton mansion, opening the front door and moving into the living room, where we spot Bill, poring over a book. The unnerving soundtrack adds to the fact that the camera has not identified whose perspective we are sharing; equipped with knowledge about the horror genre, we are led to assume that this is the point of view of a predator sneaking into Bill’s house, about to attack him. When the presumed creature approaches Bill from behind to look over his shoulder, he jumps to his feet and assumes a defensive position. It is then revealed that the intruder is Sookie. Here it is telling that Sookie is placed in the active position of the attacker and/or predator. Thus, the scene continues with her articulating that she would like to be intimate with Bill: “I feel things when I’m with you that make me think. . . . it feels like you’re the one that I’m supposed to, you know, do it with, . . . so can we get it out of the way already?” (“Mine”). Voicing her wish to share her first sexual experience with Bill, Sookie takes an active role in the pursuit of her desires. The scene then cuts from Sookie’s and Bill’s naked moving bodies to Sookie’s bedroom. It is at this point that it turns out that we were once again part of one of Sookie’s sexual fantasies. A medium shot shows her lying in bed, eyes closed, one hand under her blanket, masturbating. Once again, *True Blood* has visualized Sookie’s sexual desire through the representation of her straight female gaze.<sup>146</sup>

Other scenes are more ambivalent; the frequency of these contradictory scenes increases in later seasons. A striking example is another elongated dream sequence by Sookie which takes place in season 4. In this dream, Sookie articulates her desire for Bill as well as Eric, with both of whom she has previously had sexual and romantic

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<sup>146</sup> Later in the series, Sookie has a number of erotic dreams involving vampire Eric Northman. These dreams are facilitated by the fact that she had Eric’s blood; in *True Blood*, if humans consume vampire blood, their libido is increased and a special connection is formed between the vampire and the human. This supernatural circumstance is often used in the series as the backdrop of sex scenes occurring in the realm of fantasy.

entanglements. Both vampires star prominently in her dream. Here Sookie renounces both men's possessiveness towards her, which finds expression in their constant bickering, fighting and posturing: "'Sookie is mine.' – 'Bullshit. She's mine.' – 'I'm 10 times your age.' – 'And I love her 20 times as much.'" ("Let's Get Out of Here"). In her dream, which ridicules Bill's and Eric's trials of strength and 'masculinity,' Sookie refuses to be at the mercy of their dominating behavior: "This is my dream, so both of y'all need to shut up and listen to me" ("Let's Get Out of Here"). Instead, Sookie dictates the conditions of her relationship with both men on her own terms. In her speech, she puts her own desire at the center and proposes a polyamorous relationship in the frame of which she would be able to act out her feelings for Eric as well as Bill:

Sookie: "I think I'm in love with both of you. . . . I've always been this self-conscious, good little girl who was too scared to think outside the box, especially when it comes to love and sex. But as of right now, I'm putting that little girl behind me."

Eric: "And what exactly are you proposing?"

Sookie: "That I can love both of you. That I don't have to be yours, or yours. I'm proposing that the two of you be mine . . ."

Eric: "You have to choose."

Sookie: ". . . This is such a double standard! When it's two women and one guy, everyone's hunky-dory with it, even if they barely know each other. But when a woman tries to have her way with two men she is totally and completely in love with, everyone's hemming and hawing. . . . It's either both of you or nothing at all. Take it or leave it." ("Let's Get Out of Here")

Sookie's ultimatum comes with the reference to a sexist double standard in contemporary culture that allows men the free expression of their sexuality while it forbids the same to women, which Sookie intends to break with. Prioritizing her own desires and ideas and making clear that she would rather abdicate both men than compromise her beliefs once again, Sookie presents herself in an assertive position of power in this dream sequence.

What is interesting is that Sookie seems to derive this power not least from her sexual appeal and her positioning herself for the male gaze, which originates not only from Bill and Eric but also from the camera. Thus, while the male vampires are dressed in their usual clothes and sitting casually on the couch, Sookie is presented as posing in sexy lingerie in order to persuade them to agree to her conditions. From the start of the dream sequence, Sookie's face and body are emphasized through lighting techniques as well as through the sexualized poses she assumes. Her outfit consists of a red, short robe with a deep neckline and high heels, her movements are directed in slow-motion, and a lascivious saxophone soundtrack,<sup>147</sup> which is interspersed with little bits of a female voice

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<sup>147</sup> The *TV Tropes* website defines the so-called 'sexophone' as a "short riff on the saxophone used to indicate the arrival or presence of a sexy woman (or occasionally man)" ("Sexophone").

sighing, is playing in the background. Through all of these features, Sookie is put in the spotlight of the gaze of the camera. When she takes off her robe coquettishly to reinforce her argument, a shot of both Bill and Eric gazing at Sookie lustingly underlines for whose gaze she poses here in her own sexual fantasy. In the dream, Sookie is successful in the sense that both men seem to accept her conditions, as the three of them start to engage in passionate sex before Sookie wakes up in her bed.<sup>148</sup>

Later in the series, namely in season 6, Sookie once again relies on her sexual attractiveness to achieve her goals. This time, the representation of Sookie using her ‘feminine wiles’ for the purpose of deception and distraction draws heavily on the trope of the *femme fatale*. However, the show does not portray her approach as rooted in the agenda to pursue selfish interests or wreak havoc and corruption. Instead, she essentially chooses her strategy as a way to defend herself and to gain the upper hand in a conflict in which she is hitherto powerless. In order to do this, Sookie is depicted as taking advantage of the male gaze. Towards the end of season 5, she found out that she was promised to the immortal faerie-vampire hybrid Warlow by her ancestors; a contract from 1702 between John William Stackhouse and Warlow attests that the first fae-bearing female in the Stackhouse line is to belong to Warlow (“Gone, Gone, Gone”). Not long after the seemingly sympathetic Ben Flynn enters her life in season 6, Sookie figures out that he is using a false identity and that he is in fact Warlow, who has escaped the prison realm he was trapped in and wants to collect the debt he is owed. She then goes on the offensive: Planning to kill Warlow with her faerie light once he is caught off-guard, Sookie sets him up for a honey trap by inviting Ben to dinner under the pretense of wanting to take their newly formed relationship to the next level. She lures him in by flirting coquettishly, then dresses up in a tight lace dress and starts to seduce him to get him into a defenseless position (“At Last”). The camera follows Sookie during her preparations, including her process of grooming herself, which consists of shaving and putting lotion on her legs, applying lipstick and checking her cleavage in the mirror, wearing nothing but a see-through lace bra and a light robe. Here Sookie not only chooses to make herself the object of Warlow’s gaze in order to distract him, but she also becomes the sexualized object of the camera’s and the audiences’ gaze. In classic male gaze fashion, her body is fragmented through an extreme close-up of her lower leg. Thus, while Sookie manages

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<sup>148</sup> What works in the fantasy, does not work in ‘real life.’ At the end of the fourth season, Sookie breaks off both relationships: “I can’t stand this anymore. It’s like being ripped in half. No matter what I do, somebody I love gets hurt. . . . There is only one way I see this ending, and it’s me walking away with neither of you” (“And When I Die”).

to take advantage of the dynamic of the male gaze for the purpose of seizing power in a situation in which she is treated as the possession of men – the plan works out and Warlow falls for the ruse –, the series in turn takes advantage of Sookie by casually rendering her body the sexualized object of the male gaze.

Moreover, *True Blood* represents the honey trap as the ‘natural’ choice of weaponry for women: Sookie’s grooming scene is preceded by hyper-masculine werewolf pack master Alcide’s search for some fugitives who have kidnapped a member of his pack. When a member of the search party questions his authority, he puts her in her place and goes on to coordinate the strategic planning of their mission. The soundtrack invoking a military setting links this scene with Sookie’s grooming scene. Both Alcide and Sookie are portrayed as determined and rational, with resolute expressions on their faces; Sookie nods to herself in the mirror after she has put on her specifically ‘feminine riot gear.’ By juxtaposing Alcide’s and Sookie’s respective strategies of moving into ‘battle,’ Sookie’s use of her sex appeal is implied to be something ‘naturally’ at her disposal.<sup>149</sup>

Two episodes later, the series once again emphasizes that Sookie is taking charge of her sexuality while it simultaneously objectifies her body gratuitously for the visual pleasure of (heterosexual male) audiences. Having found out some disturbing truths about her family and subsequently changed her mind about Warlow, Sookie decides to have her way with him. In the scene, which is set in the faerie realm, Warlow is handcuffed to a pole and Sookie takes charge of the situation. The accompanying dialogue provides a specific context in which viewers are meant to interpret her actions. Here, once again, it is suggested that Sookie is reclaiming her sexuality in the face of a sexist and sexually repressive culture: “There’s a town consensus about what kind of girl I am. . . . They call me a danger whore. . . . maybe it’s time I just started accepting this about myself. . . . I may be a whore” (“Don’t You Feel Me”). In this scene, Sookie responds to the misogynistic language she encounters by appropriating and reclaiming it. She refers to herself with the derogatory label ‘whore’ and proceeds to rip Warlow’s shirt open for her own visual pleasure and to initiate sexual contact. After the mutual sharing of blood, Sookie strips off her clothes in front of Warlow, who watches her intently. The camera

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<sup>149</sup> *True Blood*’s season 6 in particular is conspicuous for the way it constantly represents female characters as using their sexuality as a tool to manipulate, persuade or bargain for advantages. In “You’re No Good,” before Jessica leaves to recruit/kidnap the science professor who synthesized ‘Tru Blood,’ she is told by Bill to “wear something inappropriate. Takahashi’s got a thing for young women.” In “At Last,” Sarah Newlin attempts to manipulate her male partner into proposing to her by using sex. In the vampire concentration camp, both Willa and Pam offer sexual favors to guards in exchange for being transferred or to escape (episodes “Don’t You Feel Me” and “In the Evening”).

takes full advantage of the strip, showing her naked body down to her waist in a medium shot. The subsequent sex scene is fairly explicit as well; here we see more of Sookie's naked body exposed than of Warlow's, who continues to be strapped to the pole and lounging on the ground.

Like the other two scenes analyzed earlier, this scene can be read both as challenging and reinforcing the patriarchal order. In fact, both readings are deeply intertwined. With regard to Sookie's strategy of reclaiming a sexist slur that was meant to degrade her, this approach recalls recent attempts of taking back words such as 'bitch,' 'slut' and 'cunt' in (post)feminist circles. Jessica Valenti summarizes two decades of activism in her column for *The Guardian*:

It's been over twenty years since then-Bikini Kill frontwoman and Riot Grrrl icon Kathleen Hanna scrawled the word SLUT across her stomach. In the years since, there's been a book called *Slut!*, countless feminist debates over the reclamation of the word "slut" and, in 2011, thousands of women took to streets across the globe in anti-rape marches called SlutWalks – a reference to how victims of sexual assault are often blamed for the violence done to them. ("Will the Awful Power")

Most recently, the global SlutWalk movement set out to "challeng[e] harmful, victim-blaming language" (SlutWalk Toronto, *About*) as well as take ownership of and give it new meaning. Having erupted as a reaction to a police officer's statement at Toronto's York University in 2011 that if women wanted to avoid sexual assault, they should stop dressing as 'sluts' (SlutWalk Toronto, *WHY*), SlutWalk rallies drew in masses of protesters across the globe – "some marchers with 'slut' scrawled across their bodies, others with signs reading 'My dress is not a yes' or 'Slut pride'" (Valenti, "SlutWalks"). By representing Sookie as addressing and re-appropriating the pejorative label 'whore' in an assertive way, *True Blood* ties in with these (post)feminist approaches that try to resignify discriminatory language and deal with the oppressive patriarchal culture by changing it from within.

#### 4.5.3. Undermining the Male Gaze through Parody

The preceding subchapter elaborated on scenes in *True Blood* in which Sookie is represented as an "active and desiring sexual subject"<sup>150</sup> (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 89); a subgroup of these scenes was characterized as ambivalent, since they allow both positive and negative readings as to whether a subversion of gendered power dynamics is accomplished. In a similarly ambivalent way, the show includes instances which can be

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<sup>150</sup> The text is printed in italics in the original.

interpreted both as parodies and reiterations of the male gaze. Some scenes offer themselves up more clearly to be read as parodies overturning conventional structures, some less so. Following Dan Harries, parody is understood here as “a methodic ‘approach’ to recontextualizing target texts” (7) which oscillates “between similarity to and difference from the target” (6).

In the episode “Shake and Fingerpop,” Sookie’s brother Jason is invited by Reverend Steve Newlin and his wife Sarah to join them for a barbecue.<sup>151</sup> Unbeknownst to the couple, Jason is sexually attracted to Sarah and gazes at her while she is managing the barbecue. Although he is in the middle of a conversation with Steve, Jason is completely distracted from his surroundings, which is signaled by the fact that the dialogue fades out and a country music soundtrack begins to dominate the audio part of the scene. Several close-up shots of Jason’s face establish him as the gazer or, more precisely, the person daydreaming here. What follows is a montage of Sarah assuming stereotypical sexualized poses for Jason and the audience. Presented in slow-motion, she licks her fingers, winks at Jason, dances and swirls around, slaps her bottom with a kitchen trowel, takes off her kitchen apron in a lascivious way, bends forward and purses her lips. Meanwhile, the lyrics of the country song underline the visuals of the scene: “She’ll sit around and tease ’em / Tell ’em she can please ’em / But I know that she’s taking me home . . . She’s Louisiana Hot Sauce / Hotter than a fireball / Smoother than strawberry wine / She’s lookin’ good as I’ve seen / Strollin’ in her tight jeans / Drivin’ me out of my mind” (“Shake and Fingerpop”).<sup>152</sup>

On the one hand, the scene reiterates the conventional structure of Hollywood film by establishing Jason as the bearer of the gaze and Sarah’s body as eroticized object. It is clear that this is Jason’s fantasy, not Sarah’s actual comportment. The director<sup>153</sup> works with the usual techniques of slow-motion and fragmentation through close-ups of sexualized body parts, such as breasts and thighs. On the other hand, the completely exaggerated manner in which Sarah performs for the male gaze qualifies the scene as a parody of traditional gaze paradigms. Because she overdoes stereotypical facial expressions and gestures, the whole situation is turned into ridicule. Exaggeration,

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<sup>151</sup> Jason has become indoctrinated by the anti-vampire church Fellowship of the Sun, which is led by the Newlins.

<sup>152</sup> The song is called *Louisiana Hot Sauce* (1999), performed by Sammy Kershaw. Considering the stereotypically macho lyrics revolving around a young, attractive, scantily-clad woman teasing the male singer, the scene could also be read as a parody of a country music video or the subgenre of ‘bro-country’ as a whole.

<sup>153</sup> The episode was directed by Michael Lehmann.

according to Harries, is “one of parody’s central methods of ironic transformation. Essentially, exaggeration functions by targeting . . . elements of the prototext and extending them beyond their conventionally expected limits” (83). Furthermore, Jason is visibly embarrassed and made uncomfortable by Sarah’s performance. His reaction undermines the conventional male gaze dynamic, as he is not taking pleasure in observing Sarah, but is rather trying to avoid looking at her, a fact which is played for laughs with viewers.

Nevertheless, this scene brings to mind strategies employed by postfeminist advertising, which makes a habit of “present[ing] titillating and sexist images of women while suggesting that it was all a deliberate and knowing postmodern joke” (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 110). As Gill suggests, “in postfeminist media culture irony has become a way of ‘having it both ways,’ of expressing sexist or homophobic or otherwise unpalatable sentiments in an ironized form, while claiming this was not actually ‘meant’” (*Gender and the Media* 266-67). Thus, *True Blood* is able to both portray the sexualized body of a female character and present this portrayal as ironic or not-to-be-taken-seriously at the same time. Besides, the series relies on viewers recognizing the elements that are being spoofed here. Because parody “depends on the stability of that which it imitates for its critical force” (Thornham 47), it runs the risk of actually reinforcing the structures it is simultaneously trying to undermine.

Perhaps an element that is less ambivalent is the character of Jason Stackhouse himself. Thus, it can be argued that throughout the seasons, Jason functions as a male version, i.e. a parody of the female stereotype of the ‘dumb blonde.’ “Ironic inversion is a characteristic of all parody” (6), writes Linda Hutcheon, and Harries, too, defines inversion as one of parody’s central methods (55). As he argues, “[s]imilar to the parodic method of reiteration, a film’s characters can be evoked, yet with a few of their traits inverted from typical genre conventions” (55). In the case of *True Blood*, Jason Stackhouse, despite being a male character, combines characteristics of two types of blondes that can be identified in Hollywood cinema: “the blonde bombshell, whose sexuality is explosive” (Perkins 46) and the ‘dumb blonde,’ who is “defined by [her] combination of overt, ‘natural’ sexuality (of which [she] may or may not be aware) with a profound ignorance and innocence manifest in an inability to understand even the most elementary facts of everyday life” (Perkins 47). The ‘dumb blonde,’ who is usually gendered female, is the butt of a subcategory of jokes, the main feature of whom is the



focus on the supposed “*stupidity and promiscuity*”<sup>154</sup> (Shifman and Lemish 89) of the blonde woman. As Shifman and Lemish point out, “[t]he blonde is portrayed as extremely intellectually challenged . . . In addition, the blonde constructed in these jokes is very sexually active: her promiscuous behavior is reflected in extensive, indiscriminate sexual engagements with single or multiple partners” (89). In light of these features that are described as central to the ‘dumb blonde’ stereotype, it is striking that some of Jason’s most pronounced characteristics are his naiveté and dim-witted-ness as well as his insatiable libido. As Bon Temps resident Tracy describes Jason: “God gave that boy a penis and a brain, and only enough blood to run one of ‘em” (“Whatever I Am, You Made Me”).

Throughout the series, Jason is depicted as a playboy who has almost “slept with every woman in this town” (“Authority Always Wins”). Besides exhibiting a high sex drive and engaging in one affair or one-night-stand after the other, he is continuously portrayed as slow-witted: Jason is often naïve and child-like,<sup>155</sup> does not understand metaphors,<sup>156</sup> employs malapropisms,<sup>157</sup> and confuses philosophical quotes<sup>158</sup> on a regular basis. His dumbness is referenced repeatedly by himself<sup>159</sup> and others,<sup>160</sup> and is often used as a source of laughter on the show. The fact that Jason is featured in more sex scenes than any other character, male or female, is exploited in the sense that his naked, well-toned body is regularly sexualized for the visual pleasure of audiences. Although the character is heterosexual, Jason is presented in erotic scenes with female as well as male characters; the latter is in the form of dream sequences.<sup>161</sup> However, the staging of his sexualized body is not limited to sex scenes. Jason often appears on the scene with a naked torso, sometimes working out, sometimes simply walking or sitting around without a shirt at home. A scene which epitomizes Jason’s embodiment of the ‘dumb blond’ is featured

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<sup>154</sup> Emphasis in the original.

<sup>155</sup> Jason: “There’s werewolves? . . . Holy shit. Bigfoot, is he real too? . . . Santa?” (“Beautifully Broken”).

<sup>156</sup> Jason: “You just drank from some dude you don’t even know.” Jessica: “Yeah, and I suppose you know every cow you’ve eaten.” Jason: “What the fuck kind of question is that? I ain’t never fucked a cow!” Jessica: “It’s a metaphor, idiot!” (“In the Beginning”).

<sup>157</sup> Jason: “You don’t have that Stockholder Syndrome, do you?” (“In the Evening”). And, after Bill attacked Sookie: “Sook, you need to press charges. What he did to you, that’s domestic...something” (“Night on the Sun”).

<sup>158</sup> Jason: “It’s like if a tree falls in the woods, it’s still a tree, ain’t it?” (“Beyond Here Lies Nothin”).

<sup>159</sup> Jason: ““It ain’t no fun thinking about the hard things, which is why I spend so much time not thinking” (“Almost Home”).

<sup>160</sup> Jason: “How’d you get to be so smart?” Tara: “I’m not smart at all, Jason. I’m not. . . . I’m a fucking idiot sometimes.” Jason: “Can I tell you a secret? I am too.” Tara: “It’s not that much of a secret” (“The First Taste”).

<sup>161</sup> “At Last” features a homoerotic dream sequence involving Jason and Warlow after Jason has consumed Warlow’s blood. In “I Found You,” there is a gay sex scene featuring Jason and Eric; again, Jason is dreaming under the influence of Eric’s vampire blood.

in “Hitting the Ground.” Here Jason is lounging in an armchair at his house, only wearing boxer shorts and musing about himself and the world: “I never really thought I was smart enough to get depressed, but here I am” (“Hitting the Ground”). Just as his sex scenes address both female heterosexual and male homosexual viewers, different audience groups are invited to draw visual pleasure from Jason’s objectified body.

In the episode “Trouble,” Jason washes a police car on the street, only dressed in blue jeans, already having spilled water across his chest. Here the trope of the sexy woman washing a car while wearing a bikini or other revealing clothing is referenced and parodied. This trope, which is listed in the online *TV Tropes* database as a “Sub-Trope of Sex Sells” (“Hood Ornament Hottie”), is well-established in popular culture. Therefore, a sexy Jason washing a car in public is easily recognizable by viewers as a reference to the trope of the “Hood Ornament Hottie,” which is the name under which it is listed in the *TV Tropes* database. Interestingly, Jason sheds the passive role as object of the gaze almost immediately; in the following, he actively pursues a woman he is attracted to, Crystal, by following her in the police car and taking advantage of his authority as a deputy sheriff liaison to ask Crystal to present her license, registration and insurance card. Notwithstanding, it is notable that *True Blood* manages to address and play with as well as make fun of sexist tropes by inserting short as well as more extensive parodic references in the course of its seven seasons.

As already pointed out, some of these parodies can be read both as subversive portrayals problematizing classic gaze paradigms and reiterations of said paradigms, albeit excessive ones. Hutcheon describes this as “a central paradox of parody: . . . In imitating, even with critical difference, parody reinforces” (26); “[p]arody is fundamentally double and divided; its ambivalence stems from the dual drives of conservative and revolutionary forces that are inherent in its nature as authorized transgression” (26). In a similar vein, Harries argues that parody’s “embodiment of authorized norms firmly keeps it within the hegemonic fold. Its discursive standardization has, in fact, contributed to its own canonization and secured a relatively easy co-option by a market economy oh-so eager to capitalize on ‘radical’ iconicity” (130). Thus, in the contemporary postmodern/postfeminist culture, irony as a technique has become ubiquitous, and parodies, despite their traditional definition as “counter-song” (Harries 5), “have slid into canonicity” (Harries 131). As a method that simultaneously confirms and destabilizes its target, parody is easily co-optable by commercial interests. Its employment, then, may be “more of an economic move to secure greater profits than any

co-ordinated effort to instigate socio-political change on the aesthetic front” (Harries 131). However, Harries also stresses parody’s transgressive potential, which lies in the ways in which it “foster[s] ‘ways’ to view texts, developing and nurturing *critical* spectatorial strategies”<sup>162</sup> (7) on the part of audiences. As Harries highlights,

Within a film, the suspension of norms may remain temporary, but the residual effects of the inversion leave memory traces of resistance to the established order and therefore have a far more lasting effect . . . parodies have a major influence on how subsequent films of the targeted logonomic system are viewed. . . . This in turn may have some cumulative effect in the restructuring of consciousness and the re-imagining of alternative social orders. (129-30)

Thus, it can be concluded that although commercial interests may play a role in their selection, parodic inversions of the conventional male gaze, however temporary or ambivalent they may be, do have the potential of permanently destabilizing traditional sexist gaze paradigms.

#### **4.6. Postfeminism and the Straight White Female Gaze**

This chapter has provided a detailed analysis of the ways in which the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* enact a heterosexual female gaze that reflects a female perspective and marks the male (vampire) body as eroticized object. By doing so, the texts engage (straight) female viewers in particular and offer opportunities of identification with the young female protagonists Bella, Elena and Sookie. As de Lauretis has argued,

for a film to work, to be effective, it *has* to please. All films must offer their spectators some kind of pleasure, something of interest, be it a technical, artistic, critical interest, or the kind of pleasure that goes by the names of entertainment and escape; preferably both. These kinds of pleasures and interest, film theory has proposed, are closely related to the question of desire (desire to know, desire to see), and thus depend on a personal response, an engagement of the spectator’s subjectivity, and the possibility of identification. (136)

Since narration is one important way of constructing subjectivity (Smelik 496), it can be argued that the analyzed TV series actively involve female viewers as subjects by making use of the figure of the vampire, whose body is strategically employed to cater to the straight female gaze. Here the female protagonists are not gazed at and sexualized by the camera, as is usually the case in mainstream Hollywood film and other popular media. Instead, they are the gazing subjects whose desires propel the action and whose experiences are relayed to audiences. Included in this experience is not only the feeling

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<sup>162</sup> Emphasis in the original.

of being gazed at – Soloway’s “gazed gaze” (Soloway) –, but also the active articulation of female heterosexual desire, which achieves a reversal of conventional gaze paradigms. Because the female protagonists of the examined vampire romances are exclusively white women/girls, it would be more accurate to speak of a white straight female gaze. However, scenes in which the female gaze is not attached to any particular character may equally speak to viewers whose racial identities differ from that of the narratives’ heroines.

This straight white female gaze can be situated in the context of a more sex-positive/sexualized postfeminist climate in which “[s]exuality/femininity . . . undergoes a process of resignification whereby it comes to be associated with feminist ideas of female emancipation and self-determination rather than its previous connotations of patriarchal oppression and subjugation” (Genz and Brabon 93). Generally speaking, contemporary postfeminism stands in the tradition of pro-sex feminist strands which emerged in the late 1970s (Genz and Brabon 91). The latter played a decisive role in feminist debates about “[f]emale sexual objectification and pornography” (Genz and Brabon 91). In these debates, anti- and pro-pornography standpoints clashed over the meanings of sex, ‘femininity’ and oppression. Thus, from their inception, pro-sex/pro-pornography feminist strands have stood in direct opposition to the anti-pornography movement, which declared pornography to be at the center of women’s oppression because it was “encoding misogyny in its most extreme form” (Genz and Brabon 93). Attempts by the anti-pornography movement to increase or create restrictions on the production, sale or dissemination of pornography were considered instances of censorship by pro-sex feminists and tended to be perceived as expressions of a puritanical, anti-sex attitude (Genz and Brabon 94). Furthermore, while much second wave feminist activism focused on discussing and raising awareness for the problematic aspects of beauty culture, heterosexuality and the latter’s connection to sexual as well as domestic violence against women, sex-positive feminists made it a point to frame heterosexuality and sex as a positive realm inviting the celebration of “the pleasures of feminine adornment and sexuality” (Genz and Brabon 93). Radical and mainstream feminist strands turned out to be more sex-critical and sceptical with regard to the sexual revolution and its potential to fundamentally reform women’s sexual relationships with men (Genz and Brabon 95). By contrast, sex-positive feminism was based on the idea of interconnection between women’s liberation and the sexual revolution, “combining sexual empowerment with feminist emancipation” (Genz and Brabon 94).

The link between these earlier strands of sex-positive feminism and contemporary forms of postfeminism is evident: For one thing, Katie Roiphe's and Rene Denfeld's criticisms of feminism and its supposed "prudery and focus on female victimisation" (Genz and Brabon 96)<sup>163</sup> recalls sex-positive feminists' move to distance themselves "from what they perceive[d] as puritanical and monolithic feminist thinking" (Genz and Brabon 94). Where sex-positive camps rejected the notion that pornography is inherently misogynistic and therefore disempowering for women, postfeminist thinkers rebuff the second wave focus on the disadvantaged position of women in patriarchal society, which is referred to as "victim feminism" (Wolf 147) among some proponents of postfeminism. Rather, sex-positive feminists emphasized that individual women may very well draw pleasure from sexually explicit texts: "Instead of understanding women simply as victims, pro-pornography proponents assert that women are capable of placing their own meanings on pornographic material" (Genz and Brabon 94). Similarly, postfeminist writers such as Naomi Wolf argue that women should be able to make individual decisions about the sexual and romantic relationships they want to pursue, and that feminism should not meddle in "women's pleasures and private arrangements" (Wolf 68). For another thing, sex-positive feminists' arguments "for sexual empowerment and subjecthood" (Genz and Brabon 93) can be found again in later renditions that may be referred to as postfeminist. As Genz and Brabon point out, contemporary groups of younger feminists define themselves in contrast to earlier sex-critical feminist standpoints, criticize the latter "for relying on one-dimensional definitions and readings of pornography/sexuality as operations of male power and female oppression" (94), and instead aim to "embrace the notion of sexual power" (96). Thus, "sex-positive feminists remained faithful to a libertine notion of sexuality well into the 1980s and 1990s, celebrating sexual energy, power and strength" (Genz and Brabon 95).

The postfeminist sex-positive stance has been analyzed under a variety of terms; in their study on postfeminism, Genz and Brabon address raunch culture and "do-me feminism – also referred to as 'bimbo feminism' and 'porno chic'" (91). In a similar vein, Catherine M. Roach writes that "[t]his phenomenon of new, potentially liberating and open attitudes toward consensual sexuality, including women's sexuality, is what commentators and scholars have characterized as sex-positive culture, sex-positive feminism, or, in a different spin, 'pornification.'" (*Happily Ever After* 79). Crucially, the emergence of this type of feminism is embedded in the context of a contemporary culture

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<sup>163</sup> See chapter 2.3.

which is increasingly sexualized (Genz and Brabon 100). Thus, Gill observes an “extraordinary proliferation of discourses about sex and sexuality across all media forms” (*Gender and the Media* 256). The mainstreaming of pornographic aesthetics is part of this trend, and so is an increasing amount of sexual explicitness in advertising, film and television alike (Genz and Brabon 101). When it comes to this pervasively sexualized and/or sexually open culture, both positive and negative aspects can be identified. On the one hand, Roach argues that

the category of what’s culturally acceptable in love and romance has in many quarters grown much bigger. The slow but ongoing success of the LGBTQ movements on legal issues of same-sex unions and partner rights is part of opening up this romance narrative, as is increasing social acceptance for difference and diversity in gender expression and sexual orientation based on a notion of informed consent. (*Happily Ever After* 79)

In the wake of the sexual revolution, which challenged a variety of traditional sexual norms, sex before and outside of marriage or any other long-term monogamous commitment has become increasingly accepted and common; contraception, abortion and sex education have become normalized, and the discussion of one’s sexuality is not nearly as taboo as it used to be. More sexual freedoms are available today, perhaps especially to young women:

A new era has opened up wherein women can write or read . . . erotica, hook up with multiple partners and different types of partners, make amateur porn or post pin-ups of themselves on sites like *Suicide Girls*, attend home-sale sex toy parties, wear porno-chic fashion, take pole-dancing classes at the local gym, revel in TV’s *Girls* or *Sex and the City* reruns, and, of course, read the *Fifty Shades* trilogy. Or consider the phenomenon, much reported in the press, of heterosexual women, well-educated and of upper-income levels, having sex without wanting long-term boyfriends. (Roach, *Happily Ever After* 78-79)

On the other hand, Gill notices the “uneven gender effects” (*Gender and the Media* 38) of the increasingly sexualized culture and particularly the mainstreaming of pornography, pointing out that it is women’s bodies in particular which are subject to sexualization and commodification within the frame of the current culture. As she argues, “[c]ontemporary femininity is constructed as a *bodily characteristic*”<sup>164</sup> (*Gender and the Media* 91), which means that in current media culture, ‘femininity’ is “defined . . . as the possession of a young, able-bodied, heterosexual, ‘sexy’ body” (*Gender and the Media* 91). Meanwhile, this focus on the sexualized body cannot be found in contemporary constructions of ‘masculinity,’ although men’s bodies – as this chapter has demonstrated – are also

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<sup>164</sup> Emphasis in the original.

increasingly objectified and coded “in ways that give permission for them to be looked at and desired” (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 97).

As becomes clear, contemporary sex-positive/sexualized culture and shifting sexual norms come with both new freedoms and constraints. As Rhonda Nicol argues, “[i]f there are more possibilities available to young women than ever before, there are equally more opportunities for failure, and unwise choices carry penalties” (120). New societal notions about sexuality in general and women’s sexuality in particular

may point toward a loosening of double standards and an opening to a consent-based (safe, healthy, informed, adult) model of sexual expression. And yet ambivalence around sexuality and especially around issues of women’s sexual choice and pleasure remain central in American culture – indeed, worldwide. (Roach, *Happily Ever After* 81)

Women and girls are confronted with contradictory demands concerning their performance of sexuality and ‘femininity,’ and have to navigate the difficult terrain of deciding when and how, with whom and under what circumstances to have the ‘correct’ amount of sex (Nicol 120). While they are expected to perform successfully sexually once they are with the ‘right’ partner, which suggests that a certain amount of sexual knowledge and experience is demanded, they must acquire this experience in a context in which “the pernicious and enduring double standard that a woman is nasty and vulgar if she revels in sex” (Roach, *Happily Ever After* 88) persists. While men’s sexual escapades are sanctioned by the larger culture and taken as a sign of their prowess and accomplishment, “[w]omen – ‘ladies’ – do not traditionally go on the hunt for sex or overly enjoy it; such licentiousness is the province of their fallen sister” (Roach, *Happily Ever After* 100). To meet society’s expectations in terms of sexuality is, at best, a delicate balancing act or, at worst, entirely impossible for women: “Failure to have sex can result in being labeled ‘frigid’ or ‘uptight,’ and choosing to have sex, even under the ‘right’ circumstances, exposes one to multiple risks: being labeled a ‘slut’ or ‘easy’ and/or being found sexually inadequate” (Nicol 119-120). If decades ago, young women were expected to adhere to the ideal of the virgin, with the idea of the ‘whore’ being invoked as a foil, women today “are supposed to look sexy but not seek out sex, to be both whore and virgin at the same time” (Roach, *Happily Ever After* 100).

It is in this context of an increasingly sex-positive/sexualized postfeminist culture, with both its pitfalls and possibilities, that the analyzed paranormal romances must be understood. Through their representation of an active heterosexual female gaze, the narratives connect with postfeminist discourses surrounding female (sexual) subjectivity and sexual empowerment. Essentially, they embody the postfeminist “shift from the

portrayal of women as *sex objects* to the portrayal of women as *active and desiring sexual subjects*”<sup>165</sup> (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 89). In doing so, the texts are both a reflection of changing cultural attitudes towards what is acceptable sexually and a major contributing factor in the circulation of positive images of straight female desire and sexuality in the face of enduring constraints and denials of the latter in the larger culture. On the one hand, the texts’ emergence is enabled by a cultural environment that allows women a progressively greater extent of sexual agency. As Perfetti-Oates puts it, the existence of the heterosexual female gaze in film “reveals contemporary Hollywood cinema’s progress toward gender equality as it enables men and women to reverse subject and object positions. . . . [and] enriches the film industry as it expands the possibilities for the gaze, and explores new avenues of visual pleasure” (par. 17). The availability of these new images can be tied back to several decades of feminist and gay rights politics (Moore 45), which have made possible what seemed to be unimaginable in 1970s and 80s feminist film theory: the existence of a straight female gaze in mainstream narrative film and television. On the other hand, in a context in which “patriarchal scripts for normative feminine docility, submissiveness, and sexual passivity” (Roach, *Happily Ever After* 100) continue to constrict women in their sexual activity and expression, it is remarkable that the *Twilight Saga*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*, as mainstream film and TV texts, endorse straight female erotic desire and sexual pleasure by privileging a heterosexual female gaze.

The occurrence of this female gaze can be interpreted as a mechanism that reverses gendered power relations by turning traditional structures of looking on their head. Considering that “[s]ociety’s dread of women who own their desire, and use it in ways that confound expectations of proper female sexuality, persists” (Penley et al. 14), the portrayal of female protagonists Bella, Elena and Sookie pursuing desires that could be described as transgressive – after all, their lovers are non-human creatures and therefore essentially Other – opens up a space of resistance to the patriarchal culture which presents women with “impossible contradictions and double standards” (Roach, *Happily Ever After* 88). As Crawford points out, Bella’s

desires are mad, illogical, amoral, impossible, anti-social, wildly excessive – and yet, by some dream-logic, by the end of the fourth book every single one of them has been fulfilled. For many readers, anxious about what and when and to what extent they may be permitted to desire at all, this has clearly been exhilarating stuff. (172)

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<sup>165</sup> Emphasis in the original.



To some degree, this has to be put into perspective: What is important to note is that Edward and Jacob are not simply passive objects of erotic contemplation. On the contrary, the narrative repeatedly affords them more agency than Bella, whose capacity to act or exert power is often restricted by her lack of physical or supernatural power in the *Twilight* universe. A similar dynamic can be seen in *The Vampire Diaries* and, to a lesser extent, *True Blood*.<sup>166</sup> The fact that the passivity associated with being the object of the gaze refuses to extend to the narrative suggests that the straight female gaze in the analyzed narratives only partially reverses the conventional gendered gaze paradigm. This is unsurprising since women continue to lack the systemic and institutionally sanctioned power that (white, heterosexual) men enjoy. Nevertheless, the three series manage to provide meaningful spaces for women and girls to refuse the position of object-to-be-looked-at and instead occupy the subjective position of the desiring bearer of the look. For this purpose, the texts not only make use of the figure of the vampire, which invites and legitimizes the straight female gaze, but also avail themselves of the strategies of camp and parody to destabilize traditional structures of looking. On a narrative level, the vampire functions as an element that triggers the female protagonists' investigative gaze: In the *Twilight* Saga and *The Vampire Diaries*, the heroines uncover their lovers' 'mysterious allure' by directing their observant and potent gaze towards them. In *True Blood*, the vampire is employed to illustrate in a particularly poignant way the dynamics of a sexist and misogynist culture, especially in the realm of sexuality. By foregrounding the perspective of the female protagonist as she becomes romantically and sexually involved with a male vampire – a socially excluded creature –, the narrative places emphasis on the experiences of (white, heterosexual, able-bodied) women as they attempt to navigate the complicated sexual mores of a society that is influenced by feminism, yet still patriarchally structured. In all three of the examined paranormal romances, the male vampire body becomes the sexualized object of a desiring straight female gaze. The vampire, a figure whose Otherness has traditionally linked it with 'femininity' and the transgression of (gendered) boundaries, is well suited to take up a position in the texts that is usually reserved for female characters in film and TV. The vampire's fluctuation between 'masculine' and 'feminine' positions also opens it up to bring into operation the potentially subversive approach of camp. Thus, through the strategic use of the vampire figure, the analyzed paranormal romances offer a "resistant space where alternatives to

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<sup>166</sup> Sookie turns out to be a faerie-human halfling whose supernatural powers include telepathy and photokinesis. Although she must often be rescued by more powerful male characters, she does use her supernatural gifts to defend and fight for herself.

the dominant system of desire can be explored” (Bellas, “When the Girl Looks”) and where heterosexual female desire is validated and rewarded.

If Kaplan argued in 1983 that “men do not simply look; their gaze carries with it the power of action and of possession which is lacking in the female gaze. Women receive and return a gaze, but cannot act upon it” (31), the fact that the analyzed paranormal romances make their female protagonists the bearers of a desiring and investigative gaze suggests that women’s gazes do increasingly carry power in the late 2000s. After all, Moore contends that “as social conditions change, so do our pleasures” (57). While the representation of white, heterosexual women’s active gazes in current popular culture is a step forward from the previously claimed “unrepresentability of woman as subject of desire” (Smelik 496), the portrayal of Jacob’s character in the *Twilight* Saga shows that the representation of Native Americans in American popular culture is still guided by centuries-old tropes like the ‘Noble Savage.’ Although it could be argued that the presentation of Jacob’s body does not have the sadistic undertone that often accompanies fetishistic scopophilia in traditional Hollywood film because his body is never presented in fragmented close-ups, his casual sexual objectification through a white cinematic gaze remains problematic. Another aspect that can be criticized when it comes to the *Twilight* Saga is the fact that heterosexual desire is presented as the unquestioned norm in the text. Through the heteronormative conception of desire in the Saga, any alternative figurations of desire or sexual identity are completely erased. The same is true of *The Vampire Diaries*, where non-heterosexual models of desire are kept to a minimum<sup>167</sup> and where female characters of color, such as Bonnie Bennet, are not afforded the same subject position as the white female lead.<sup>168</sup> In *True Blood*, Tara Thornton suffers a similarly grim fate as Bonnie regarding her (sexual) agency;<sup>169</sup> however, as mentioned earlier, this series offers more conceptions of gay and/or queer sexualities than the other two texts.

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<sup>167</sup> Gay characters include Bill Forbes (Caroline’s father), Luke, Mary Louise and Nora, all of whom are killed after appearing on the show for relatively short periods of time.

<sup>168</sup> Bonnie desires several men over the course of the seasons, but she is rarely allowed to gaze at them like Elena gazes at the Salvatore brothers. What is more, none of her romantic and/or sexual entanglements end well: Ben turns out to be an evil vampire who is then staked by Stefan; Luka, Carter and Enzo are killed due to various circumstances; Bonnie’s fling with Jamie is simply not mentioned again, and Jeremy moves on with his life after his relationship with Bonnie does not work out.

<sup>169</sup> In season 2, Tara’s and her boyfriend Eggs’ sexuality is controlled by Maenad Maryann; Eggs is then accidentally killed by Jason. Later, Tara is kidnapped, abused and raped by sociopathic vampire Franklin. After sacrificing her life for her friend Sookie and being turned into a vampire against her will, Tara is killed at the beginning of the final season.

As already pointed out, the gaze is primarily available to the white, heterosexual, young and able-bodied female protagonists of the analyzed paranormal romances. Scholars have criticized “the class, age, and racial exclusions that define postfeminism” (Tasker and Negra 2), and this aspect emerges here as well. In fact, some scholars have pointed out that the attainment of sexual subjecthood is linked to even more restrictive conditions in postfeminist culture. For instance, Gill writes that “it is important to note that only *some* women (beautiful, slim, young) are attributed sexual subjecthood”<sup>170</sup> (*Gender and the Media* 91), so that for example women who are considered obese, ugly, hairy or wrinkled tend to be excluded from the empowerment narrative, even if they may be white and heterosexual. Not surprisingly, Bella, Elena and Sookie all fall into the restricted category of women whose sexual subjecthood is commonly represented in popular media. Even more clearly than Bella and Elena, Sookie seems to epitomize the postfeminist ideal of the white, straight, young woman endowed with a sexy body and a particularly ‘feminine’ appearance. Thus, contrary to Kaplan’s earlier-cited prognosis, female characters are not required to shed their feminine-coded characteristics in the process of becoming the bearers of an active gaze. As was already alluded to in subchapter 4.5.2, among the analyzed protagonists, Sookie undoubtedly represents the postfeminist phenomenon of the “do-me feminist” (Genz and Brabon 92).

As defined by Genz and Brabon, the “do-me feminist consciously employs her physical appearance and sexuality in order to achieve personal and professional objectives and gain control over her life” (92). By adopting a sexual/‘feminine’ agency, “[t]his ‘new’ kind of woman is both feminine and feminist at the same time, merging notions of personal empowerment with the visual display of sexuality” (Genz and Brabon 92). In the case of Sookie, this idea is mirrored in the scenes analyzed earlier in which she draws power from appealing to the male gaze. Repeatedly in the series, Sookie uses her sexy body as well as her seduction techniques to gain advantages for herself, be it in her professional or her personal life. In the process, she allows her body to become sexualized by the gaze of male characters and the camera. However, she is represented here not as a “passive, objectified sex object, but a woman who [is] knowingly playing with her sexual power” (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 89). As Gill maintains, in postfeminist media culture, “[w]omen are not straightforwardly objectified but are presented as active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so” (*Gender*

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<sup>170</sup> Emphasis in the original.

*and the Media* 258). Importantly, in the postfeminist logic, “[t]his is ‘power femininity’ in which self-objectification is not an indicator of the power of cultural expectations about how women should look, but in fact a strategy of ‘empowerment’” (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 92). Here the adoption of a sexualized stance is viewed as “an expression of positive female autonomy rather than objectification” (Genz and Brabon 102). In this respect, it is striking that in each of the examined scenes, the narrative and/or dialogue underline that Sookie is acting from a position of ‘feminist’ strength, struggling to seize power in a sexist conflict, when she actively chooses to cater to the male gaze. Meanwhile, it cannot be denied that Sookie does embody the conventional features of the straight male fantasy: She is young, slim, petite, blonde and beautiful; she also presents herself in lingerie and revealing outfits that accentuate her body which, through its ‘feminine curves,’ is coded as ‘sexy.’ It is here that the dissemination of pornographic aesthetics into mainstream culture plays a role: “We are invited to become a particular kind of self, and endowed with agency on condition that it is used to construct oneself as a subject closely resembling the heterosexual male fantasy that is found in pornography” (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 258).

Many critics dismiss the empowering potential of the equation of sex and power. In fact, some argue that do-me feminism and raunch culture actually exacerbate the sexual objectification of women’s bodies while tricking women into thinking that they are sexual subjects. Thus, Genz and Brabon note that a number of critics reject “the notion of sexual subjecthood, insisting that what some are calling ‘the new feminism’ is really ‘the old objectification,’ disguised in stilettos” (103). For instance, in Ariel Levy’s account, empowerment is only feigned because in reality, through their self-objectification, women unwittingly serve a patriarchal agenda (Genz and Brabon 103). Furthermore, Gill finds that the self-chosen objectification “represents a shift from an external judging male gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze. It is a move to a new ‘higher’ form of exploitation: the objectifying male gaze is internalized to form a new disciplinary regime” (*Gender and the Media* 90). In this view, a pornographic aesthetics is adopted by women as their own, a process through which they actively participate in the repetition of sexist stereotypes. While such explanations rightfully emphasize the dangers with which sex-positive/sexualized culture is fraught, they fall short with regard to the “the potential for resignification that is lodged within the re-articulations of sexuality” (Genz and Brabon 104). Thus, in accordance with postfeminism’s central feature of contradictoriness, female sexual subjecthood in the contemporary age encompasses both empowerment and

subordination. In this paradoxical construction, women become both subject and object at the same time, highlighting “the complex identity positions that women take up in contemporary society, as both a conscious and unconscious ‘choice’” (Genz and Brabon 105). As Genz and Brabon write with reference to Ien Ang’s *Living Room Wars* (1996):

In Ien Ang’s words, many women of the new millennium can be said to reside in a strangely unsettled in-between space where they are ‘free and yet bounded,’ inhabiting a contradictory site that is simultaneously constraining and liberating, productive and oppressive (165). What makes this contemporary critical site so thought-provoking and contentious is precisely the varying degrees of ‘freedom’ and ‘boundedness,’ with critics vigorously debating as to where this precarious balance lies. (105)

Thus, the degrees of empowerment and subordination are debatable and may vary from case to case. When it comes to *True Blood*, the first couple of seasons offer scenes that are more clearly readable as examples of Sookie’s empowered (sexual) subjecthood. Placed alongside instances in which Sookie’s active gaze and perspective is privileged, a scene like her dream sequence, in which she confidently demands that Bill and Eric accept her conditions for the continuation of their mutual sexual relationship, can be interpreted as demonstrating “one of the central tenets of postfeminist ideology: that sexual attractiveness is a source of power over patriarchy rather than subjection to it” (Roberts 233). While the camera work does objectify Sookie’s body, she presents herself as a sexual subject in charge of her own fantasy. In later seasons, beginning with season 6, Sookie’s self-chosen objectification, for instance when she sets up a honey trap for Warlow, becomes less and less plausible<sup>171</sup> and more often a pretext for the showrunners to sexualize Sookie’s body in classic male gaze fashion. Furthermore, such scenes appear in a context in which Sookie’s subjective gaze is no longer represented, and in which for female characters overall, the objectification of their own bodies seems to become the only option of acquiring agency. Here “the promise of power by becoming [the] object . . . of desire” (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 90) rings rather hollow and restrictive, and it is doubtful whether a resignification of ‘femininity’/sexuality was ever the goal of this kind of representation.

As such, then, proponents of sex-positive/sexualized postfeminist culture operate “in the controversial gap between sexual objectification and liberation” (Genz and Brabon 97). Their objective is the reclamation and re-articulation of ‘femininity’ and sexuality as active and pleasurable. Seeing as they rely on practices of re-assigning meanings,<sup>172</sup> for

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<sup>171</sup> After all, Sookie could just as easily have caught Warlow off-guard in any other setting.

<sup>172</sup> Fittingly, Sookie attempts to reclaim the word ‘whore’ in the episode “Don’t You Feel Me,” as discussed earlier.

them, the “feminist ‘revolution’ is conceived mainly in the realm of representation” (Genz and Brabon 97). Characteristic for these postfeminist strands is therefore “not only a sexy kind of feminism but also an implicit acceptance of the fact that this sexualised feminist stance is necessarily embedded in popular culture” (Genz and Brabon 96). As touched upon in subchapter 2.2.3 about postfeminism as a historical break, a media-friendly angle is typical of postfeminism’s approach. Thus, the “existence of postfeminism as a cultural media phenomenon is undisputed” (Genz and Brabon 18): Feminist discourses are now firmly anchored in the contemporary media landscape and (post)feminism is fundamentally characterized by an interaction with the market (Genz and Brabon 25). While operating from an “insider position within popular culture” (Genz and Brabon 70) may be beneficial in terms of the ways in which (post)feminist notions can be distributed and normalized in the larger culture, a common criticism has been that by becoming mainstream, “feminism is supposedly in danger of losing its radicalism” (Genz and Brabon 25). Most recently, Andi Zeisler has argued in *We Were Feminists Once: From Riot Grrrl to CoverGirl®, the Buying and Selling of a Political Movement* (2016) that what she terms “marketplace feminism” (xiii) is “decontextualized. It’s depoliticized. And it’s probably feminism’s most popular iteration ever” (xiii). According to Zeisler, after having been incorporated into popular culture, “feminism got *cool*” (x) and “sellable” (xii). Considering popular culture a site which is inherently compromised by the interests of advertisers and the market, Zeisler and other representatives of this viewpoint maintain that instead of continuing to push a collective feminist agenda to challenge the societal status quo, marketplace feminism “constructs women as both subjects and consumers through an individualist rhetoric” (Genz and Brabon 25). In the meantime, “the actual issues crucial to feminism’s forward movement, are as threatened as ever” (Zeisler xiii-xiv) but are brushed off by a feminism that does not take into account structurally and institutionally based inequalities. As Zeisler has argued in an interview with the *Huffington Post*, feminism is now “something that certainly mainstream media uses as a hook to get people interested. But at the same time feminism itself – the need for feminism and the many ways in which it’s an unfinished project – seems sort of increasingly disconnected to [sic] that ‘cool feminism’” (Vagianos).

It is in this area of conflict that the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* exist. On the one hand, the commercial nature of these highly popular texts cannot be dismissed. Douglas points out that while media-created fantasies “have been driven in part by girls’ and women’s desires, and have often provided a great deal of vicarious

pleasure, they have also been driven by marketing” (8). Thus, the privileging of a heterosexual female gaze can also be seen as a marketing strategy to draw in straight white female viewers: “Since the earliest days of commercial television, women have been recognized as a crucial component of the television audience because of their spending power as consumers. That principle is equally valid today” (Roberts 229). As a result, there is a danger that the supposed (sexual) empowerment proffered by the narratives is a façade constructed to lure in viewers, and that indeed, “feminism’s entry into the popular is . . . a damaging attempt to manage and contain the revolutionary potential of the feminist enterprise” (Genz and Brabon 19). Ariel Levy warns that “[r]aunch culture is not essentially progressive, it is essentially commercial. . . . Raunch culture isn’t about opening our minds to the possibilities and mysteries of sexuality. It’s about endlessly reiterating one particular – and particularly commercial – shorthand for sexiness” (29-30). With regard to the analyzed cultural products, especially *True Blood* runs the risk of simply “repeat[ing] and giv[ing] flesh to old sexist stereotypes” (Roach, *Happily Ever After* 81) in later seasons, since the series represents Sookie in increasingly sexualized ways; at the same time, no convincing element of empowerment is offered by her depiction as a do-me feminist.

On the other hand, it is too “convenient to conclude that sexual subjecthood is a commercial media ploy” (Genz and Brabon 104). Instead of conceiving postfeminism’s intricate involvement with the popular as an indication of its depoliticization, I agree with Genz and Brabon who

maintain that popular/consumer culture should be reconceived as a site of struggle over the meanings of feminism and the reconceptualisation of a postfeminist conceptual practice that, unlike second wave feminism, does not rely on separatism and collectivism . . . and instead highlights the multiple agency and subject positions of individuals in the new millennium. (25)

Notions of straight female (sexual) agency, pleasure and subjecthood may be particularly media-friendly and ‘sellable’ topics (Zeisler xv), but this does not mean that they are without substance. To the contrary, the preceding systematic, in-depth analysis of the paranormal romances in question has shown that the texts extend engaging offers of identification for (straight, white) female viewers, and thereby address and challenge conventional structures of looking in Hollywood film and mainstream television. Here viewers may not only be intrigued by the representation and validation of active heterosexual female desire but also by the acknowledgment and negotiation of how it feels to become the object of the gaze from a female perspective. In this respect, it is

interesting that Genz and Brabon write that “[a]dvocates of th[e] late twentieth-century sexualised feminist culture call for a vision of the future that is a continuation of the freedoms of the sexual revolution coupled with an awareness of sexual oppression activated by the feminist movement” (96). As was brought out by the analysis, both *Twilight* and *True Blood* examine how male entitlement and structural power materialize in the form of gazes and attempts to control women’s bodies in public as well as private spaces, and “how the continuum of men’s intrusive practices plays a key . . . role in women’s experience of their embodiment as contradictory and ambiguous” (Vera-Gray 164). Thus, “the positions of subject and object are . . . experienced by women as parallel and simultaneous” (Vera-Gray 154). Faced with different challenges and/or opportunities at different times, Bella and Sookie find different ways and strategies to deal with, avoid, circumvent, ignore, address, fight, accept, play with or reframe the situations they find themselves in. In this way, the two series not only illustrate “the multifaceted and complex ways in which structural oppression impacts, conflicts, points to and limits choice and action” (Vera-Gray 4), but they also highlight “[t]he complex, multiple and uneasy ways in which women individually . . . live our agency in the current gender order” (Vera-Gray 48). Part of this complexity is that women, in more than one way, are simultaneously rendered subject and object, which the analyzed texts illustrate so poignantly. Considering the cultural work that the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* do in combining the ‘gazed gaze’ with an active desiring gaze, it makes sense to conceive, with Soloway, the “privileging of a female point-of-view . . . as a political tool to generate empathy and, ultimately, demand socio-political justice” (Soloway). Thus, far from being depoliticized, the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* are postfeminist texts whose focus on a (straight, white) female gaze can be interpreted “as indicative of an important cultural moment of possibility and counter-resistance” (Roach, *Happily Ever After* 82).



## 5. Vampire Transformation as Makeover: The Making of Ideal Postfeminist Subjects<sup>173</sup>

The body is a central and recurring topic in contemporary Gothic narratives. In fact, in his description of recent developments within the genre, Xavier Aldana Reyes refers to “the body and its transformation as the ultimate site of Gothic inscription” (389). Texts featuring body horror typically display an obsession with metamorphosis and the limits of the body (Aldana Reyes 397) and are rooted in a “public anxiety about gender, mortality, and control” (Badley 6). The fascination with physical as well as identity changes in the vampire series analyzed in this dissertation, the *Twilight Saga*, *The Vampire Diaries* and, to a degree, *True Blood*, can be ascribed to the teen genre, in which the figure of the vampire is used to negotiate issues connected with adolescence, coming of age, and the ensuing corporeal changes as well as shifting social relationships and power dynamics (Wilson Overstreet 15). What is narrated in these texts is often a young girl’s gradual entrance into adulthood. Thus, while the examined series may be famous for their attractive male vampires – Edward Cullen, the Salvatore Brothers, Bill Compton and Eric Northman being the most prominent ones –, when it comes to the powerful *transition* from human to vampire, the emphasis is clearly on female characters undergoing the transformation on screen. As I will argue in this chapter, the vampiric transformation, which is often framed as a narrative of personal growth, discipline and control for the female protagonists, is rooted in the context of contemporary postfeminist culture. First, Bella Swan’s transformation into a vampire in the *Twilight Saga* will be examined closely. After this, the analysis will focus on Caroline Forbes, one of the central characters in *The Vampire Diaries*, and then shift to Jessica Hamby from *True Blood*. As I posit, the three characters epitomize the paradox of the active/passive female postfeminist subject, individually empowered and simultaneously ruled by social norms.

One way in which the postfeminist subject is frequently established is the painful process of a makeover, which has become ubiquitous in contemporary film and television. As Negra points out, “[i]n a postfeminist consumer culture the makeover is a key ritual of female coming into being” (123). Perhaps less obviously than in reality programs like

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<sup>173</sup> Parts of this chapter have previously been published by the author, “The Legacy of Lucy Westenra: Female Postfeminist Subjects in *The Vampire Diaries*, *True Blood* and *The Twilight Saga*.” *Rethinking Gender in Popular Culture in the 21st Century: Marlboro Men and California Gurls*, edited by Astrid M. Fellner, Marta Fernández, Martina Martausova, and Viera Novakova, Cambridge Scholars, 2017, pp. 89-109; “Vampires ‘on a Special Diet’: Identity and the Body in Contemporary Media Texts.” *Dracula and the Gothic in Literature, Pop Culture and the Arts*, edited by Isabel Ermida, Rodopi, 2015, pp. 235-256. Published with the permission of Cambridge Scholars Publishing and Rodopi.

*The Swan* (FOX, 2004) or teen movies like *She's All That* (1999, dir. by Robert Iscove) and *The Princess Diaries* (2001, dir. by Garry Marshall), I argue that makeovers play a central role in the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*. Corresponding to broader postfeminist discourses, Bella's, Caroline's and Jessica's postfeminist vampiric makeovers can be understood as acts of personal empowerment which permit these characters a new sense of agency, while also demonstrating an aspect of consumer culture that endorses the constant disciplinary shaping of the self by way of working on the body. Scholars have previously addressed the makeover trope in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* Saga; I will further explore the ways in which the other two texts make use of this trope. By relating the mentioned paranormal romances to postfeminist/neo-liberal media culture, this chapter will investigate how discourses surrounding self-surveillance, body work and subjectivation are incorporated and negotiated in the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*.

## **5.1. Neo-liberalist Postfeminism**

Subchapter 2.5.2 has already provided an overview of postfeminism's fundamental entanglement with neo-liberalism. The conglomerate of neo-liberal and postfeminist discourses will be further elaborated on in the following section. In the introduction to their collected edition *New Femininities. Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity* (2011), Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff define neo-liberalism as "a mode of political and economic rationality characterized by privatization, deregulation and a rolling back and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision that rose to prominence in the 1980s under the Reagan administration in the US and Thatcher's premiership in the UK" (5). Most relevant for the following study, a crucial aspect of neo-liberalism is that a range of "quasi-market mechanisms" (Gill and Scharff 6) are transferred to other spheres of life. Thus, individual responsibility is internalized by neo-liberal subjects with regard to all kinds of different areas, such as work, health or social life (Gill and Scharff 6). As "subjects who are constituted as self-managing, autonomous and enterprising" (Gill and Scharff 5), persons living in neo-liberal culture are encouraged to forge their self-identity on the basis of a series of lifestyle choices (Genz and Brabon 166). In other words, by continuously shaping their lives, individuals come to be seen as 'entrepreneurs' or 'enterprises of the self' (Genz and Brabon 170). In this way, neo-liberalism acts "as a force for creating actors who are rational, calculating and self-motivating, and who are

increasingly exhorted to make sense of their individual biographies in terms of discourses of freedom, autonomy and choice – no matter how constrained their lives may actually be” (Gill and Scharff 6).

The shift towards neo-liberalist ideas of autonomous and “entrepreneurial subjectivity” (Gill and Scharff 6) has taken place in an era characterized not only by a loss of faith in the authority of science and other universalist ‘grand narratives’ (Pilcher and Whelehan 110), but also by the decline of other traditions. Life stories are less and less socially prescribed, work biographies are no longer carved in stone, and lifestyle options have become increasingly divergent (Genz and Brabon 170). As a result, “identities in general have become more diverse and malleable and, today more than ever, individuals can construct a narrative of the self” (Genz and Brabon 169-70). The latter is what Anthony Giddens refers to as “the reflexive project of the self” (180). This project entails that individuals’ course of life is less determined for instance by their socio-economic class, familial background or gender; instead, they are called upon to self-produce their biography through negotiating a range of lifestyle options. Crucially, the construction of a self-identity must be understood as “an ongoing project that demands the active participation of the subject” (Genz and Brabon 170). As Genz and Brabon stress, “[i]ndividualisation . . . operates as a social process that . . . increases the capacity for agency while also accommodating a rethinking of the individual as an active agent” (170).

Individualization is also one of the central aspects through which neo-liberalism and postfeminism are connected. Thus, Gill and Scharff argue that individualism is at the core of both phenomena in the sense that notions of collectivism or “any idea of individuals as subject to pressures, constraints or influence from outside themselves” (7) are discarded. Postfeminism is not interested in looking at the systemic structures which affect the lives of individuals. Rather, postfeminist discourses suggest that, in the aftermath of the tremendous successes of second wave feminism, women now act as autonomous agents who grow up in a world in which gendered power imbalances have been eradicated (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 260), so that they are free to steer their life into any direction they wish, as long as they work hard enough to get there. In this way, “the autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism bears a strong resemblance to the active, freely choosing, self-inventing subject of postfeminism” (Gill and Scharff 7).

As Genz suggests, “[p]ostfeminism is . . . participating in the discourses of capitalism and neo-liberalism that encourage women to concentrate on their private lives and consumer capacities as the sites for self-expression and agency” (qtd. in Genz and Brabon 171). Postfeminism, which “naturalizes a model of feminine identity and female power inseparable from consumption”<sup>174</sup> (Roberts 232), is therefore also intertwined with neo-liberal consumerism. Within the frame of the latter, a new relationship between body and self has developed (Featherstone 187): Mike Featherstone underlines the “significance of appearance and bodily preservation within late capitalist society” (170). Advertising in this society keeps reminding the individual that self-improvement is possible and necessary in all aspects of life (Featherstone 172). This results in “ascribed bodily qualities to become regarded as plastic – with effort and ‘body work’ individuals are persuaded that they can achieve a certain desired appearance” (Featherstone 187). Consequently, individuals assume self-responsibility for the way they look, and the body becomes a ‘mirror’ of the self. In the same way that “fitness and slimness become associated not only with energy, drive and vitality but worthiness as a person” (Featherstone 183), bodily neglect can be taken as “an indication of laziness, low self-esteem and even moral failure” (Featherstone 186). In this way, someone whose body does not correspond to conventional beauty standards may become less acceptable as a person.

On the one hand, body work is seen as a way of self-expression and self-actualization for individuals (Fraser and Greco 28). The more a body resembles an ideal young, healthy, fit and beautiful body, the more value it seems to be awarded (Fraser and Greco 28). On the other hand, Mariam Fraser und Monica Greco describe the process of optimizing the body as “a disciplining force, placing even greater burdens on individuals” (28). The term “body maintenance” (Featherstone 182) incorporates the metaphor of a machine being transferred to the body: Like cars and other consumer goods, bodies require regular attention and constant maintenance in order to keep functioning efficiently. Individuals may resort to advice by experts such as therapists and fitness trainers – the “helping professions” (Featherstone 192) – but also by advice pages in magazines or self-improvement programs on television. Importantly, individuals must monitor themselves and their bodies constantly.

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<sup>174</sup> Gill argues that postfeminist discourses underline “the idea that women can gain control through the commodification of their appearance – that by acquiring a particular ‘look’ (by buying the right bras, makeup and accessories) they can obtain power” (*Gender and the Media* 89-90).

Women, according to Featherstone, are most clearly “trapped in the . . . self-surveillance world” (179), which is doubtlessly reflected in the rising social expectation for women to resort to an intense regime of personal grooming, like waxing, tanning, manicures, pedicures, etc. (Negra 119), or even to consider more permanent forms of body enhancement like cosmetic surgery. For Kathy Davis, surgery belongs to a “broad regime of technologies, practices, and discourses that define the female body as deficient and in need of constant transformation” (117). Women are persuaded to choose between different personal grooming and lifestyle options in order to outwardly ‘perform’ success. Curiously, this performance is also considered to induce ‘inner’ pleasure: Notions of ‘being self-determined’ and ‘pleasing yourself,’ for instance by ‘using beauty’ to make oneself feel good and sexy, are central to postfeminist logic (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 259). Thus, postfeminism’s emphasis on self-discipline is intimately related to its stress upon personal choice (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 261). In this context, the body is “presented simultaneously as women’s source of power *and* as always already unruly and requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodelling”<sup>175</sup> (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 255).

According to Gill and Scharff, the fact that it is women in particular who are urged to manage and optimize their bodies and selves is further suggestive of the strong connection between neo-liberalism and postfeminism: “To a much greater extent than men, women are required to work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present all their actions as freely chosen. Could it be that neoliberalism is *always already gendered*, and that women are constructed as its ideal subjects?”<sup>176</sup> (7). In postfeminist discourses, the neo-liberal rhetoric of empowerment and autonomy accompanies the optimizing of the female body and self, so that the “tropes of freedom and choice are increasingly associated with the category ‘young women’” (Budgeon, “The Contradictions” 284). Because their lives have historically been particularly constrained and disadvantaged (as opposed to the lives of white, affluent men), women are “held to be key beneficiaries of a range of socio-economic changes that now characterize Western societies” (Budgeon, “The Contradictions” 284), among them the emergence of neo-liberalism. In any case, the “powerful resonance between postfeminism and neoliberalism” (Gill and Scharff 7) becomes palpable in the

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<sup>175</sup> Emphasis in the original.

<sup>176</sup> Emphasis in the original.

postfeminist trope of the makeover, which is taken up by the paranormal romances that will be analyzed in the following subchapters.

## 5.2. “Born to Be a Vampire:” Bella Swan’s Vampire Makeover

Heike Steinhoff and Maria Verena Siebert have read the *Twilight Saga* as a makeover narrative in the frame of which the transformation works

both as a disciplinary mechanism that functions to transform female bodies in line with patriarchal heteronormative norms of gender and sexuality *and* an experience of female empowerment where the body becomes a project of absolute makeability, a means of self-realization for the female agent.<sup>177</sup> (2)

This oscillation between two contradictory points is an essential aspect of the makeover trope and indicates its embeddedness in postfeminist discourse. As will become clear, it is a common thread in the *Twilight Saga*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*. While the texts may differ considerably in some respects, they share a focus on external and internal changes which require the active involvement of the subject and which signal the achievement of a successful self. As will become clear, Bella in the *Twilight Saga* represents a portrayal of female vampiric transition which, on the one hand, is very different from the two characters in the other series, as vampirism in her case implies not the transgression, but actually a clear reinforcement of traditional gender roles. On the other hand, Bella’s transformation narrative follows a similar logic as Caroline’s and Jessica’s: It is one of personal growth and empowerment on the basis of self-control.

As a human, Bella is first and foremost characterized by her physical vulnerability and lack of control. Thus, she starts out from a position in which she holds little power – similar to Caroline and Jessica, as will become apparent in the subsequent analyses. Not only is Bella portrayed as having trouble with daily physical activities, but she is also considerably weaker than most of her vampire and shapeshifter friends due to her human nature. Since she is defenseless in the face of all ordinary and particularly supernatural threats, Bella repeatedly depends on being rescued by Edward, Jacob and other male characters. She recognizes that the only way to reverse Edward’s and her role is to become a vampire, too: “I could protect you if you change me” (*New Moon*). Her lack of power is also reflected in the fact that she has little agency when it comes to steering the course of her life in general, as Edward and/or Jacob tend to pull the strings. In *Eclipse*, the two

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<sup>177</sup> Emphasis in the original.

young men discuss which life script would be the best option for Bella. Jacob argues: “You have to consider that I might be better for her than you are,” while Edward relents: “I have considered that. I know you can protect her. . . . you can give her . . . a human life, that’s all I want for her.” Between them, Bella is lying fast asleep, unable to weigh in on the conversation and decide her own fate.<sup>178</sup>

Bella’s powerlessness is further implied through the portrayal of her body, which is presented as specifically human as well as specifically ‘feminine,’ i.e. as inherently flawed. In *Twilight*, Bella is shown to constantly slip, stumble and trip over things. Bella refers to herself as “uncoordinated,” and Edward is annoyed by her extreme clumsiness: “Can you at least watch where you walk?” (*Twilight*). According to Steinhoff and Siebert, Bella’s body is portrayed as “unruly” (5): “soft, potentially dangerous to everyone around, and a source of humiliation for the subject” (5) – in short: “abject” (5).<sup>179</sup> By defining Bella’s body as inherently lacking and in need of discipline, the *Twilight* Saga is consistent with cultural notions that construct ‘femininity’ not only as close to nature and the body but also as monstrous (Steinhoff and Siebert 9). Such a construction can, for example, be found in Sigmund Freud’s cultural theory, in which ‘femininity’ is consistently equated with nature, while ‘masculinity’ is associated with culture (Rohde-Dachser 133); the two are posited as opposites. “Because of their extreme deviation from the male prototype . . . uniquely female biological processes such as menstruation, pregnancy, birth and menopause are seen as inherently subject to malfunction” (Davis-Floyd 1126). In fact, the representation of ‘femininity’ as the unpredictable, the fluctuating, and the ephemeral dates back to ancient Greece (von Braun 94). Reproduction is a field that is closely associated with growth and becoming, and woman, due to her

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<sup>178</sup> A scene reminiscent of the one in *Eclipse* can be found in *The Vampire Diaries*’ season 3. Here Klaus Mikaelson engages in a conversation with the Salvatore brothers, presenting his opinion about what Elena (who is absent) should do with her life: “. . . what she needs right now is to be rid of you lot, and to fall in love with a human. Maybe that nice football player, you know, the blonde one. . . . Yeah, why not? They’ll marry, live a long and fruitful life, and pop out a perfect family” (“Bringing Out the Dead”). Similarly, in *True Blood*’s final episode, Bill makes the decision to leave Sookie for good by killing himself despite Sookie’s protest. As a reason for his decision, he gives his vision for Sookie’s future, which entails marriage, motherhood and a ‘normal life:’ “I’ve seen you around children, seen how you light up around them. I would hate for you to never know what that feels like, to have children of your own” (“Thank You”).

<sup>179</sup> According to Julia Kristeva, the abject is that which “disturbs identity, system, order” (4), which “does not respect borders, positions, rules” (4). The abject threatens life; it must be “radically excluded” (2) from the place of the living subject, “propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self” (Creed 9). Thus, central to the conception of the abject is the idea of a border: That which crosses or threatens to disturb the border is abject (Creed 10). The female body crosses a number of such borders that stabilize the paternal order. By undercutting the symbolic order and thereby highlighting its fragility, ‘femininity’ becomes monstrous.

reproductive capabilities, is seen as not far removed from the world of nature (Deuber-Mankowsky 228). Examining this cultural association between ‘femininity’ and nature that is based in patriarchal fears, Barbara Creed has dedicated a monography to what she terms the “monstrous-feminine” (1). The latter refers to what is “shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject” (Creed 1) about ‘the feminine.’ Creed argues that “when woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions” (7), or the monstrousness is linked directly to questions of sexual desire. A particular representation of the monstrous-feminine can be found in the *Twilight* Saga in Bella’s ‘monstrous’ pregnancy. Here the female body’s supposed inclination to be excessive and out of control is showcased right before the normalizing makeover is performed on Bella (Steinhoff and Siebert 9): Immediately after the horrific birth of her daughter, Bella is turned into a vampire by Edward to save her life.

The conception of Bella’s and Edward’s child is unplanned and unexpected.<sup>180</sup> The events leading to Bella’s realization that she is pregnant set the tone for the grotesque nature of the scenes that follow. It is during her honeymoon that Bella wakes up in the morning and eats peanut butter from the jar, yoghurt and fried poultry for breakfast; after the incongruous meal, she must leap to the bathroom because she is sick. Upon grabbing her toiletries, she spots an unused pack of tampons in her bag. This “reference to menstruation and Bella’s binge-eating at the beginning of the pregnancy plot signal that the horrific threat of the female body out of control that had before only been implicit will now become explicit” (Steinhoff and Siebert 8). To Bella’s and the audience’s surprise, not only is a little baby bump already discernible on her body, but she can also feel the fetus moving inside her. As it turns out, the human-vampire hybrid fetus grows at accelerated speed, a fact that Bella’s human body is not equipped to deal with. The exaggerated growth of the child, which results in its mother’s body being mangled from the inside, is reminiscent of unnatural pregnancies depicted in horror and science fiction movies (Creed 44).<sup>181</sup>

Throughout the process of the pregnancy, Bella’s body becomes increasingly sick, pale and fragile, emaciated despite the huge belly because she cannot hold any food in.

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<sup>180</sup> Assuming that Edward’s vampire body cannot father any children, the couple was engaging in unprotected sex. This assumption, however, turns out not to be accurate. While female vampires in the *Twilight* universe are infertile, the male vampire body continues to be able to reproduce, which “upholds men’s natural role as the spreader of the seed” (McGeough 95).

<sup>181</sup> Films featuring monstrous pregnancies and births include: *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968, dir. by Roman Polanski), *Demon Seed* (1977, dir. by Donald Cammell), *The Brood* (1979, dir. by David Cronenberg), *Alien* (1979, dir. by Ridley Scott), and *The Unborn* (1991, dir. by Rodman Flender).



“The fetus isn’t compatible with your body. It’s too strong. It won’t allow you to get the nutrition you need. It’s starving you by the hour, I can’t stop it, and I can’t slow it down. At this rate, your heart will give up before you can deliver” (*Breaking Dawn – Part 1*), Carlisle explains to Bella. In order to feed the vampire-human halfling inside her, she must drink human blood, which visibly disgusts Jacob. Thus, a recurring theme within the depiction of Bella’s pregnancy is the involvement of bodily wastes, such as blood and vomit, which is a genre convention of the modern horror film. The latter “often ‘plays’ with its audience, saturating it with scenes of blood and gore” (Creed 13). Moreover, the text underlines continuously that the border of inside and outside is violated by the creature that Bella will give birth to. Although the above-described bizarre way of nourishing herself makes her feel better temporarily, the problem remains that Bella’s body suffers from the consequences of the fetus’ unnaturally speedy growth: “It’s breaking her bones now. It’s crushing you from the inside out” (*Breaking Dawn – Part 1*). The awful sound of Bella’s bones being crushed accompanies the scene which finally triggers the delivery of her baby: Caused by a rash gesture in which she bends forward to catch a cup of blood which is falling to the ground, Bella’s spine breaks. Paralleling the paper cup, which falls and results in blood being splashed across the carpet, Bella’s body contorts in a grotesque way and her knees crash to the ground. At the moment of the delivery, her body is at the height of being out of control: “Although Bella firmly made the decision to give birth, she has little control over the experience of giving birth and ultimately must rely on the help of others to survive” (McGeough 96).

A striking circumstance is that Bella’s advanced pregnancy is (initially) portrayed not from Bella’s but from Jacob’s perspective; this change in focal character is adopted from the book version of the series, in which Jacob narrates the complete story of Bella’s pregnancy. The shift in point of view allows for the action to be portrayed from a distanced, male perspective. By this means, the threat of the monstrous-feminine for the paternal symbolic order is emphasized. Bella’s pregnancy is also evaluated by the (almost exclusively) male wolf pack, whose verdict is much the same as Jacob’s: “It’s growing fast. It’s unnatural. Dangerous. A monstrosity. An abomination. On our land. We can’t allow it. We can’t allow it” (*Breaking Dawn – Part 1*). The werewolf pack, Edward and Jacob consider the termination of the monstrous pregnancy the only option. Without consulting with Bella at all, Edward shuts her out of the conversation when he learns that she is pregnant. Conferring with Carlisle on the phone, he deliberately withholds what his vampire father is saying at the other end, and tells Bella: “I’m not going to let it hurt you.

Carlisle will get that thing out” (*Breaking Dawn – Part 1*). Similarly, upon learning what is happening to Bella, Jacob immediately turns to the Cullens instead of enquiring what Bella might want: “Why haven’t you done anything? Take it out of her” (*Breaking Dawn – Part 1*).

Meanwhile, Bella has already decided that she will carry the pregnancy to term, no matter the consequences. With the help of Rosalie, Edward’s vampire sister, she manages to prevail against the opinions of others who try to deny her the right to do what she wants with her own body. Thus, considering that she is voiceless in so many respects, it is all the more striking that Bella is able to make and abide by a number of important decisions in the course of the *Twilight* Saga. These choices include her entering into a love relationship with Edward (someone who, by nature, threatens Bella’s life), her getting married to Edward at an early age, and her carrying her unintended pregnancy full term. Moreover, Bella makes the conscious choice to become a vampire, which distinguishes her from Caroline and Jessica.

Significantly, Bella’s choices are in line with conservative ideas about romantic relationships, family values and reproductive politics. For instance, Rosalie’s and Bella’s insistence that everyone refer to the fetus as “baby” is essentially anti-choice rhetoric which professes to advocate for the unborn. It is in this respect that the postfeminist emphasis on individual choice and empowerment and its disregard for broader structures come into play. The text frames Bella’s choices as individual ones, but it ignores the gender system they may be a part of. Thus, it refuses to take into account the larger context in which these choices are made. Here the *Twilight* Saga can be associated with new traditionalist strands of postfeminism. As Gill and Herdieckerhoff claim, while postfeminist agents value the freedom to make individual choices, it is telling that “they frequently use their empowered postfeminist position to make choices that would be regarded by many second wave feminists as problematic, located as they are in normative notions of femininity” (499).<sup>182</sup> Thus, the members of the Cullen family, whom Bella joins through her transformation, are domesticated vampires representing heteronormative values and reinforcing the dominant social order. With their

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<sup>182</sup> A similar dynamic can be observed in the final episode of *True Blood*, in which Adele Stackhouse holds a fiery (post)feminist speech to convince the adolescent Sookie, who is worried that her disadvantageous supernatural power will impede the fulfilment of her innermost desires, that she can achieve anything she wants in life – in this case an existence as a wife and mother: “Stop it! I don’t want to hear you talking like that. You can have any kind of life you want. You can persevere. Anything you want, Sookie, you are entitled to it. There are no limits on you if you don’t put them on yourself” (“Thank You”).

unwillingness to bite, they are essentially ‘defanged’ vampires, and their advocacy for conservative virtues and rules suggests that they are “distinctly unqueer” (K. Kane 117). Besides, as Steinhoff and Siebert point out, the vampire body which Bella receives in exchange for her flawed human body is “the perfect realization of a body that is under control; it is the clean and proper body” (7). In the context of her unplanned pregnancy, Bella is portrayed as the ultimate self-sacrificing mother-to-be;<sup>183</sup> the delivery of her daughter Reneesme ends fatally for her, but turns out to be the way for Bella to achieve everything she has hitherto desired: an immortal existence with her husband, a functional family, agency, physical strength, beauty, sexuality, wealth, and motherhood.

After an emergency C-section, Edward turns Bella into a vampire. Steinhoff and Siebert observe that *Breaking Dawn – Part I* remains faithful to the structure of makeover shows like *The Swan* in the sense that a man carries out the cosmetic surgery while Bella is unconscious; the surgery is essentially “a transforming procedure . . . that results in an improved, a revamped body” (Steinhoff and Siebert 10). This vampire transformation is entirely medicalized: Instead of a passionate bite of the neck, we get a large syringe with which Edward inserts his venom into Bella’s heart while she is lying on an operating table. The unwritten rules of plastic surgery reality TV suggest that “it is not necessarily the most beautiful, but the most devoted, hard-working and radically transformed woman who wins” (Steinhoff and Siebert 10). The female candidate has to endure intense pain, master the physical recovery and work through emotional set-backs, all the while reinventing herself in accordance with her ‘new body.’ Thus, in makeover shows, “[p]lastic surgery is not depicted as a process passively endured by the candidate” (Steinhoff and Siebert 10). Correspondingly, Bella’s working through excruciating pain is emphasized throughout the transformation process. While she seems dead on the outside, with Edward and Jacob desperately trying to administer first aid, viewers witness the ordeal she is undergoing on the inside. Her organs are literally being burned by Edward’s corrosive venom, and she is internally screaming in pain. “Bella’s pain is her effort, her sacrifice in order to attain that ideal hard body of a vampire,” Steinhoff and Siebert write (10). Considering that Bella has insisted throughout the film series that she wants to be made vampire despite Edward’s and everyone else’s reservations, her transformation can be read as an act of triumph and female empowerment. Indeed,

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<sup>183</sup> The theme of motherly sacrifice runs through the *Twilight* Saga as a whole; it is most obviously embodied by the figure of the ‘Third Wife,’ a nameless Quileute woman who saved the lives of Taha Aki, the spirit chief, as well as the members of her tribe by eagerly sacrificing herself in the fight against ‘the Cold Woman,’ a female vampire.

Edward acknowledges Bella's accomplishments in the last film: "I've had a bad habit of underestimating you. Every obstacle you've faced, I'd think you couldn't overcome it. And you just did" (*Breaking Dawn – Part 2*). At the same time, Bella is dependent on Edward to perform the 'operation' on her body; like a contestant on *The Swan*, she cannot carry out the procedure herself but must rely on the skills of a (male) expert (Steinhoff and Siebert 10).

As a newborn vampire, Bella achieves subjectivity and agency: She is not only exceptionally beautiful, but she also surpasses Edward in terms of physical strength, which he acknowledges right after Bella's transition: "It's your turn not to break me" (*Breaking Dawn – Part 2*). Her new unbreakable, untiring body enables Bella to freely enjoy her sexuality with Edward: "We don't get tired. We don't have to rest or catch our breath or eat. I mean, how are we going to stop?" (*Breaking Dawn – Part 2*). Contrary to Jessica, who experiments with non-monogamy as a vampire, Bella finally finds fulfilment in her exclusive relationship with Edward. If the latter has previously been threatened by the mutual attraction between Bella and Jacob, this tension is now resolved. Bella no longer sexually desires her werewolf friend who, as her sensitive vampire nose registers, gives off what Alice has termed a "God awful wet dog smell" (*New Moon*).<sup>184</sup> Not only does she 'naturally' slide into her role as a loving vampire mother, but Bella also discovers that she has a supernatural ability which provides her with more security in dangerous situations. She is a shield, which is "a defensive talent, . . . a very powerful gift" (*Breaking Dawn – Part 2*) helping her to protect her loved ones in the family's final battle against the vampire lawmakers, the Volturi. While Caroline and Jessica make use of their vampire strength to actively fight, it is interesting that Bella's vampiric talent is a fundamentally passive one. Physically strong as she may be, she is still not an equally active and aggressive fighter as Edward. Furthermore, her supernatural shielding ability seems to be an extension of her caring, motherly attitude; Anna Silver draws attention to Bella's shield being "womb-like" (134), connecting the character with motherhood.

While vampirism in the *Twilight* Saga apparently works as a way of reaffirming traditional gender roles, which distinguishes *Twilight* from *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*, it is crucial to note that Bella's empowerment is based on the same kind of self-discipline that Caroline and Jessica work on in their vampire lives. Contrary to everyone's expectations, Bella exhibits an unprecedented amount of self-control after her

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<sup>184</sup> Vampires and werewolves/shapeshifters are "natural enemies" (*Eclipse*) in the *Twilight* universe. This is a famous and widely used trope in vampire/werewolf fiction.

transformation. Experience has shown that newborn vampires are “at [their] most uncontrollable, vicious, insane with thirst” (*Eclipse*), which is why the Cullens anticipate Bella having difficulties in dealing with her infant daughter, a vampire-human hybrid. However, during her first hunt, Bella manages to suppress her thirst for human blood and redirect it towards an animal without needing any help from Edward, which is surprising since “even mature vampires have problems with that” (*Breaking Dawn – Part 2*). When she also successfully refrains from biting her human father, Jasper is impressed: “Well done, Bella. Never seen a newborn show that kind of restraint” (*Breaking Dawn – Part 2*), and Emmett jokes: “Not sure she *is* a newborn. She’s so tame”<sup>185</sup> (*Breaking Dawn – Part 2*). In fact, before discovering her shielding ability, Bella assumes that her supernatural gift is “super self-control” (*Breaking Dawn – Part 2*). Thus, having inhabited an inherently insufficient body as a human, “Bella claims ownership and control over her body as a vampire, and it is through her transformation that she finally becomes Edward’s equal” (McGeough 99). In disciplining herself, Bella adopts the Cullens’ way of life, which entails abstaining from drinking human blood. As Edward explains to Bella in *Twilight*: “My family, we think of ourselves as vegetarians . . . because we only survive on the blood of animals. But it’s like a human only living on tofu. It keeps you strong but you’re never fully satisfied.” The Cullens’ willingness to suppress their biological instincts affords them the privilege of blending into human society; because they do not attack humans in the area in which they have taken up residence, they are able to maintain their cover. Throughout the Saga, the disciplining of the vampire body is portrayed as a marker of character strength and strong morals. Thus, by agreeing to work on their individual character and to adjust to the values of human society, the members of the Cullen family gain their place within the community of Forks.

Strikingly, Bella’s new vampire body is coded as specifically ‘masculine,’ in stark contrast to her human, feminized body analyzed earlier (Steinhoff and Siebert 12). This ‘masculine’ body is weirdly at odds with her ‘feminine’ social role as a mother and (house)wife after her transformation. In the *Twilight* Saga, the vampire body functions as the ideal body: It is “a smooth, closed, hard surface, a static body” (Steinhoff and Siebert 12) which keeps intact the border of inside and outside; importantly, this is the body that Bella desires. As a cultural sign, a hard body indicates “that one ‘cares’ about oneself and how one appears to others, suggesting willpower, energy, control over infantile impulse, the ability to ‘shape your life’” (Bordo 195). Indeed, the Cullens control their vampire

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<sup>185</sup> Emphasis in the original.

bodies through the power of their minds. Particularly Edward and his father Carlisle embody tremendous self-restraint and strength of mind, both of which are highly valued within the text. As Danielle Dick McGeough argues, Edward's "capacity to assert reason and resolve over emotional, bodily desires reifies the mind/body dichotomy and privileges logic. . . . Because rationality and self-control function as the ideal, Edward is granted power in their relationship" (100).<sup>186</sup> Of course, intellect and the mind have long been associated with 'masculinity'; the other side of the binary contains the supposedly 'feminine' body and imagination (Creeber, *Tele-Visions* 52). Another point is that Bella's new body can no longer conceive and carry a child. Since it is a static body that never changes, it has neither monthly cycles nor reproductive capabilities. In this way, her body's supposed connection to 'nature' is symbolically removed. Thus, although Bella assumes a traditionally 'feminine' role after her transformation, her body is, strangely, rendered more 'masculine.' It seems as if "the perfected form of the female body is an unchanging, non-menstruating, and none-reproductive one" (McGeough 95). Curiously, as a vampire, Bella feels like herself for once. The fact that she finally feels at home in her made-over vampire body is in line with makeover narratives, in which "self-transformation fuses the external and the internal. It unites physical crossings, such as passages through space or location or alterations of dress and appearance, with interior rites of passage and psychic changes through the medium of the body" (Ferriss 42).

### **5.3. "You're Just Going to Have to Work That Much Harder:" Caroline Forbes, Entrepreneur of the Self**

The character of Caroline Forbes in *The Vampire Diaries* shows many parallels to Bella in the *Twilight* Saga, but also differs in some respects. In the course of the second season, Caroline is turned into a vampire and subsequently experiences the consequences of this makeover, which – similar to Bella's – entails elements of empowerment as well as subordination. At the beginning of the series, Caroline is human. Contrary to Bella, she is one of the popular girls at school, the captain of the cheerleading squad, honor student, and organizer of various parties and campaigns in and around the town. In season 1, she wins the title of 'Miss Mystic Falls,' which not only testifies to her conventional physical

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<sup>186</sup> Edward's vampire father is the master of self-command in the *Twilight* Saga. In *New Moon*, we learn that Carlisle's exceptionally strong will and readiness to make sacrifices enabled him to become the person he aspired to be, namely a doctor: When he tends to Bella's flesh wound, he manages to suppress his bloodthirst only thanks to "[y]ears and years of practice."

attractiveness, but also suggests that she comes from a (white) family of a higher social class, since the local beauty pageant openly showcases the “most outstanding community leaders in the making” (“My Brother’s Keeper”).<sup>187</sup> Despite the confidence and determination she usually displays, underneath it all Caroline is insecure and always anxious not to belong. She worries about being too socially awkward to find a boyfriend and feels inferior to her best friend Elena. To a large degree, Caroline’s energy and dedication are rooted in this insecurity of hers; she regards her relationship to Elena as a competition and is frequently characterized as neurotic and an “over-achiever” (“Our Town”). Giving up is said to be untypical, i.e. “un-Caroline” (“Handle with Care”) of her, and Elena names “her control-freakiness [and] her delusional positivity” (“Promised Land”) as characteristic of Caroline. Her appearance is something in which Caroline puts much effort, as is manifested more than once in her eagerness to find the perfect dress for high school parties and dances. Besides, not only is she a grade-A-student in high school, but she also shows the same level of ambition when she enrolls in college. Thus, from the beginning, Caroline’s most distinguishing traits are her zealotry and her willingness to work exceedingly hard, whether in professional or personal terms. As I argue, this predisposition makes her the ideal candidate to become a self-surveilling postfeminist subject later in the narrative. “She likes projects,” is how Matt describes her (“She’s Come Undone”), and while Caroline’s projects do include the organization of events like ‘Senior Prank Night’ and the Homecoming dance, it can be argued that her predilection for projects extends to the management of the enterprise of her self.

Similar to Bella, Caroline’s position before her makeover is characterized by a lack of power and agency. The first season shows the human Caroline being victimized by Damon Salvatore who abuses her for his personal amusement and instrumentalizes her for his own ends. Among other things, he uses her to obtain information about her friends; he is also granted access to society through her, as he temporarily poses as her boyfriend. In this way, Caroline resembles Lucy Westenra in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), the archetype of the female vampire victim, who is used as a tool by the Count to acquire other victims in his scheme to take over the city of London. While Lucy’s vampiric transformation and her ensuing transgression of gender roles are constructed as worth

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<sup>187</sup> Caroline’s privileged upbringing and her unawareness of those same privileges become apparent when she speaks disparagingly about the waiter at the local grill, calling him “just a washed up jock who serves drinks for a living” (“Unpleasantville”) and who is therefore undeserving of her friend Bonnie’s romantic attention.

punishing in *Dracula*, Caroline's story takes a very different and decidedly positive turn after her transformation. At the beginning of season 2, Caroline is turned into a vampire; after suffering severe injuries in a car accident, Damon feeds her his blood in order to heal her. With the vampire blood in her system, she is then killed by another vampire, Katherine, which leads to her transition from human to vampire. Being made into a vampire is not Caroline's choice and it is clear that in this moment, she is a pawn in the hands of Katherine, who plans to use Caroline to her own advantage by forcing her to do her bidding in the subsequent episodes.

The transformation itself is accompanied by a number of 'body horrors,' which are evident from Caroline's cries of pain and disgust with her new physical urges. As mentioned earlier, this matches notions about makeovers requiring the active investment of pain, sweat and tears in order to be successful (Strick 296). In retrospect, Caroline describes her transition as traumatizing: "I was alone when I turned. I had no control over my body or my urges, and I killed somebody" ("The Sacrifice"). However, after draining a man of blood in the wake of her transformation, she does not kill anyone in several months, thus showing an impressive amount of control for a newly turned vampire. Caroline quickly learns to adjust to her new vampire body by restraining her desire to attack humans for their blood: Instead of actively murdering people, she retrieves banked human blood from hospitals. Caroline recognizes: "I want to [kill]. It's my basic nature now. But on a healthy diet, I can control it. I'm getting better at it" ("Plan B"). A decisive factor in her restraint is her predilection for disciplining herself, her mind and her body. As Stefan comments: "Neat, organized Caroline. Staying within lines. Good at control" ("A Bird in a Gilded Cage").

Vampiric bloodthirst in *The Vampire Diaries* is framed as a conflict between mind and body. Here, too, is the disciplining of the body depicted as indicative of a vampire's decent character. Caroline's suppression of her thirst is celebrated as a success within the narrative. In the *Twilight* Saga, the Cullen family's docile, good-natured disposition finds expression in the color of their eyes: While evil vampires in *Twilight* are characterized by red eyes which point to their thirst for human blood, the Cullens, who only hunt animals, have golden eyes after having fed. In this way, their inner disposition is literally 'written on' their bodies and can be read for example by Bella. In a similar manner, Caroline's kind nature and sense of justice become explicit in her disciplined body. Her successful enterprise of the self stands out particularly in comparison to Elena, who becomes a vampire a little later in the series: After her transformation, Elena goes completely off the



rails and depends on the Salvatore brothers to stop her from endangering herself and others, as she is not at all in control of her vampire urges. In contrast to Caroline, she is not allowed to make her own choices because of her lack of discipline, and her transition from human to vampire does not give her access to more agency in the narrative – rather, her lack of restraint means a loss of subjectivity for her. Elena confides in her diary: “I lost control. . . . The worst feeling is the moment that you realize you’ve lost yourself” (“The Killer”).

Contrary to all other vampires in the series, Caroline manages to control her thirst even when her humanity is switched off.<sup>188</sup> When Elena warns her about the potentially deadly consequences of giving up one’s humanity, Caroline reminds Elena: “That is your experience, okay? I have more control over my vampire self than you ever did. My experience will be different” (“Let Her Go”). Indeed, although “[t]he point of flipping your humanity switch is that you don’t care how you leave things” (“A Bird in a Gilded Cage”), Caroline – after flipping her switch – refrains from actively murdering people for pragmatic reasons. As she argues, killing humans on her college campus “would be inconvenient. Elena, I shut off my humanity. I didn’t turn into an idiot” (“The Downward Spiral”). Goal-oriented as she is, Caroline has turned off her humanity strategically to escape the grief over the death of her mother, rather than to revel in hedonism and bloodshed. In a conversation with her friends, she pleads her case: “In return for my good behavior, I want a year where I don’t have to feel pain, or grief, or remorse” (“The Downward Spiral”). Caroline, while intending to reap the benefits of her vampire body, understands that she will only be allowed to exist peacefully within her community if she curbs her appetite: “I go to school here. . . . I want to keep going to school here. The second that I draw any suspicions – break-ins, broken property, dead bodies – people will try to interrupt my routine” (“A Bird in a Gilded Cage”). As a consequence, she makes sure to divert her “instinctual impulse into a socially acceptable activity” (“Because”).<sup>189</sup>

Contrary to Elena, for Caroline, vampirism turns out to be the admission ticket to an autonomous, self-determined and ultimately happier existence. Becoming a vampire restores the memories of what Damon had conveniently compelled<sup>190</sup> her to forget, and

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<sup>188</sup> As Damon explains, vampires can “turn [their humanity] off. It’s like a button you can press. . . . as a vampire, your instinct is not to feel. . . . No guilt, no shame. No regret. I mean, come on, if you could turn it off, wouldn’t you?” (“Isobel”).

<sup>189</sup> Despite her impressive display of self-control, Caroline is not granted her year without humanity by her friends or by the series, respectively. In the subsequent episodes, Elena, Bonnie and the Salvatore brothers torture Caroline and force her to switch her humanity back on.

<sup>190</sup> In *The Vampire Diaries*, compulsion is a vampiric ability to control the mind of another simply through eye contact.

this knowledge puts her in a position to confront him about his actions as well as eventually overcome her victimization. In the course of the following seasons, she becomes fully accepted and respected in her circle of friends. If Caroline was constrained to the role of “damsel in distress” (“The Turning Point”) prior to her change, she is now able to defend herself and the people she loves, and often plays an active part in the protagonists’ supernatural missions. Thanks to her superhuman strength, speed and hearing, she is able to rescue her parents as well as her friends in various situations. Slowly, she also overcomes her insecurities and develops a mature, complex personality; her mother recognizes: “You’ve become this strong, this confident person” (“Plan B”). Here “the makeover as personal empowerment trope” (Negra 123) becomes tangible. Given the option to take a cure for vampirism in season 4, Caroline refuses. As Klaus interprets her decision: “You prefer who you are now to the girl you once were. You like being strong, ageless, fearless” (“Down the Rabbit Hole”).

What is interesting is that in postfeminism, “those engaging in . . . forms of technological self-transformation . . . experience this not as the creation of a new self but the discovery of a more authentic ‘true self’ and therefore as a project of self-realization, of becoming who they ‘really are,’” as Martin Roberts writes (237). Thus, the ‘new’ self, which was there all along, is understood as having been liberated through the makeover (Roberts 237). Interestingly, *The Vampire Diaries’* vampire lore implies that once a person becomes a vampire, their most prominent characteristics are heightened, so in a way people are more themselves. What this means for Caroline is certain; she concludes sarcastically: “now I’m basically an insecure, neurotic control freak on crack” (“Bad Moon Rising”). It should be added that prior to her transformation, a criticism that Caroline receives over and over is that she is inauthentic, “fake” (“A Few Good Men”), a “stupid thing . . . And shallow. And useless” (“162 Candles”). Her vampiric makeover finally assures Caroline the acknowledgement of her peers and family that she is a fully fledged, authentic person (not a thing): “You grew into yourself when you became a vampire. You changed” (“The Rager”). In Kathy Davis’ opinion, a makeover functions as a break with the old self, which facilitates the construction of a different self in the sense of “biographical work” (82) – work on one’s own biography which is re-enacted on a physical level. While Caroline’s transformation is certainly the actual moment of her makeover, she receives a symbolic funeral in season 3 on occasion of her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday in order to bury her old self and embrace the new vampiric one. The obituary reads: “Here lies Caroline Forbes. Cheerleader, Miss Mystic Falls, third grade hopscotch champion,

friend, daughter, over-achiever. Mean girl . . . She was 17, and she had a really good life. So rest in peace, so that she can move forward” (“Our Town”).

After successfully completing her vampiric makeover, Caroline’s work, however, is not done: When becoming a vampire, she receives a body she must constantly discipline. Paula-Irene Villa points out that in makeover shows like *The Swan*, the focus is not actually on the result of the respective makeover, but rather on the continual excruciating work on the body and thereby the self (264). This continual nature of the work, which requires an exceptional amount of willpower, reveals the fact that idealized norms or subject positions can never be fully embodied (Villa 265). The consequence is an eternal process of approximating the contemporary ideal, which is perfectly captured in Caroline’s constant and never-ending work to discipline her vampire body. Thus, along the way, she does slip up a number of times. For instance, she attacks her boyfriend Matt because she is overwhelmed by her bloodlust while the two are being intimate. As Stefan explains to her in this situation, living with a vampire body will not get any easier, as this body requires constant self-management. Caroline acknowledges the continual work her body/self requires as integral to her new vampire life: “. . . being good comes so easy to me? Well, . . . it doesn’t. I am a vampire, I have . . . impulses . . . So I’m allowed to make some mistakes along the way” (“Gone Girl”). Failures are bound to occur, which is what emphasizes the need for perpetual work on the body/self.

#### **5.4. “This Hunger in Me, It’s Never Going Away:” Jessica Hamby’s Continual Body Work**

Jessica Hamby’s storyline in *True Blood* is different from Caroline’s and Bella’s regarding a number of aspects but works in a similar way when it comes to the topic of discipline and control. She, too, experiences her vampiric transition as a process of empowerment and a subversion of regulative rules, while simultaneously finding that she is subject to a number of new restrictions as a vampire. Jessica is introduced to the series towards the end of season 1, when she is made vampire by Bill Compton. As we quickly learn, she comes from a devout Christian middle-class family with extremely strict rules. Home-schooled by her mother and physically abused by her father as punishment for missteps, she has been suffering under the restrictive regime of her parents and their ideology. The few scenes in which we experience her as a human show Jessica in a state

of utter powerlessness: Kidnapped by the henchmen of the Vampire Authority,<sup>191</sup> she has been dragged into an arena of bloodthirsty vampires who lust for Bill to transform her. The latter has been sentenced by the Authority to turn a random human victim as retribution for killing another vampire, which underlines Jessica's status as an object caught in the power struggles of the patriarchal vampire system. Following an initial phase of terror and confusion after her transformation, Jessica quickly embraces her vampirism as a way out of her previous living conditions: "I don't obey anybody! Those days are over" ("To Love Is to Bury"). Contradicting Bill's as well as viewers' expectations, Jessica does not show desperation or sorrow when she learns she is a vampire. Instead, she rejoices upon realizing what this entails for her: "No more belts. No more clarinets. No more home school. No more rules. I'm a vampire! Whoo!" ("To Love Is to Bury"). In this way, Jessica resembles Caroline, who breaks generic expectations after Damon has posited that "Caroline of all people will not make it as a vampire. . . . we all know how this story ends. Let's just flip to the last chapter" ("Brave New World"). Thus, Jessica's vampire transformation is celebrated as a source of empowerment for her, especially as a means to escape her domineering father and his domestic violence as well as her religiously restrictive upbringing. The "makeover as personal empowerment trope" (Negra 123) thereby comes to the fore in *True Blood* as well.

What follows swiftly, however, is the revelation that Jessica is now subject to a new vampiric social order with new authorities, which compromises her agency considerably (Jäckel 70). She is also the owner of a vampire body requiring constant discipline. Right after her change, Jessica has a conversation with Bill about the implications of her vampire existence. To her, being a vampire means that "I don't have to sit like a lady and I can kill anybody I want. And there's an awful lot of people I'd like to kill." However, Bill immediately puts a damper on this: "You absolutely cannot kill anybody you want. . . . With your new powers come new responsibilities. You are going to mainstream like I do" ("To Love Is to Bury"). Mirroring the Cullen family's way of life, mainstreaming in *True Blood* involves the peaceful integration of vampires into human society, including their consumption of synthetic 'Tru Blood.' As an advocate of this social movement, Bill expects Jessica to live according to the ideas of the American Vampire League<sup>192</sup> like he does. Thus, as Julia Jäckel points out, the law of the father that Jessica must adhere to is

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<sup>191</sup> In *True Blood*, the Vampire Authority is a semi-religious council which exercises ultimate authority over all vampires across the globe.

<sup>192</sup> In *True Blood*, the American Vampire League is an organization which is responsible for the public relations of the vampire community in the United States and the promotion of vampire rights.

not entirely removed but rather shifted from her biological human father to her vampire father (70) – at least in the beginning of Jessica’s vampire life. Similarly, in her monograph *Bewitched Again. Supernaturally Powerful Women on Television, 1996-2011* (2013), Julie O’Reilly finds that

[t]he surveillance of superpowered women illustrates one way in which these characters are subject to the judicial authorities in their lives. Within television series featuring superpowered women, such authorities . . . are predominantly male, whether representations of traditional systems of law and order or supernatural ones. (191)

The way in which the surveillance by Jessica’s human father is essentially replaced by that of her vampire father becomes particularly clear when Jessica returns to her childhood home and threatens to take revenge on her human father by strangling him with the belt he used to beat her with. Jessica manages to reverse their power hierarchy thanks to her vampire strength and confidence, and triumphs: “Now I get to home-school you in what it’s like to be scared” (“Keep This Party Going”). At the last moment, however, Bill stops her. Part of the relationship between maker and progeny in *True Blood* is that ‘vampire parents’ can force their ‘children’ to do whatever they want; a verbal expression of a maker’s order cannot be defied by the progeny, so Jessica has no choice when Bill orders her to “let him go! . . . As your maker, I command you” (“Keep This Party Going”).

As a newborn teen vampire, Jessica also depends on her maker to explain the whole vampire world to her, including her new bodily functions.<sup>193</sup> For instance, earlier in the same episode, she is blindsided by the fact that she now cries blood instead of tears, which Bill had neglected to tell her (“Keep This Party Going”). While maker-progeny relationships vary among vampires, Bill’s relationship to Jessica is clearly that of a father to his daughter. Since her vampiric transformation means the disruption of any ties to her human life, Jessica moves in with Bill and must subsequently get used to the rules around his home: “Your bed time will be at 4 a.m. and not a minute later. And whilst you’re under my roof, hunting is completely forbidden. . . . We also recycle in this house” (“Nothing But the Blood”). Upon Bill’s insistence, Jessica tries different flavors of ‘True Blood’ and arrives at her personal mixture of blood types on which she is supposed to subsist from now on. Biting humans is off limits according to Bill: “I would no more allow you to feed on that young man than to watch pornography on television” (“Never Let Me Go”). Here it becomes evident that in *True Blood*, much like in the *Twilight* Saga,

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<sup>193</sup> Paralleling this circumstance, in *The Vampire Diaries*, it is Stefan who introduces Caroline to the vampire world after her transformation, for example by teaching her how to hunt rabbits. Similarly, Edward shows Bella the ropes of hunting animals in *Breaking Dawn – Part 2*.

vampiric bloodthirst and sexual desire have extensive overlaps and sometimes work as stand-ins for each other. In this respect, *True Blood* is more strongly indebted to traditional vampire narratives which have long been known for their “overt sexual symbolism” (Antoni). In fact, it is striking that in the first four seasons, Jessica almost exclusively manages these two desires: Her storyline involves the struggle for control of her vampire impulses, and her sexual and romantic relationship with Hoyt Fortenberry, a young human man. As long as she is not willing or able to discipline and restrain herself, vampire father Bill steps in to exercise control – similar to the Salvatore Brothers whose responsibility it becomes to govern Elena’s newborn vampire thirst. Considering the equation of vampiric and sexual desire, to an extent, Bill not only monitors Jessica’s bloodlust but also polices her awakening sexuality. For instance, when she invites Hoyt over after meeting him at the local bar, Bill swoops in, aggressively interrupts the couple’s intimacy and sends Hoyt away because of Jessica’s supposed ‘instability.’ His power over her sexuality is further demonstrated when he again disturbs Jessica’s and Hoyt’s first consensual sexual encounter. Bill justifies his control over Jessica’s body by emphasizing her alleged unpredictability and dangerousness: “She is a loaded gun” (“Scratches”).

Jessica’s ensuing struggle with disciplining her powerful vampire body positions her, alongside Bella and Caroline, as “a brave new postfeminist self requiring continual self-monitoring” (Roberts 237). As pointed out already, her attempts to handle her physical impulses are a distinct focus throughout several seasons. Along these lines, her vampire fangs which protrude whenever she is upset, hungry or aroused become almost a running gag in the second and third season. Deeply ashamed, Jessica tells Hoyt: “I have fangs and they come out and I can’t control them” (“Scratches”). Her attempt to take revenge on her father is later reframed as a loss of control by Jessica: “I swear it was like it wasn’t even me doing it. It must be all those new vampire impulse control issues” (“Keep This Party Going”). Her impulse control issues not only restrict Jessica’s agency in the first place, but they also lead to a number of social consequences. Here it becomes clear that she must actively modify her behavior in order to be socially accepted. For instance, Jessica’s lack of self-control results in the temporary breakup of her relationship with Hoyt after she attacks his mother in response to the latter’s disdainful attitude towards vampires in general and Jessica as her son’s girlfriend in particular. The warning that Jessica issues towards Maxine Fortenberry, “Lady, you have no idea how little control I have over my actions!” (“New World in My View”), is not only telling in this specific scene but also paradigmatic in terms of most of Jessica’s early vampire life.

After feeding on a trucker and killing him accidentally in the process, Jessica finally starts getting a grip on her physical impulses. She recognizes that “[b]iting people, getting so mad that I do bad things by accident, that’s in my nature” (“Beautifully Broken”), and then decides to fight her urges systematically. For this project, she depends on the advice of Pam, one of the only vampires she knows besides Bill, as she cannot count on the latter’s help (“Beautifully Broken”). From Pam, Jessica learns how to feed without killing her human prey, which requires a specific ability to control in order to “take [someone] to the precipice of death and hold [them] there” (“We’ll Meet Again”). Finding the balance between draining a person and keeping their heart beating at the same time is a skill Jessica soon masters. Mid-season 3, she successfully feeds on and glamors<sup>194</sup> a customer at Merlotte’s Bar, where she has started working as a waitress. Finally able to exercise control over herself, she is not only more socially involved through her job at the Bar & Grill, but also manages to resume her relationship with Hoyt. By now, Bill’s strict educational methods have become obsolete, and his attitude towards Jessica is more generous: “It’s your home, too. You can take care of yourself” (“We’ll Meet Again”).

Interestingly, after going through the process of opting for and learning self-control, Jessica is granted some room for transgression within the narrative, both in terms of her vampiric desires and her sexuality – something that does not apply to Caroline who is not granted the transgression of flipping her humanity switch in season 6, and who is immediately shamed by various characters for her ‘misstep’ of having a one-night stand in season 5. Jessica’s space for transgression could be attributed to the series’ positioning as more sexually explicit and polarizing than other popular teen vampire TV. As Alan Ball, the producer and creator of *True Blood*, comments in an interview in 2010: “I think that if thirteen year old girls who watch *Twilight* and the kind of sex scenes that are in *Twilight*, watched *True Blood* and the kind of sex scenes that are in *True Blood*, they would be traumatized. No, *True Blood* is for a different audience. *True Blood* is for adults. Period” (Gross). Thus, when Jessica gets back together with Hoyt, she comes clean about her previous involuntary crime and presents him with the fact that she cannot and will not subsist only on ‘Tru Blood’ any longer. The couple agrees on a monogamous sexual relationship, which is synonymous with a ‘monogamous feeding relationship’ in which Jessica exclusively feeds on Hoyt to satisfy her desire for human blood.

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<sup>194</sup> Vampiric glamoring entails controlling a person’s mind and/or erasing their memory in *True Blood*; this vampiric ability is similar to what is referred to as ‘compulsion’ in *The Vampire Diaries*.

Later, this ‘permitted transgression’ taking place within the confines of monogamy turns out to be insufficient for Jessica in the long term. She feels constrained by her exclusive relationship with Hoyt and wants to act out her vampiric desire to feed on more than one person, which is why she ends up ‘cheating on’ him by biting a stranger at a night club. Once again, the interplay of sexual and bloodlust in *True Blood* becomes apparent. Eventually, Jessica’s and Hoyt’s traditional relationship fails; she declares: “I’m not made for this. I have a hunger in the very center of me, and this, you and me, I can’t. It’s not enough” (“Spellbound”). In accepting her inherent vampire urges and the need to satisfy them while continually working on them, Jessica is finally fully ‘liberated.’ The acknowledgement of her physical impulses enables her to indulge in her vampiric as well as sexual desires – under the crucial condition that she restrains her appetite insofar as she does not lose control and kill anyone. Towards a fellow female vampire, she expresses all the benefits of her vampire existence: “It’s not just the feeding and the sex and the power but I mean, we’re going to live forever, we’re going to be young forever, the world, . . . it’s wide open to us” (“Let’s Boot and Rally”). She also distances her new vampiric self from her old human self by underlining that she prefers her vampire life to her dull, powerless human life. Just like Caroline, she would never trade in one for the other:

Jason: “If you could go back to being the way you were before, would you?”

Jessica: “No. Don’t get me wrong, it ain’t easy. I never see the sun and I’m always hungry. I have all these feelings and these urges and I don’t even understand them half the time. But it is exciting. I am fast and I am strong and nobody can hurt me. And I smell and I taste things in a way that I never thought was possible. It’s kind of hard to explain but my old world was about that big, and now . . . it’s endless.” (“I Wish I Was the Moon”)

In the course of season 4, Jessica is shown to be feeding on strangers regularly, enjoying her sexual attractiveness and entering into an open relationship with Jason Stackhouse on her own terms. With the latter, she agrees not to be exclusive because she wants no restrictions on her exploration of different sides of herself. As she says to Jason: “I’m just barely getting to know myself” (“And When I Die”). This taking into account of the fact that she still needs to learn more about her physical urges and desires further points to the continual nature of her body work. In season 6, Jessica loses her self-control in the face of five faerie girls, whose blood smells especially appealing to vampires in the *True Blood* universe: She drains four of them of their intoxicating blood and thereby kills them. Later on realizing what she did, Jessica is horrified and spends the following episodes coming to terms with her deeds. In doing so, she stops feeding at all for months and slowly degenerates physically as well as emotionally because she does not trust herself to bite without losing herself once again. In line with consumer cultural notions of the body



functioning as a reflection of the self, Jessica in turn also questions her own morality and blames herself for actually “serving the devil” (“Fuck the Pain Away”): “Don’t get close to me, I can’t help myself, I’ll rape you or something, and I just need to be put someplace where I won’t be tempted” (“Fuck the Pain Away”). Thus, having lost control over her body, Jessica gives up her agency and freedom at the same time. The fact that her postfeminist vampire body requires perpetual management and disciplining is demonstrated in her recognition that her hunger for human and/or faerie blood will remain ever-present.

## **5.5. Female Vampires and their Postfeminist Projects of the Self**

When it comes to the portrayal of the female vampire characters discussed in this chapter, the preceding analyses have unearthed a number of common features but have also demonstrated significant differences between the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*. What the narratives share is a focus on the characters’ transition from human to vampire; for the female vampires, this transition facilitates an increase in agency and their becoming subjects – since subjectivation is tantamount to having agency (Menke 286). While Caroline and Jessica break prescribed gender roles by becoming more active and aggressive, and by expressing sexual desire, Bella tends to adhere to normative notions of femininity after her vampiric transformation. Thus, *The Vampire Diaries’* Caroline and *True Blood’s* Jessica cross gender boundaries by displaying not only conventionally ‘feminine’ characteristics and looks, but also incorporating active ‘masculine’ qualities. Their transition from human to vampire is celebrated as a welcome challenge to the gender order. *Twilight’s* Bella may not be crossing boundaries as a vampire in terms of her gender performance, but her transformation is equally framed as a narrative of personal growth and empowerment.

The fact that the analyzed female characters’ transformations are framed in different ways within their respective narratives demonstrates the historically contingent nature of the category of gender. As Milestone and Meyer write, “[t]he socially constructed nature of femininity and masculinity is clearly illustrated in the changes of meaning which we find across . . . different historical periods” (12). Bella, Jessica and Caroline offer a number of different models of femininity, which attests to the fact that “femininity is diversifying in popular culture, providing girls with a wider range of identities” (Milestone and Meyer 89). Bella embodies what Milestone and Meyer would refer to as

a more “conventional femininity” (89), while Jessica and Caroline can be said to exemplify the “shift towards a ‘new femininity’ which is more socially and sexually assertive, confident, aspirational and fun-seeking” (88).

Despite their discrepancies, the three contemporary vampire series share a focus on discourses of self-control and body maintenance, which I trace back to postfeminism/neo-liberalism. In particular, what becomes palpable here is the neo-liberal logic of the entrepreneur of the self, which has obvious parallels with postfeminist notions of individualism and consumer ideology. The analyzed female characters each achieve subjectivity through vampiric makeovers. In line with typical renditions of this trope, “the makeover process . . . facilitates and charts the development of a new, ideal feminine and feminist subjectivity” (Gwynne and Muller 4). In *True Blood*, the disciplining of the body and self is framed as a success as well as a requisite for Jessica’s becoming an empowered postfeminist subject. Similarly, in *The Vampire Diaries* and the *Twilight* Saga, Caroline’s and Bella’s self-control is referred to as unprecedented in the course of the series and held up as an example for other vampires to aspire to. For instance, Stefan admires Caroline: “you’re so good at it. At being a vampire” (“The Rager”), and Bella tells us in a post-makeover voice-over: “I was born to be a vampire” (*Breaking Dawn – Part 2*). What both descriptions seem to imply is that being a vampire is tantamount to maintaining self-control, and that this is what the respective characters excel in.

The figure of the vampire has proven to be an exceedingly flexible metaphor for different cultural, social as well as political issues in different contexts (Gordon and Hollinger, “Introduction” 2) – in the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*, it functions as a projection surface for postfeminist/neo-liberal discourses of the management of body and self. Already in 2003, Sally Miller pointed out that “[o]ne of the most striking features of contemporary vampire fiction is the vampire’s reluctance to feed” (53). The recent trend of vampires refusing to subsist on human blood and struggling for self-restraint, which can be observed in this study’s three examined texts, can be placed within a more general evolution of the motif towards a reluctant/sympathetic vampire that differs greatly from the popular Dracula figure in Bram Stoker’s novel. As discussed briefly in chapter 3.3.2, this ‘new’ vampire type is conspicuous for its ‘civilized’ and humanized nature. About this type, Milly Williamson writes: “The sympathetic vampire . . . is a creature troubled by its ontology; it is a being at odds with its vampiric body and the urges that this body generates” (“Television” par. 2). Strikingly enough, it is precisely the vampire’s struggle with its own body that

resonates so strongly with audiences and that accounts for the vampire's popularity (M. Williamson, "Television" par. 29). Indeed, particularly Caroline is a great favorite with fans, while viewers have certainly made a special connection with Jessica through reading about her experiences in her online blog "Baby vamp Jessica," which is part of *True Blood's* clever multi-platform marketing campaign.<sup>195</sup>

If vampires in the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* work as vehicles for postfeminist discourses of self-control and body maintenance, what is characteristic is the contradictory nature of these discourses. As Negra writes, "in the postfeminist era it seems the body is relentlessly owned, claimed and managed but it is simultaneously as fragmented and ruled by social norms as it has ever been" (117). On the one hand, Bella's, Caroline's and Jessica's personal empowerment is facilitated by their change from human to vampire; on the other hand, they become successful and socially accepted subjects only upon the condition that they discipline and restrain themselves via their vampire bodies. In Jessica's case, the contradictoriness is particularly striking, considering that her freedom to transgress and her socially-required subordination to self-control are not only intimately related but in fact mutually dependent. Judith Butler has pointed out that the term 'subjectivation' implies a paradox in itself, as it "denotes both the becoming of the subject and the process of subjection – one inhabits the figure of autonomy only by becoming subjected to a power, a subjection which implies a radical dependency" (*The Psychic Life of Power* 83). In this sense, subjectivation means submitting to normative ideals while simultaneously gaining subjectivity and agency (Villa 264). As Butler writes, the injunction – in this case the prohibition of vampiric feeding on humans –

sets the stage for the subject's self-crafting, which always takes place in relation to an imposed set of norms. . . . If there is an operation of agency or, indeed, freedom in this struggle, it takes place in the context of an enabling and limiting field of constraint. (*Giving an Account of Oneself* 18-19)

Steinhoff and Siebert point out that in *Twilight*, Bella is empowered and domesticated at the same time (15). Dissimilar as the three characters may be in regard to other aspects, Caroline's and Jessica's transformations can be aligned with Bella's. Caroline's tendency to work hard on herself in particular demonstrates that she is a successful "self-surveilling postfeminist subject" (Negra 119). Meanwhile, especially Jessica's story hints at the fact that the maintenance of the (vampire) body must continuously be carried out, since the

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<sup>195</sup> As will be discussed in the subsequent chapter, the fact that the male vampire heroes of the examined series abstain from drinking human blood forms one of their most appealing characteristics.

conflict between body and mind is never solvable. As Sally Miller points out, “the vampire can never be entirely free of its hunger and the conflicts surrounding it; . . . what is found in these [texts] is a [sic] merely a domestication, and not an eradication of appetite” (53). Here the vampire turns out to be a figure in which postfeminist/neo-liberal discourses promoting the continual necessity for body work and maintenance materialize.

Interestingly, these female characters’ new vampire selves also comply with the “cult of youth” (Tasker and Negra 11) that postfeminism is invested in. As Negra argues, “[p]ostfeminism suggests that symbolic forms of time mastery (particularly management of the ageing process) will provide the key to the reclamation of self” (53) for women. With regard to the examined paranormal romances, it is striking that the vampire makeover, with its ensuing subjectivation process, indeed comes with the eradication of aging. The vampire body remains static; due to its immortality, it embodies eternal youth, beauty and health – attributes which are highly valued in postfeminist consumer culture. Since vampires do not age, Bella, Caroline and Jessica will be frozen in their young, slim, beautiful, healthy and capable bodies forever. It is here that the exclusionary politics of postfeminism become visible once again. Not only are the represented female postfeminist subjects all young, slim, beautiful, healthy and able-bodied, they are also all white. Concurringly, Genz and Brabon note that “the ideal postfeminist subject is seen to be a white, middle-class, heterosexual girl” (8). The exclusive focus that all three series place on the successful makeovers of white female characters making the transition from human to vampire points to the problematic fact that “postfeminism is white and middle class by default” (Tasker and Negra 2).

While the lack of representation of non-white female characters achieving the level of agency that white female characters acquire through a makeover suggests that non-white women and girls are excluded from subject positions in postfeminist media culture in the first place, the situation of white female characters also remains ambivalent. It is Bella’s narrative which seems to best encapsulate the tensions at the heart of postfeminist makeover culture. Thus, although Bella embraces the conventionally ‘female’ role of mother and homemaker, which is represented as a triumph for her since she made the ‘individual’ choice to do so, the earlier analysis has shown that in the process of her vampire makeover, Bella trades her vulnerable, soft, undisciplined, female-coded human body for a powerful, firm, disciplined, male-coded vampire body. As Steinhoff and Siebert argue, this paradoxical situation

hints at the tug-of-war that the female body and female identity is trapped in: on the one hand, contemporary women are confronted with beauty ideals that prescribe a youthful, unchanging body, a body that does not grow big with child, that does not carry stretch marks or any other traces of a pregnancy, whilst on the other hand, being able to give birth is still often represented as one of the main differences between men and women in a culture that is suffused with notions of natural sexual difference. (12-13)

The tensions inherent in the hegemonic conception of contemporary (white) female identity also become apparent in the character of Rosalie Cullen, Edward's vampire sister. Having been turned by Carlisle when she was gravely injured and unable to give full consent to her transformation, Rosalie says she would not have chosen a vampire life for herself. As she tells Bella in *Eclipse*, she deeply regrets that she will never have biological children: "we'll always be this. Frozen. Never moving forward. That's what I miss the most. Possibilities. Sitting on a front porch somewhere. Emmett, gray-haired, by my side, surrounded by our grandchildren. Their laughter." Admitting that she envies Bella for her ability to choose, Rosalie urges her not to give up her reproductive ability so carelessly by continuing to insist on her transformation into a vampire. The fact that Rosalie mourns her ability to become pregnant "maintain[s] the idea that women should *want* to have children"<sup>196</sup> (McGeough 95). In addition, Rosalie's above-cited vision suggests that her wish to reproduce is firmly located within heteronormative, idealized notions of marriage and family.

While Rosalie's story is represented as a tragic one, Bella manages to 'have it all:' Not only does she give birth to a perfectly gifted child who rarely needs to be taken care of,<sup>197</sup> she also receives the idealized vampire body she has desired for as long as the film series has followed her. Here the vampiric makeover can be read as a solution to the conflicting demands that the contemporary culture makes of women today. As Simone Broders observes, women in the current US-American "cultural context appear to be trapped between different life-concepts and thus diverging roles in society . . . Integrating all cultural and social expectations into one life plan seems to require superhuman strength – ironically, being a vampire fulfills all requirements" (Broders). Bella goes through pregnancy and birth but her body ultimately does not bear the consequences of that considerable physical burden. Due to her unusual story, she is able to both fulfill the traditional role of the mother, which grants her a particular status, and retain a body that will be forever young, slim, physically able and beautiful, which is equally highly valued

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<sup>196</sup> Emphasis in the original. In the novels, Rosalie's and Edward's vampire mother Esme also has a difficult time accepting her infertility (McGeough 95).

<sup>197</sup> Bella now has a large family who is happy to babysit the child all the time; Reneesme also grows older with accelerated speed, so that she is soon autonomous.

within the culture. At the same time, Bella's choices can also be interpreted as a submission to patriarchal values, with the specificities of the female body implicitly being devalued. As Steinhoff and Siebert put it,

Bella's makeover is both playing into the hands of patriarchy and at the same time constitutes a moment of female empowerment – sought out, accomplished and enjoyed by the female subject herself. . . . Bella is both empowered and 'tamed.' The latter is particularly expressed by the removal of the most threatening feature of her unruly female boy – its power to give birth. That the ideal female body presented in the text is a body that cannot conceive stands in sharp contrast to the saga's focus on family values and its celebration of motherhood and sheds light on the contradictory hegemonic demands women are faced with in contemporary western culture. (15)

In other words, the double movement that characterizes postfeminist discourses manifests here. Not only does the *Twilight* Saga illustrate the paradoxical expectations that women are meant to meet today, but it can also be said to highlight “the conflicting forms of agency that women take up in contemporary society” (Genz and Brabon 174). The result is a model of 'femininity' that caters to contradictory notions about what it means to be female today, a “postfeminist Gothic Cinderella [who] is . . . subject and object in one” (Genz 75).

## 6. Fantasy Solutions to Postfeminist Culture: Vampire Heroes and Postfeminist Masculinity<sup>198</sup>

While the previous analyses focused on the main female characters in the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*, this chapter aims to shed light on what kinds of masculinities can be found in the examined texts. Since “discourses of masculinity . . . are crucial to the hegemonic common sense of post-feminist culture and thereby crucial objects for feminist analysis” (Levine 143), this chapter will investigate the representation of the vampire lovers Edward Cullen, Stefan Salvatore and Bill Compton in the mentioned paranormal romances.

In their seminal works published in the 1980s, Tania Modleski and Janice A. Radway have explored the appeal of romance fiction for its largely female readership. As already elaborated in 3.6, a central conclusion of both studies is that romance presents fantasy solutions to existing issues in women’s lives (Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance* 14). In this way, romance texts can be interpreted as a way of acknowledging and protesting constraints women experience within a patriarchally structured society (Radway 213). Against this backdrop, one of the primary appeals of romance is that it presents a male protagonist who takes over some of the responsibilities/characteristics that are usually ascribed to women, such as the ability to care of others emotionally and physically. Thus, romance heroes typically assume a caretaking role for the heroine and are shown to be “supremely capable of caring for her in an unusually nurturant way” (Radway 144). This is a scenario which is welcomed by female romance readers who, as wives and mothers, are expected to constantly put their own needs on hold on behalf of the family (Radway 211). Second, Modleski argues that romance enacts a kind of symbolic revenge on men, a conclusion she carries over into the title of her book, *Loving with a Vengeance*. While romance stages an initial power difference between hero and heroine, towards the end of the narrative, it is the heroine who is represented as having the upper hand because she has managed to make her male love interest fall for her, which gives her control over him. According to Modleski, readers draw satisfaction from the “conviction . . . that all the while [the hero] is being so hateful, he is internally grovelling, grovelling, grovelling” (*Loving with a Vengeance* 45). Thus, while female consumers’

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<sup>198</sup> Parts of this chapter have previously been published by the author, “Vampires ‘on a Special Diet’: Identity and the Body in Contemporary Media Texts.” *Dracula and the Gothic in Literature, Pop Culture and the Arts*, edited by Isabel Ermida, Rodopi, 2015, pp. 235-256. Published with the permission of Rodopi.

personal experiences with male aggression and superiority find representation in the text, through the familiarity with the generic convention of the happy ending, readers can find pleasure in the assurance that in the end, the heroine will bring “the man to his knees” (Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance* 45).

Considering that contemporary paranormal romance is emerging under different historical and cultural circumstances than the texts that Modleski and Radway examined more than three decades ago, the question arises if romance narratives like the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* still address the same gender-related issues or if they have other or additional functions. Crucially, the timeframe in which these three cultural products crop up is “a turbulent and highly unsettled economic and social moment” (Negra 15). Marked, for instance, by the long-term effects of 9/11 and the consequences of the global financial crisis, the cultural context in which these series are broadcast is characterized by a range of different tensions and challenges to the established American social system, including the gender order. In pointing to “the blinkered nature of contemporary American life with its sense of unmanageable terrorist, environmental, and other threats and a conservative political climate” (51), Negra names a number of prominent spheres of anxiety, which provide the backdrop of the cultural products that are analyzed in the frame of this dissertation. Along with the effects of the Great Recession between 2007 and 2012 and an increasingly tight labor market, Americans are also faced with “social, cultural and demographic changes that include high rates of divorce, the growth of new family forms and broader transformations of intimacy” (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 225). Rapidly shifting gender roles are widely accompanied by unease, which reflects the fact that “many opportunities opened up by such change can be eclipsed by instability and uncertainty” (Mukherjea, “My Vampire Boyfriend” 14). With “traditional sources of security disappearing fast” (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 225), romance is “offering a secure meta-narrative in unsettling times” (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 226). It is paranormal romance in particular, with its ability to represent psychological and social realities in allegorical form and to thereby negotiate issues which are otherwise difficult to address, which speaks to contemporary audiences’ insecurities concerning fluctuating gender roles and relations. As Eric Selinger has theorized, contemporary popular culture reveals a prevalent



nostalgia for or a fascination with the idea of a radical difference between the sexes. We see this in popular advice texts, . . . they're speaking to certain desires that we have in our culture right now for a kind of clarification and simplification of this very messy drama that we all deal with in our day to day lives. . . . [P]aranormal takes that model and shows it to us in a way where differences between the genders can be mythologized, they can be asserted as fundamental ontological differences, even sometimes differences between species. ("Exploring Difference")

The resurgence of traditional gender roles is an aspect that can be seen in the *Twilight* Saga in particular, but also in *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*. Aiming at and being marketed to a predominantly heterosexual female audience, these paranormal romances present male vampires as romantic leads who "offer the security and stability of old-fashioned gentlemen that some readers [and viewers] may now crave without being able to clearly articulate that craving" (Mukherjea, "My Vampire Boyfriend" 3). However, these vampire romance heroes are not simply a resurrection of regressive gender roles. Crucially, vampire heroes such as Edward Cullen, Stefan Salvatore and Bill Compton "are noteworthy for their extraordinary ability to be all things at once, embodying masculine ideals from multiple classes and eras, for multiple age-groups and subcultures, offering an array of characteristics and abilities" (Mukherjea, "My Vampire Boyfriend" 11). In this way, these heroes capture the defining features of the 'postfeminist man,' whom Genz and Brabon describe as the "ongoing conglomeration of at times contradictory and conflicting masculinities" (142). Although the texts hold available a variety of different forms of masculinity, this postfeminist version of masculinity emerges as the most successful and popular one across all three of the analyzed cultural products. Thus, within the paranormal romances that this study focuses on, postfeminist masculinity is presented as the "ideal-type" (D. P. Levy 254) or hegemonic form of masculinity. As I argue, in placing postfeminist masculinity at the center of their narratives, the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* provide a "redefinition . . . of socially admired masculinity" (Connell and Messerschmidt 846), one which is open to bringing into question its own hegemony.<sup>199</sup> In this way, said texts put

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<sup>199</sup> The term 'hegemonic masculinity,' which was coined by Raewyn Connell in the 1980s with recourse to Antonio Gramsci, "can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (77). Thus, hegemonic masculinity is at the top of a hierarchy of different forms of masculinity and femininity that exist at a given time; women and, for instance, homosexual men and men of color are subordinated to this normative variety of masculinity (D. P. Levy 254). Although hegemonic masculinity is not actually enacted by the majority of men, it "embodie[s] the currently most honored way of being a man" (Connell and Messerschmidt 832). Ideas about this idealized form of masculinity are predominantly shaped by media discourse; exemplars of bearers of hegemonic masculinity may be "fantasy figures, such as film characters" (Connell 77). Connell and Messerschmidt argue that "[t]o sustain a given pattern of

into practice Raewyn Connell's and James W. Messerschmidt's optimistic idea "that a more humane, less oppressive, means of being a man might become hegemonic, as part of a process leading toward an abolition of gender hierarchies" (833). Taking into account that the examined male vampire characters still hold continuities with older, more oppressive forms of masculinity, the hegemony of postfeminist masculinity in the analyzed paranormal romances may indeed be understood as part of an ongoing process towards gender equality, not its achievement. Postfeminist masculinity holds the hegemonic status here because it provides an amalgamation of masculinities that has great appeal for heterosexual female audiences in particular.<sup>200</sup> Crucially, postfeminist masculinity is in compliance with feminist ideas without eschewing culturally valued markers of 'masculinity' such as physical strength, aggression and rationality. In merging these contradictory features, Edward, Stefan and Bill present solutions to the tensions which many viewers may be faced with in postfeminist contemporary culture. As idealized men with supernatural capacities, these vampire romance heroes can both satisfy a longing for supposedly simpler traditional gender roles and offer a new version of masculinity which accepts feminism's ideals.

## 6.1. The Evolution of the Postfeminist Man

According to Genz and Brabon, the discourse of the postfeminist man emerged in the early 2000s (142). This new postfeminist man is a hybrid formation, "a melting pot of masculinities, blending a variety of contested subject positions, as well as a chameleon figure still negotiating the ongoing impact of feminism on his identity" (Genz and Brabon 143). Coming to the fore in the wake of "the incapacitating social and economic topography of late capitalism" (Brabon, "'Chuck Flick'" 117), this contradictory form of

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hegemony requires the policing of men as well as the exclusion or discrediting of women" (844). Thus, men are offered the incentive to practice gender according to the hegemonic system because they otherwise "run the risk of subordination" (D. P. Levy 254). Even if most men do not live up to the ideal, they "accept and participate in the system of hegemonic masculinity so as to . . . enjoy the material, physical and symbolic benefits of the subordination of women" (D. P. Levy 254). Connell and Messerschmidt emphasize that hegemonic masculinities are constantly subject to contestation and that "older forms of masculinity might be displaced by new ones" (833).

<sup>200</sup> It is easily conceivable that the representations of masculinity offered here might speak to (heterosexual) male viewers as well – not only, but also because these representations are tremendously successful with women. Likewise, gay male viewers may find satisfaction in identifying with the female protagonists of the narratives (Mukherjea, "My Vampire Boyfriend" 17), so the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* certainly hold appeal for a variety of different audiences. However, because the three paranormal romance series are predominantly known for the fact that they fairly clearly address the heterosexual interests of women/girls, this chapter will concentrate on the appeal of the texts for this particular audience segment.

masculinity can be said to be a product of the so-called ‘crisis in masculinity,’ which was widely discussed in the academic as well as the popular realm in the United States and Britain around the turn of the century (S. Robinson 90). Scholars and critics describing this crisis delineate the ways in which social and economic shifts on a domestic as well as global level have increasingly resulted in the loss of power and independence for men in general, and for white, hegemonic masculinities in particular. For instance, as Brian Baker suggests in *Contemporary Masculinities in Fiction, Film and Television* (2015), “[c]ontemporary (white, hegemonic, Anglo-American) masculinities are undoubtedly troubled, ill at ease with their own aspirations and pleasures, uncomfortable with the systems of privilege and power that differently enable individual men economically, socially and culturally” (245). In more conservative accounts, feminism is made responsible for the fact that men have had to relinquish positions of power (S. Robinson 90). However, Baker locates the ‘crisis in masculinity’ in the context of “the dominance of neoliberal economics in the global North, crises of legitimacy in ‘democratic’ political processes, the experience of war and the effects of terrorism, as well as emergent social and cultural formations produced by digital networks and globalized travel” (1).

The destabilization of ‘masculinity’ has been understood to have taken place both actually and symbolically, in the sense that men have actually had to give up certain privileges, and that the traditional concept of masculinity has waned in popularity in American culture (S. Robinson 90). While most critics seem to agree that shifts in gender roles have recently been – and are currently – occurring, some have exposed the idea “that American masculinity was stable and fulfilling prior to feminism” (Abele xvii) as a “myth” (Abele xvii). Indeed, Baker points out that the conception of a ‘masculinity crisis’ is not to suggest

that there was a time when constructions of masculinity in capitalist Modernity were ever untroubled, when male subjects were whole and not produced by conflicting ideological, social and cultural structures, or when men existed in an unchallenged patriarchy not striated by class or ethnicity. (243)

Rather than claiming that the ‘crisis in masculinity’ is a new phenomenon, these scholars argue that there was never a time when masculinity was “stable and well-defined” (Abele xv). Instead, it would be more accurate to speak of a “continual crisis, [which] may actually have less to do with feminism than with the inordinate value this culture has placed on an unsustainable ideal of American masculinity” (Abele xv-xvi). In fact, Michael Mangan posits that crisis is “a condition of masculinity itself. Masculine gender identity is never stable; its terms are continually being re-defined and re-negotiated” (qtd.

in Genz and Brabon 133). Kenneth MacKinnon argues that what informs the contemporary 'crisis' is a shift to an understanding of masculinity not as a 'natural,' biologically given set of attributes, but as performative (14). As he writes, if masculinity "once was taken for granted as transparent, normal, too natural to require explanation, it has become something of an enigma. A masculinity which takes up so much energy and demands so much attention is self-evidently unconfident about its nature and attributes" (21). In this sense, feminism may indeed have played a part in masculinity's 'crisis:' As Elizabeth Abele suggests, "feminism's process of revealing and questioning the artificial limitations placed on women by society . . . cannot help but reveal the social construction of men as well, constructions that may create as many limitations as privileges" (xiii). Thus, the relatively recent perception of masculinity as a social and cultural construct brings with it an awareness that men are performing certain roles, which can then be questioned and put up for discussion. Furthermore, the theory that masculinity, like femininity, is dependent on a continual reproduction of specific ways of 'doing gender' highlights the fragility of the concept. According to MacKinnon, the recognition that masculinity's "hegemony is a position of fragile dominance and ideologies themselves are flexible and changeable" (Milestone and Meyer 18) plays a big part in the contemporary 'crisis in masculinity' (21).

As hybrid models of masculinity which are located at the intersection of different economic and social tensions, postfeminist masculinities "hold continuities with hegemonic, and even archaic, depictions of masculinity alongside 'new' emergent masculine images, emphases and values" (Thompson 150-151). Thus, while postfeminist masculinity continues to incorporate features that are traditionally understood as 'masculine,' such as aggression and (professional) ambition, it can also "increasingly redefine itself in terms of its sensitivity, emotional expressiveness and nurturing qualities, and also in terms of its openness to improving interpersonal relations and to taking a lead part in child-rearing" (MacKinnon 73). Rebecca Feasey's observation that men are represented in contemporary television series as occupying both public and private spaces corroborates this finding (153-54). Since male characters on TV are shown to be at home in both the sphere of work, which is conventionally marked as 'masculine,' and the domestic arena, which is usually associated with 'femininity,' they can be described as integrating a "conglomeration of seemingly irreconcilable masculine gender scripts" (Brabon, "'Chuck Flick'" 128). As a consequence of being characterized by contradiction and ambiguity, postfeminist masculinities are both "haunted by the threat of 'backlash'"

(Brabon, “‘Chuck Flick’” 117) and the opportunity of subversion, as “invocations of older forms of masculinity are re-signified by pro-feminist interventions” (Brabon, “‘Chuck Flick’” 117).

Postfeminist masculinity’s hybrid nature is also a result of its incorporation of different constitutive elements: Emerging at the beginning of the new millennium, it combines characteristics of several preceding models of masculinity. More precisely, Genz and Brabon argue that the recent phenomenon of the postfeminist man hybridizes features of three discourses of masculinity that have evolved since the 1980s: the ‘new man,’ the ‘metrosexual’ and the ‘new lad’ (137). Most clearly, postfeminist masculinity can be described as “a reimagined and reconstructed version of the 1980s ‘new man’ archetype; a highly visible cultural icon of that decade which enjoyed hegemonic status across a wide range of representational spaces” (Burns 134). The discourse of the ‘new man’ developed, among other things, under the influence of feminism, individualism and consumer society (Milestone and Meyer 117). The historical context in which the ‘new man’ originates has molded his character; he has been described as “pro-feminist” (Genz and Brabon 137) and “‘feminized’” (Milestone and Meyer 117), but also as “self-absorbed” (Genz and Brabon 137).

Two strands of the ‘new man’ type can thus be distinguished: “the ‘nurturer’ (men as sensitive, emotionally expressive and domesticated) and the ‘narcissist’ (men as ambitious fashion- and body-conscious consumers)” (Burns 134). The postfeminist man is indebted to both. From the ‘nurturer’ version of the new man, he inherits emotional and caretaker skills as well as a liberal and feminist political outlook. Another characteristic the postfeminist man shares with his predecessor, the nurturing ‘new man,’ is the fact that they are both comfortable in traditionally ‘feminine’ realms; the ‘new man’ is sensitive and does his share of household duties, including child-rearing (Milestone and Meyer 116-17). At the other end of the spectrum, the ‘new man’ as narcissist “knows the value of appearance; he is well groomed and looks sexy. He possesses a fit and muscular body, achieved through regular exercise and diet regimes, wears expensive and stylish clothes, has a trendy haircut and uses beautification products such as moisturizers or hairwax” (Milestone and Meyer 116). This version of the ‘new man’ is a result of the increasing “commercialisation of masculinity witnessed from the 1980s to the present day” (Genz and Brabon 136). The fact that the possession of a sexy body and an aestheticized appearance are requirements for successful postfeminist masculinity in contemporary culture (Thompson 151) shows the extent to which current manifestations of manhood

take their cue from those of the 1980s and 90s. All in all, the emergence of the discourse of the 'new man' – in both of his manifestations – denotes “an increase in the importance of consumption, culture, appearance, sexuality and emotions for men” (Milestone and Meyer 117).

The increased focus on consumer cultural values is further amplified in the figure of the 'metrosexual,' who is part of a discourse of masculinity usually associated with the 1990s. The 'metrosexual' has been described as “a refashioned version of the new man” (Milestone and Meyer 117): “Epitomised by David Beckham, the 'metrosexual' extends the narcissistic and self-absorbed characteristics of the 'new man,' revelling in the consumerist heaven that is the modern-day metropolis” (Genz and Brabon 139). Although he is usually characterized as heterosexual, the 'metrosexual' man displays behaviors that were previously only associated with gay men or 'femininity:’ He intentionally puts his body on display and is interested in grooming and fashion trends (Milestone and Meyer 117). As a result, he has also been defined as “[s]exually ambivalent” (Genz and Brabon 139), blurring the lines between heterosexual and homosexual masculinities (Genz and Brabon 139). Like the 'new man,' the 'metrosexual' is usually middle-class with a “high disposable income” (Hasenbank 438), which is a prerequisite of him being able to fully embrace the prevailing culture of late capitalism. This type of masculinity is closely linked to lifestyle choices, which, as Genz and Brabon point out, “are limited and limiting” (140), as they are only accessible to individuals who are rich in resources. Foreshadowing the contradictory make-up of the postfeminist man, the 'metrosexual' “illustrates the precariousness of masculinity in the twentieth century, as 'new' and 'old,' homosexual and heterosexual masculinities compound and evolve in increasingly 'hybrid' forms” (Genz and Brabon 140).

The third figure which the postfeminist man draws upon is the 'new lad,' a masculinity discourse which is largely associated with British culture of the 1990s (Milestone and Meyer 118). 'New laddism' is generally understood as “a backlash against feminism, which it associates with political correctness, and against male responsibilities linked with traditional breadwinning roles” (Pattman 358). Thus, not only is the 'new lad' linked with retro-sexism, homophobia and the demonstrative objectification of women, he has also been described as offering “a refuge from the constraints and demands of marriage and nuclear family. He opened up a space of fun, consumption and sexual freedom for men” (Gill, “Power and the Production of Subjects” 47). A key characteristic of this figure is laddish humor, which aims to uphold gendered hierarchies through the

use of irony. Thus, the postmodern feature of irony is employed here to brush off criticism levelled at the often sexist nature of jokes in laddish culture (Pattman 358). Although the ‘new lad’ primarily addressed working-class masculinities that may have had a hard time identifying with the consumer cultural discourses of the ‘new man’ and the ‘metrosexual’ (Genz and Brabon 142), middle-class men were also targeted as potential consumers of laddism in the British media (Pattman 358). A significant overlap between the postfeminist man and the ‘new lad’ is the combination of oppositional characteristics and/or responsibilities, although both seem to be at different ends of the spectrum when it comes to their attitude towards male privilege and responsibilities. As Genz and Brabon argue, “the ‘new lad’ wants it both ways, jettisoning the responsibilities of patriarchy while maintaining its privileges” (142). Meanwhile, Brabon suggests that the postfeminist man “attempts to navigate the danger he presents to himself and the social and economic system he simultaneously sustains and is alienated by” (“‘Chuck Flick’” 122). Ultimately, the postfeminist man is very much a hybrid of the ‘new man,’ the ‘metrosexual’ and the ‘new lad:’

On the one hand, the ‘postfeminist man’ accommodates backlash scripts – drawing upon characteristics of the ‘new lad.’ On the other hand, he is more self-aware, displaying anxiety and concern for his identity while re-embracing patriarchal responsibilities which the ‘new lad’ defiantly threw off. In many ways, the ‘postfeminist man’ could be described as the ‘new lad’ grown up or a less sensitive ‘new man.’ (Genz and Brabon 143)

Through the hybridization of different versions of masculinity, postfeminist masculinity mixes “old and new elements” (Milestone and Meyer 119) in a way that allows both progressive and regressive readings.

## **6.2. Humanized Vampires as Romance Heroes**

Hybridizing the prototypes of the ‘new man,’ the ‘metrosexual’ and the ‘new lad,’ the postfeminist man is a combination of different and even conflicting masculinities. As I argue in this chapter, the contradictory qualities of postfeminist masculinity become manifest in the vampire romance heroes featured in the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*. More precisely, it is the figure of the humanized/domesticated vampire in particular which captures the inherently paradoxical features of postfeminist masculinity. The latter constitutes the hegemonic form of masculinity in the analyzed paranormal romances, with the male vampires being represented as idealized postfeminist men. Functioning as preferred partners for the human heroines and, by proxy, the heterosexual female audience of the narratives, these vampire heroes are modelled in

many ways after the typical ideal hero of the romance genre. However, the vampire lovers also deviate from the characteristics of the traditional romance hero in some crucial aspects, which signals their embeddedness in a postfeminist culture in which “feminist gains, attitudes, and achievements are woven into our cultural fabric” (Douglas 9). Generally speaking, the ideal romance hero, too, is an inherently contradictory character which can be said to blend different aspects – some of which are traditionally gendered ‘masculine,’ some ‘feminine.’ As Radway maintains, although the hero of the romantic fantasy is “characterized by spectacular masculinity” (128), he is also defined by “the presence of a small feature that introduces an important element of softness into the overall picture” (128). In this way, the romance hero combines stereotypically masculine features, such as a muscular physique, a hard and angular exterior, social status and moral purity (Radway 128-30), with characteristics usually associated with ‘femininity,’ like a “capacity for tenderness and attentive concern” (Radway 14). As already stressed, the typical narrative structure of the romance requires the hero to be “nurturant and protective in a maternal way” (Radway 140), which complicates his otherwise extremely ‘masculine’ demeanor. In other words, the traditional romance hero is “powerful in traditionally masculine qualities, while retaining the sensitivity to recognize [the heroine’s] needs” (Mussell 117). The hero’s supposedly ‘feminine’ features are the key to the above-mentioned transformation of the hero into a viable romantic partner, which is achieved through the efforts of the heroine; this is the process through which she brings him “to his knees” (Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance* 45). As Mussell argues, because he is so spectacularly ‘masculine,’ the romance hero is

so threatening that he must be domesticated to be a genuine hero. . . . The heroine who wins a passionate lover for her husband has it both ways. He has all the excitement and power to fulfill her romantic yearnings, but because he combines sexual potency and vulnerability, he can be domesticated. The heroine gains the sexual and romantic excitement of being loved by such a man and protection through his love from the threat of violation by the outside world – or by him when she submits, sexually or emotionally. (123)

In the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*, the contradictory nature of the romance hero is perfectly embodied by the figure of the vampire. Like the romance hero, the vampire becomes eligible as a romantic partner through its domestication. On the one hand, vampirism functions as an extension of the romance hero’s ‘masculine’ characteristics, “like violence, passion, sexual desire and the rest of the standard ‘Alphaman’ traits” (Crawford 106). On the other hand, the overpowering dominance of the supernatural creature is made safe by the vampire hero’s willingness to restrain his



monstrous power with the support of the heroine. Among the analyzed media texts, the *Twilight* Saga provides the most obvious example of a romance hero who is a “heterosexual, monogamous romantic vampire, a believer in true love and an expert in keeping his unruly desires for blood, sex and power under control” (Crawford 104). Here it is crucial to bear in mind that the “romance convention that the more dangerous a man is, the more sexually attractive he will be” (Crawford 167) is based on “the generic guarantee . . . that the violence of the hero is only ever an index of his virility, power and passion, and never of the actual likelihood of him inflicting physical harm upon the heroine” (Crawford 167-68). Therefore, the vampirism of the romance hero can function as a welcome “fantasy thrill” (Clements 116), while the relationship with the hero “is essentially absolutely safe” (Clements 116) for the heroine. In short, with the domesticated vampire hero, the heroine wins someone who can be both “her passionate first love but also the adult figure who protects her from the possible excesses of that relationship” (Mukherjea, “My Vampire Boyfriend” 9). The gradual domestication and/or humanization of the vampire figure in popular culture is a development which has been widely examined in vampire academia. Already briefly discussed in subchapters 3.3.2 and 3.3.3, it will be further elaborated in the following because of the key role it plays for the vampire’s entanglement with postfeminist discourses.

In his essay “Metaphor into Metonymy: The Vampire Next Door” (1997), Jules Zanger discusses the process of the vampire’s humanization in detail. The shifts in the vampire genre which Zanger describes shed light on why the vampire is particularly suited to incorporate and mirror discourses surrounding postfeminist masculinity. Distinguishing the ‘new’ vampire type from an ‘old’ one and drawing on Stoker’s *Dracula* as exemplary for the latter, Zanger identifies three major aspects in the vampire’s changing popular cultural representation: the shifts in the vampire character “from solitary to multiple and communal, from metaphoric Anti-Christ to secular sinner, [and] from magical to mundane” (19). According to Zanger, crucial shifts in representation have “demythologize[d] the vampire” (19). One major change in the portrayal of the vampire in literary and film texts concerns its metaphysical and religious status (Zanger 18). While *Dracula* was presented as Anti-Christ and as the embodiment of Evil in Stoker’s novel, the ‘new’ vampire is no longer an instrument in the conflict between God and Satan. Instead, its actions can be taken as indicating its individual personality and

condition. Thus, the character of the vampire is no longer pigeon-holed as inherently evil, but the existence of ‘good’ as well as ‘evil’ vampires becomes possible.<sup>201</sup>

Indeed, the element of a conflict between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ vampires is crucial for example in the *Twilight* Saga. *Twilight*’s ‘good’ vampires, the members of the Cullen family, maintain a special position within the vampire world. This is due to their lifestyle that differs fundamentally from other vampires: The Cullens lead a vegetarian life, not feeding on humans because of moral considerations. Edward explains in *Twilight*: “My family, we’re different from others of our kind. We only hunt animals. We’ve learned to control our thirst.” As becomes clear in *Breaking Dawn – Part 1*, when he was a newborn vampire, Edward temporarily abandoned his father’s lifestyle before ultimately deciding to resort to vegetarianism for the rest of his vampire existence:

A few years after Carlisle created me, I rebelled against him. I resented him for curbing my appetite. And so for a while, I went off on my own. I wanted to know how it felt to hunt, to taste human blood. All the men I killed were monsters, and so was I. . . . I looked into their eyes as they died, and I saw who I was and what I was capable of.

Thus, Edward is presented as going through personal experiences, which lead to his individual decision in terms of eating behavior, making him a ‘good’ vampire. Bella admires her fiancé’s strong morals and self-control, referring to Edward as “someone capable of courage and sacrifice” (*Breaking Dawn – Part 1*). Her words indicate the markedly positive meaning of vampiric vegetarianism and, generally, of self-discipline in the *Twilight* Saga. The main antagonists of the Cullen family in part one of the *Twilight* Saga are three vampires whose lifestyle is effectively set against the Cullens’ philosophy. Laurent, James and Victoria are nomads, introduced into the narrative as roaming through the family’s territory. They turn out to be the murderers of a number of Forks’ citizens, as they hunt their prey in the area the Cullens call their home. To those ‘evil’ vampires, Bella is nothing but a “snack” (*Twilight*). Furthermore, other vampires who are constructed as antagonists and therefore ‘evil’ vampires in the Saga are the Volturi, the unofficial vampire royalty. The Volturi possess great authority in the vampire world, being known for their drastic and sometimes cruel judgements. Like all ‘evil’ vampires in the *Twilight* universe, they subsist on human blood. Edward informs Bella in *New Moon* that what the Volturi lack is “respect for human life, of course.” No longer solely embodying Satanic evil, the humanized vampire is motivated by subjective experiences

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<sup>201</sup> As Crawford notes, „[i]n practice, ‘goodness’ . . . basically consists of alignment with the values of the contemporary liberal white American middle classes. . . . demons and vampires are often depicted . . . as bearing the trappings of cultural and racial ‘otherness’ – . . . and they are ‘good’ only to the extent that they have learned to assimilate themselves to contemporary American culture” (133).

and acting according to its individual character. Its moral strength and benevolence are indicated by its modified eating behavior – a characteristic trait not shared by its antagonists, the ‘evil’ vampires, who therefore represent its antithesis.

A second feature that distinguishes the ‘new’ vampire type from the ‘old’ one according to Zanger is the new communal spirit of the vampire (18). While Dracula used to be solitary, acting alone on his quest to conquer the city of London, the humanized vampire is a decidedly social creature. It lives as the member of a family, with friends and lovers to which it relates in either the human or the vampire world. The *Twilight* Saga is a paramount example for this shift in representation: The films focus on Edward Cullen as the member of a family which consists of a father, a mother and five adopted children who in turn form amorous couples among themselves. Family, according to Silver, is one of *Twilight*’s leitmotifs: “the series is . . . concerned with the contemporary American nuclear family, and a woman’s role within that family. Identity, in the series, occurs within the context of group identity, particularly family” (122). Silver underlines the Cullens’ status as a settled group that is organized as a family, which clearly distinguishes them from other vampires in the *Twilight* universe who are presented as nomads, solitary figures or covens (134). This status definitely has a positive connotation within the Saga. It is striking that the Cullens being firmly located in a specific place becomes significant, as it works as a way of determining their status as social creatures.

A similar focus on interpersonal relationships can be found in *The Vampire Diaries*, which deals with the romantic love triangle between the two vampire brothers Stefan and Damon Salvatore, and the human girl Elena Gilbert. In addition, a similar pattern as in *Twilight* emerges when Stefan, the initially ‘good’ and blood-abstinent brother, temporarily turns ‘evil’ in season 3, leaving his hometown behind and roaming the country as his bloodthirsty *alter ego*, “the ripper” (“As I Lay Dying”). Again, Stefan’s rejection of human blood seems to be linked to his being rooted in a place, marking him as a creature with a fixed home as well as relations to a specific community. As mentioned in subchapter 3.3.3, Stefan’s and Damon’s acceptability as romantic leads is directly related to the domestication of their vampire nature, which is in turn dependent upon the presence of Elena’s redeeming influence.

The third important shift concerns the loss of many folkloristic features of the vampire (Zanger 19). This shift not only concerns the vampire as a social creature on an interpersonal level, but also relates to a societal level. Many folkloristic characteristics used to mark Dracula as a magical creature, and therefore as unambiguously Other –

which is what prevented him from blending into human (or, American) society. Zanger refers to the mutability of the old vampire type: that is, its ability to transform into mist or into animals, such as insects, bats or dogs. Indeed, the vampiric ability of spontaneous mutation does not seem to play any role in current vampire narratives.<sup>202</sup> What also proves ineffective are traditional defensive measures, such as crucifixes and holy water (Zanger 19), a phenomenon which is obviously connected to the vampire's secularization. An important feature of the 'new' vampire becomes visible in *The Vampire Diaries*: the lack of the vampire's usual shunning of light. In the series, the Salvatore brothers possess magic lapis lazuli rings which shield them from the destructive power of the sun. In this way, they are not forced to run errands at night but can walk around during the day as well. Not bothered by sunlight, the brothers are able to participate in all sorts of mundane activities, such as attending the local high school; moreover, Damon is involved and known in the Founder's Council, a group of high-ranked civil servants in the town of Mystic Falls.

In the *Twilight* universe, vampires are not threatened by daylight at all. Instead, *Twilight's* vampires are famous for sparkling like diamonds in the sun – a characteristic trait of their skin which may reveal their supernatural being but does not hurt or destroy them. The Cullens are respected citizens of Forks; Carlisle in particular is held in high esteem for his work as a doctor at the local hospital. The family members' capacity to walk unharmed in the sunlight enables them to pursue school and academic educations and to take up professions. The accumulation of graduation caps in the Cullens' staircase shows that all of them hold several academic degrees. As esteemed members of Forks' community, the Cullens are integrated into American society. Tellingly, one of their favorite hobbies is baseball, which they explicitly refer to as "the American pastime" (*Twilight*).

Although *True Blood* remains faithful to some of the vampire figure's folkloristic features – vampires' exposure to sunlight still results in the so-called 'True Death' in the series –, the link between the humanization of the vampire and its integration into American society becomes clear here as well. The series' title refers to 'Tru Blood,' a drink consisting of synthetic blood invented by Japanese scientists in the program's universe. The blood drink has recently been made available in ordinary supermarkets and

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<sup>202</sup> Regarding this phenomenon, Sally Miller remarks: "One of the biggest modifications of the vampire myth in contemporary fiction is the 'density' of the vampiric body. No longer able to transform or transcend its corporeal presence, the vampiric body has become a body that has ceased to exist, yet cannot die" (56).

bars. It is marketed as an alternative food source for vampires, who can buy the drink in different flavors or blood types. The corresponding marketing campaign promises that ‘Tru Blood’ entirely meets vampires’ nutritional needs. With the invention of synthetic blood, vampires have ‘come out of the coffin,’ now campaigning for equal rights. Nan Flanagan, official spokesperson of the ‘American Vampire League,’ repeatedly argues for the enforcement of the ‘Vampire Rights Amendment:’

Now that the Japanese have perfected synthetic blood . . . , there is no reason for anyone to fear us. I can assure you that every member of our community is now drinking synthetic blood. That’s why we decided to make our existence known. We just want to be part of mainstream society. (“Strange Love”)

The invention and sale of synthetic blood mean that everyday tasks, such as shopping for food in grocery stores and socializing in bars, are performed by vampires now, too. In this way, they are able to step out of their monstrous marginality that up to this point had shaped their lives. Thanks to ‘Tru Blood,’ their survival is theoretically ensured without the biting and killing of humans. Therefore, the official majority of vampires strives for a peaceful coexistence with humans as well as for equality and integration into human society – a process referred to as ‘mainstreaming’ in the series.

### **6.3. Vampire Romance Heroes and Central Features of Postfeminist Masculinity**

The vampire’s tendency to increasingly appear as domesticated – albeit not becoming entirely ‘defanged,’ as discussed in subchapter 3.3.2 – is a prerequisite of its representation as a romantic lead in the *Twilight Saga*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*. As creatures straddling the border between various oppositional categories, vampires are ideally suited to embody the contradictory features of hybrid postfeminist masculinity in these texts. Not only do vampires simultaneously give voice to a number of human fears and transgressive desires, but they also combine many other incongruous elements: “Vampires typically disrupt the binaries of alive/dead, human/animal, beauty/ugliness, and hero/villain” (Masson and Stanley par. 5) and may further “complicate . . . the masculine/feminine” (Masson and Stanley par. 5) binary. As romantic heroes, vampires integrate a number of antithetical properties. Interestingly, each of these properties may be desirable for heterosexual female audiences. For instance, while the vampire hero has usually been made vampire decades, possibly even centuries ago, he

takes on the appearance of a young man or – as in the *Twilight Saga* and *The Vampire Diaries* – a teenage boy. As Ananya Mukherjea argues,

this age-duality of being ancient in experience while also youthful in impulse renders the vampire boyfriend both wise and passionate. His beloved can benefit from the intensity of his desire for her but not suffer from his inability to control it or to express it elegantly. . . . this is the physical glory of youth combined with adult accomplishments and restraint. (“My Vampire Boyfriend” 7)

Essentially being “simultaneously very much of the past and of the future” (Mukherjea, “My Vampire Boyfriend” 4), the vampire, in the three popular cultural products analyzed by this research, neatly incorporates both traditional, retrogressive ideas about masculinity and more recent, potentially progressive ones. As a result of his immortal nature, the vampire hero typically stems from an era associated with traditional gender roles and moral values. At the same time, he is firmly assimilated into contemporary culture and can act as an advocate of modern, including feminist ideas. The vampire can thereby function as a personification of postfeminist masculinity, which may both carry retro-sexist ideas about gender roles and offer new images of manhood emerging under the influence of feminism. According to Carla T. Kungl, the contemporary vampire can be described as “both ancient and modern, feared and befriended, a citified version of his old-country self” (“A New Spin on an Old Tale”). Similarly, Abbott argues that while vampires are usually “seen as stretching back into far reaches of the past” (*Celluloid Vampires* 2), those in recent film and television are “intrinsically linked to the modern world” (*Celluloid Vampires* 5) and firmly anchored in their contemporary setting (*Celluloid Vampires* 3). The “transition from an outsider settling in the city to a vampire fully integrated within the urban landscape” (Abbott, *Celluloid Vampires* 10) can be subsumed under the above-described continuous humanization of the vampire figure. In other words, the vampire’s humanization process qualifies it to carry the hybrid features of the postfeminist man. Beside the vampire’s integration into a modern setting, culture and community, the shedding of its mythological properties and the loss of its metaphysical and religious status are two central developments that enable the vampire to mirror as well as contribute to contemporary discourses of postfeminist masculinity.

As stated earlier, in the domestication process, the vampire’s loss of folkloristic features entails this figure’s becoming less Other; this concerns its characterization as well as its visual portrayal. Not only does the vampire look more human, it is also depicted as more conventionally attractive and even attains common beauty standards. Susannah Clements’ observations about the vampires in Anne Rice’s *Vampire Chronicles* can be

taken as representative of the general evolution of the vampire figure. As she writes in *The Vampire Defanged: How the Embodiment of Evil Became a Romantic Hero* (2011), “Rice’s vampires are beautiful rather than monstrous like Dracula. They are far more humanized in nature than Dracula, and that humanness takes visual form in Louis’ physical appearance – he is like a man but paler and more beautiful” (36). Recht, too, argues that the transformation of the male vampire body towards established notions of attractiveness can be considered a humanization strategy which goes hand in hand with the construction of the sympathetic vampire (251). A consequence of the depiction of the vampire body as healthy-looking and sexually attractive is that male vampire characters in popular cultural narratives are no longer read as representing the Other or the foreign and instead become figures of identification for audiences (Recht 251). According to Recht, this enables the vampire characters to deviate from traditional media representations of gender (251). As he demonstrates using the example of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, sympathetic male vampire characters like Spike and Angel are often depicted as sexualized visual objects in the TV series. For instance, their bodies, which are often explicitly showcased, are modeled after established representations of heroic and muscular masculinity; they are also shown as scantily clad and in vulnerable, passive poses (Recht 221-54). Thus, these vampires’ portrayal is one in which ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ positions fluctuate (Recht 253).

The representation of heterosexual female protagonists as subjects of a gaze which turns male vampire characters into eroticized objects in the *Twilight Saga*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* was examined in detail in chapter 4 of this dissertation. Meanwhile, this present chapter shall focus on the sexualized depiction of humanized vampire heroes as taking up discourses of narcissistic, commercialized postfeminist masculinity. Strikingly, with the emergence of the ‘new man,’ men’s bodies have started

to become objects to be displayed and looked at by spectators. Popular culture represents male bodies which are highly muscular, lean and sculpted, and increasingly naked. The ways in which they are lit and positioned invites a desiring gaze and sexual appreciation; male bodies are now made to look good and sexually attractive. Such display and gaze sexualize and fetishize male bodies in a way which was previously only the case for women. (Milestone and Meyer 119)

As a version of masculinity which is intimately connected with the prevalence of consumer culture, the fashion-conscious ‘new man’ “wants to look good and will consume in order to achieve this” (Milestone and Meyer 120). In this context, Milestone and Meyer argue, with reference to Sean Nixon, that the ‘new man’ is characterized by “a contradictory ‘hard-soft’ look. The new man is sensual yet tough, masculine in both

an old and a new way” (120). This combination of ‘old’ and ‘new,’ ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ features is retained by the postfeminist man. While the idealized postfeminist man resorts to trending beauty practices that may usually be more associated with women, like the removal of body hair, the portrayal of his body also typically focuses on “his toned arms and torso” (Burns 136), emphasizing “the importance of a highly muscular physique” (Milestone and Meyer 120) for men in contemporary culture. As Amy Burns notes, the hero in current postfeminist ‘chick flicks’<sup>203</sup> “is usually attractive, [which means that] he satisfies the currently accepted aesthetic standards of ‘attractive’ masculinity and conforms to contemporary trends of styling, as presented and promoted within the media and consumer culture” (135). According to Burns, the postfeminist hero “can be found readily on ‘display’ . . . , as he is presented to both female characters within the text and the female audience as an ‘object for consumption’” (134). In this way, the postfeminist man is a clear descendant not only of the ‘new man,’ but also of the ‘metrosexual’ who enjoys parading his styled and cultivated physique and intentionally “puts his body on display” (Genz and Brabon 139). The similarities between the ‘metrosexual’ and the ‘new man’ are indeed striking, “as narcissism and the commoditisation of masculinity become the organizing features of both forms” (Genz and Brabon 139). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, both – together with the new lad – merge into the figure of the postfeminist man, whose masculinity is “inextricably linked with the ‘attractive’ male body” (Burns 136).

The figure of the humanized male vampire, as it has evolved in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is particularly well equipped to capture this self-displaying, self-grooming quality of the postfeminist man. As figures of fantasy, vampires in contemporary texts are able to meet and maintain otherwise impossible beauty standards via their idealized bodies. In contemporary paranormal romance, the supernatural creatures often “possess nearly perfect physical forms, immense physical prowess, and some manner of prolonged youth or immortality. In addition to being powerful, . . . the men are handsome with bodies that range from chiseled to muscular” (Willms 139). Media texts in which “becoming supernatural bestows bodily forms and abilities that ‘just happen’ to coincide with what is often idealized and commodified in gendered ways within contemporary Western culture” (Willms 139) work as mirror images of the process of “the ongoing

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<sup>203</sup> Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young broadly define ‘chick culture’ as “a group of mostly American and British popular culture media forms focused primarily on twenty- to thirtysomething middle-class women” (1). A general scholarly consensus is that “in contemporary chick popular culture and in the media discussions which surround it, . . . postfeminist discourses take place and postfeminist ideology is constructed” (Burns 131).



commercialisation of masculinity” (Genz and Brabon 138) in contemporary culture. Furthermore, in a cultural product like the *Twilight* Saga, vampirism is associated with affluence and privilege, as immortality and supernatural skills offer access to high amounts of time and resources, which facilitate the accumulation of money as well as knowledge in the form of education. This principle is most clearly represented by Edward Cullen, whose “fashion choices reflect his wealth” (Wilson, *Seduced by Twilight* 92). Edward’s superior styling, fashion and grooming choices, which cannot be separated from his social class and white privilege, are a perfect embodiment of the fact that “‘new’ masculinities are increasingly bound up in men’s lifestyle choices, [which are] . . . often only accessible to a small number of affluent individuals” (Genz and Brabon 140).

As Zanger posits, individual vampires are no longer portrayed as monsters because they are depicted as being equipped with free will and a conscience (22). Thus, the capacity to make individual choices prevents the vampire heroes in the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* from being determined by their supernatural nature. As Bella tells Jacob in *New Moon* with regard to the question of what makes one a monster: “It’s not what you *are*, it’s what you *do*.” What defines the vampire hero is that he makes a choice to deploy his power for the sake of the heroine and her loved ones. As already mentioned, the physical dominance and propensity to violence, which has been inherent in the figure of the vampire despite its substantial domestication, is part of the allure of the vampire romance hero. Mukherjea points out that “the appeal of masculinity is a complicated matter, and benevolent but incontestable male dominance continues to be widely socially approved and desired” (“My Vampire Boyfriend” 12). In a setting which contains many supernatural and other, more mundane threats, the vampire hero is welcomed as a protector for the heroine; however, the hero’s violence is only acceptable if it is not directed towards the female protagonist herself. Although the vampire hero “must be capable of spontaneous and successful acts of violence in order to protect the heroine” (Mukherjea, “My Vampire Boyfriend” 12), he must “also be extremely gentle by nature” (Mukherjea, “My Vampire Boyfriend” 12). As already pointed out, this means that the humanized vampire hero combines stereotypically masculine and feminine features. The combination of differently gendered features can be read as an expression of postfeminist masculinity, as the latter is simultaneously indebted to more traditional ideas about ‘masculinity’ and demonstrating ‘feminine’ emotional as well as domestic skills. On the one hand, the vampire hero is associated with features presumed to be typically ‘masculine,’ such as “strength and power (physical, mental and social), being

active and ambitious, tough and competitive, assertive and aggressive” (Milestone and Meyer 20). Because of his supernatural status, he is likely to be even more ‘masculine’ than any regular human romance hero: “In paranormal romance, the hero can be more alpha – bigger, stronger, more deadly – than in non-paranormal. . . . He is the über-patriarch” (Roach, “Getting a Good Man to Love”). On the other hand, vampire romance heroes like Edward Cullen are presented as kind and caring, seeing as they constantly look after their romantic partners and attend to their needs. They also demonstrate high levels of emotional intelligence and are eager to talk about their feelings – all traits commonly ascribed to women rather than men (Milestone and Meyer 20-21).

An interesting argument put forward by scholars such as Marcus Recht and Milly Williamson is that the reluctant vampire hero is intimately connected with the ‘feminine’ realm of emotion and melodrama (Recht 88). Williamson discusses the television vampire as a figure which “has stirred sympathy with its pathos-ridden recognition of its own (often glamorously depicted) monstrosity” (“Television” par. 1).<sup>204</sup> Taking Barnabas Collins from *Dark Shadows* as an example, Williamson compares the reluctant vampire to the character of the heroine in the Gothic melodrama (“Television” par. 6). Like the heroine, the vampire is “depicted as one who is caught in circumstances beyond his control” (M. Williamson, “Television” par. 6). While the heroine’s pathos is based on her “removal from a place of safety to the threatening location of her husband’s or employer’s familial mansion” (Wheatley, qtd. in M. Williamson, “Television” par. 7), the vampire’s victimization typically stems from the fact that he was transformed into a supernatural creature against his will (M. Williamson, “Television, Vampires and the Body” par. 12). Discovering his thirst for human blood, he is faced with the horrors of his abject vampire body which he fails to come to grips with (M. Williamson, “Television” par. 12). Importantly, then, the reluctant vampire’s “pathos is performed through the body. . . . he is caught in the grip of something beyond his control – his own vampirised and vampiric body” (M. Williamson, “Television” par. 15). According to Williamson, at the heart of the reluctant vampire’s melodrama is his “[c]oncealed innocence that is misrecognised as evil” (“Television” par. 15) by himself as well as society. Similar to the heroine, whose

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<sup>204</sup> According to Williamson, based on its “serialised nature” (“Television” par. 12), television is the home of the sympathetic/reluctant vampire, as “our sympathy with the vampire develops out of its unfolding story of suffering” (“Television” par. 12). This argument is also put forward by Abbott, who writes that the “TV vampire highlights moral ambiguity as the serial narrative allows them to develop, showing complex characterisation rather than two dimensional evil” (“Vampires on My Mind”), and points to the historical forerunner of today’s reluctant vampires, Varney from *Varney the Vampire*, a serialized Gothic horror story by James Malcolm Rymer which appeared between 1845 and 1847 as a series of penny dreadfuls (“Vampires on My Mind”).

“predicament is also often that . . . [her] innocence is misrecognised by those around her or the world at large” (M. Williamson, “Television” par. 14), the reluctant vampire’s innocence, which is based on his “non-complicity in his vampiric transformation” (M. Williamson, “Television” par. 13), is misread by society as guilt due to the fact that “the vampire body is a sign of villainy” (M. Williamson, “Television” par. 14).

Corresponding to the melodramatic genre, which is “closely tied to emotion and feeling” (Wheatley 154), the reluctant vampire’s melodramatic identity “involve[s] excess (of expression, emotion, and gesture)” (M. Williamson, “Television” par. 19). This melodramatic identity may seem to be at odds with the vampire’s stereotypically masculine features discussed earlier. However, the reluctant vampire’s pathos – which can be understood as ‘feminine’ since it is usually connected to the Gothic heroine – is a fundamental part of his appeal, as it serves to engage female audiences in compelling ways. As Williamson argues, television viewers have interpreted vampire Barnabas Collins as sympathetic because they were “identifying with his plight” (“Television” 21). In this context, it is important to note that the viewership of *Dark Shadows* consisted largely of “middle-aged women, usually housewives home raising their children, and teenage boys who ran home from school to watch the show” (Jowett and Abbott 46), which was broadcast at the afterschool time of 4pm. This fits well with Wheatley’s argument that Gothic television primarily addresses a “domestic, female viewer” (24). Barnabas’ struggle against society’s misrecognition of his innocence and his own tragic internalization of society’s misjudgment of the meanings of his body – both of which Williamson defines as “melodrama’s core impulses” (“Television” par. 22) – mirror female viewers’ experiences with “socially unacknowledged dilemmas and injustices” (M. Williamson, “Television” par. 23): “Barnabas as a vampire . . . acts out our own inability to be heard, our own inability to put forward the case of our innocence, our inability to articulate our own experiences of the injustices that we cannot fully name” (M. Williamson, “Television” 29).

The parallels between heroine and monster are a well-known observation in studies of the horror genre. For instance, Linda Williams points out that in the classic horror film, a “strange sympathy and affinity . . . develops between the monster and the girl” (21), the latter of which works as a stand-in for the female viewer. As Williams explains, the monster functions as a “double” (20) for the woman because both have a “similar status within patriarchal structures of seeing” (18). Both the monster’s and the woman’s bodies are perceived as different from that of the “normal male” (L. Williams 20), and freakishly

so; from the perspective of the male, both of their bodies are endued with “the feared power and potency of a different kind of sexuality” (L. Williams 20). As Williams argues, the woman “recognizes the sense in which [the monster’s] freakishness is similar to her own difference. For she too has been constituted as an exhibitionist-object by the desiring look of the male” (21). Here, too, the body is at the core of the “affinity between monster and woman” (L. Williams 18).

The correlation between the female audiences’ own experienced “injustices and anxieties” (M. Williamson, “Television” par. 21) in a patriarchally structured world and the reluctant vampire’s melodramatic pathos surrounding his misrecognized innocence provide a point of empathy which audiences may feel for the vampire hero. These parallels explain viewers’ appreciation of the vampire because his character negotiates dilemmas which otherwise remain unacknowledged (M. Williamson, “Television” par. 23). Furthermore, the audience’s “viewing pleasure is constructed around what only the audience is fully allowed to see, that [the reluctant vampire] is not really guilty” (M. Williamson, “Television” par. 23). This knowledge advantage chimes well with the audience’s generic recognition of the romance hero’s true identity from the beginning of the romance narrative. Even before the heroine realizes that behind the hero’s “protective exterior hides an affectionate and tender soul” (Radway 128), avid consumers of romance narratives who are familiar with the generic script know that the hero is the ideal lover for the heroine. After the heroine has reinterpreted the hero’s ambiguous behavior as indicating his love for her, she is able to “magically remake a man” (Radway 127) based on the fact that she alone recognizes the hero’s hidden virtue. As generic convention dictates, the heroine’s acceptance of the hero’s true nature confirms the special quality of the couple’s love and suggests a soul mate relationship between the two.

Williamson’s observations concerning the similarities between the reluctant vampire and the melodramatic Gothic heroine are perfectly complemented by an argument put forward by Brabon in his essay “The Spectral Phallus: Re-Membering the Postfeminist Man” (2007), in which he examines postfeminist masculinity in the context of postfeminist Gothic texts. As Brabon contends, a striking shift in the Gothic genre has been that by the late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century,

an inversion has taken place, as the female Gothic heroine cedes her position and role to the postfeminist man. . . . Instead of the female Gothic heroine performing her role of victim, it is the postfeminist man ‘miming’ masculinity. In this sense, the postfeminist man’s new status of victim is defined and delineated by his masculinity – he is trapped between the loss of his essentialist quality of masculinity and his attempt to reassert a strong masculine identity. (“The Spectral Phallus” 60)

Although Brabon is not referring to the figure of the vampire in his essay, his argument can be transferred to the paranormal romance texts investigated within the frame of this dissertation. Thus, what could be added to Brabon's discussion is that the contemporary vampire romance hero works as a particularly apt embodiment of the postfeminist man, as the vampire's "troubled reluctance at [his] vampiric urges" (M. Williamson, "Television" par. 2) can be interpreted as a metaphor for his discomfort with his 'masculine' identity, which – as discussed earlier in this chapter – is 'in crisis.' Torn between his 'natural' bloodlust and the expectation that he must restrain his appetite, the reluctant vampire bundles postfeminist discourses surrounding a self-aware masculinity which is in the process of interrogating itself and its privileges as well as responsibilities.

As previously discussed, in contemporary culture, masculinity "is no longer unproblematic, normal, to be seen as part of nature. There is an increasing focus on masculinity as troubled and unsure of itself" (MacKinnon 63). Traditional patriarchal duties, like being the breadwinner for the nuclear family, can no longer be fulfilled by most men "due to the incapacitating social and economic topography of late capitalism – in a world where . . . job security across the social spectrum is uncertain" (Brabon, "Chuck Flick" 117). Apart from this, there is a growing expectation in the wider society that men do their share of household and child-rearing duties. As a result of these sets of 'old' and 'new' expectations and responsibilities, the postfeminist man has a complicated relationship with traditional forms of hegemonic masculinity, which for him exist "in a latent, at times nostalgic but always unattainable, form" (Brabon, "Chuck Flick" 122). He may enjoy the privileges he is afforded due to his hegemonic status in the patriarchal culture (Brabon, "Chuck Flick" 122), but given that his perception of his own masculinity has, among other things, "been altered by second-wave feminism" (Brabon, "Chuck Flick" 122), he may also be aware of and attempt to work against retaining these privileges. According to Brabon, the "undermining of masculinity's essentialism and normativity has left male identity troubled" ("The Spectral Phallus" 60). As a result, the postfeminist man "now must engage with his own masculinity" (Brabon, "The Spectral Phallus" 60) – a process which takes place "at the physical level of the body" (Brabon, "The Spectral Phallus" 61) in postfeminist Gothic texts. In the case of the vampire romance hero, this engagement with one's own masculine identity is clearly mapped onto the vampire body with its propensity for predatory violence and thirst for human blood. In the paranormal romances analyzed within this dissertation, storylines tend to revolve

around vampire romance heroes' willingness to engage in critical self-reflection and their efforts in directing their (physical) dominance into 'appropriate,' i.e. benevolent channels.

As I argue, this self-reflexive and self-critical postfeminist masculinity, with which the vampire heroes in the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* are endowed, holds high appeal for heterosexual female audiences. Because of its attractiveness for target audiences, postfeminist masculinity enjoys the hegemonic status as the accepted version of ideal masculinity in the analyzed media productions. Thus, I concur with Mukherjea, who notes that

the vampire boyfriend's almost ubiquitous dissatisfaction with his own vampire nature might actually represent the dissatisfaction that many heterosexually involved women would like to see their male partners feel about their own gendered dominance and the ways in which they benefit from an unfair, sexist social system ("My Vampire Boyfriend" 12)

The negotiations between human female protagonists and male vampire heroes depicted in paranormal romance can thus be read as reflecting – and providing solutions for – crucial aspects of women's and girls' complex experiences in navigating heterosexual relationships in contemporary postfeminist culture. Essentially, postfeminist vampire heroes are depicted as juggling with a variety of contradictory features, ranging from more traditional to modern ones, which are offered to audiences to pick and choose from. The vampire hero's "convoluted personality" (Mukherjea, "My Vampire Boyfriend" 11) enables viewers to immerse themselves into the fantasy of secure gender relations while also taking pleasure in the fruits of decades of feminist activism. As Mukherjea points out,

[v]ampire boyfriends are usually expected to wear many, contradictory hats at the same time, to offer multiple expressions of masculinity at all times. . . . They are, in short, fantasy men – both very hard and very soft and fantastically flawless in a way that even very few fictional human men could possibly be. ("My Vampire Boyfriend" 12)

Indeed, inherent in the concept of hegemonic masculinity is the idea that it expresses "widespread ideals, fantasies, and desires" (Connell and Messerschmidt 838) rather than what is "normal in the statistical sense" (Connell and Messerschmidt 832). In fact, few men actually enact hegemonic masculinity. As Connell and Messerschmidt emphasize, "[r]ather, hegemony works in part through the production of exemplars of masculinity (e.g., professional sports stars), symbols that have authority despite the fact that most men and boys do not fully live up to them" (846). MacKinnon goes even further, writing that hegemonic masculinity "can be embodied only by such figures of fantasy as the characters embodied in . . . movies" (115). In the paranormal romance films and TV series analyzed

within the frame of this research, the “most honored way of being a man” (Connell and Messerschmidt 832) is epitomized by the vampire romance hero with his inherently contradictory features.

In relation to this, it is interesting that some scholars point out that an embodiment of hegemonic masculinity would actually be unhealthy and harmful for most men (MacKinnon 9). In a similar vein, Mukherjea rightly comments that the “vampire nature of the characters and the fantasy element in these stories . . . make qualities desirable, which, in actual men in real relationships, might be quite unsettling” (“My Vampire Boyfriend” 12). This argument contradicts the often-made assumption that (female) readers and viewers of paranormal romance are influenced by the content they consume to such an extent that they are looking for a vampire lover’s qualities in ‘real’ men.<sup>205</sup> In contrast to such claims, it is important to keep in mind that “[t]hese vampires are idealized leading men, and they are more manly than mere men could be or, perhaps, than we would want real men to be” (Mukherjea, “My Vampire Boyfriend” 14). The following subchapters will delve into the paranormal romance texts themselves and analyze the vampire heroes in the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* as prime examples of postfeminist masculinity.

#### **6.4. Both ‘Overbearing’ and ‘Emo-Metrosexual:’ Edward Cullen as a Postfeminist Man**

In academic discussions of the *Twilight* franchise, the character of Edward Cullen has widely been understood as a re-inscription of deeply regressive, traditional masculinity. For instance, Melissa Miller argues that the *Twilight* novels work to “highlight Edward’s patriarchal authority” (168), which is normalized and bolstered in the texts (174). Similarly, Ashley Donnelly maintains that by drafting a physically dominant and controlling character like Edward, Meyer “is perpetuating an exclusively heteronormative, patriarchal worldview that relies . . . on the continued (some may say renewed) oppression of the female gender and femininity in general” (191). While these scholars have a point in signposting the regressive aspects of Edward’s characterization, which are indeed troubling, this vampire hero also displays traits that deviate from traditional conceptions of masculinity. Thus, Edward’s traditionally ‘masculine’

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<sup>205</sup> Such assumptions are frequently made by self-declared ‘anti-fans’ of the *Twilight* Saga who construct fans of the Saga as “cultural dupes, passively consuming retrograde messages” (Godwin 102).

authority, power and rationality are complemented by a soft and emotional side. As Wilson points out, he is “representative of the neither too macho nor too feminine male characters that the saga depicts. While Edward is traditionally masculine in many regards, he is also an emo-metrosexual” (*Seduced by Twilight* 86). Wilson concludes that through the character of Edward, “*Twilight* presents neither a subversive nor a conservative view of masculinity, but a contradictory mixture of both” (*Seduced by Twilight* 86). An interesting point is Wilson’s reference to the figure of the ‘metrosexual.’ As I argue, in the *Twilight* film series, Edward Cullen functions as an embodiment of hybrid postfeminist masculinity, which incorporates aspects of the ‘metrosexual’ as well as other forms of masculinity.

According to Milestone and Meyer, “traditional masculinity is very much tied to an age of clear gender roles and family structures” (115). Born in 1901, Edward Cullen represents such an age in which gender roles were supposedly clear-cut, stable and satisfying for all genders. An outsider in contemporary Forks High School due to his antiquated speech and demeanor, Edward “indulge[s] a craving for an old-fashioned, generally wealthy, and socially dominant gentleman” (Mukherjea, “My Vampire Boyfriend” 1) which audiences may experience in the face of rapidly changing gendered expectations. Most prominently, Edward advocates old-fashioned values when it comes to the question of marriage. Despite Bella’s initial rejection of the idea of getting married at a young age, Edward contends that “where I’m from, [marriage is] the way one says ‘I love you’” (*Eclipse*). With the phrase “where I’m from,” he deliberately references a distant past associated with traditional values. As the films make very clear, the decades in which Edward grew up and in which he was educated have shaped his understanding of romance, courtship, sexuality and family. The second and third film chronicle Edward’s attempts to convince Bella to marry him. In *Eclipse*, when he proposes to her with a romantic gesture, he once again locates his proposal in a more desirable traditional past:

I know it’s not a modern notion. . . . I’m from a different era. Things were a lot less complicated. And if I had met you back then, I would have courted you. We’d have taken chaperoned strolls, or had iced tea on the porch. I may have stolen a kiss or two. But only after asking your father’s permission. I would have got down on one knee, and I would have presented you with a ring. This was my mother’s. Isabella Swan, I promise to love you every moment of forever. Would you do me the extraordinary honor of marrying me?

In his speech, Edward presents a highly romanticized version of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in which gendered expectations were supposedly clearly regulated and simple to live up to. Encapsulated in this idea of self-evident gender roles is “an essentialist understanding of



social life which conceptualizes men and women as inherently different species” (Milestone and Meyer 114). In this essentialist understanding, gendered expectations are based on differences in men’s and women’s biological make-up, with gender roles being understood as ‘natural’ consequences of a binary biological difference (Milestone and Meyer 114). According to Milestone and Meyer, “traditional masculinity, more than any other type of masculinity, directly juxtaposes men and women” (114).

This juxtaposition of men’s and women’s ‘typical’ characteristics becomes visible in Edward’s ideas about the part he ought to play in his relationship with Bella. In *New Moon*, he articulates what viewers have already been able to infer from his previous actions: Edward’s role is to guard Bella from harm. In response to Bella’s wish to be turned into a vampire and thereby become his equal in terms of power, Edward insists: “But it’s my job to protect you.” In the course of *Twilight* alone, he indeed saves her life in a car accident, guards her from a group of intrusive men in a dark alley, and frees her from the clutches of a vampire planning to kill her. Edward not only sees his role in protecting Bella’s life and safety; he is also adamant in protecting her “virtue” (*Eclipse*). Contradicting her clearly expressed desire for sexual intimacy, he insists that they should be married before any sexual interaction: “Believe me, I want to. I just want to be married to you first. . . . It’s not *my* virtue I’m concerned about”<sup>206</sup> (*Eclipse*). Silver argues that “Edward’s self-consciously anachronistic diction . . . indicates that he is a relic and model of Edwardian, if not Victorian, masculinity. His use of words like ‘virtue’ . . . [is] uncommon in popular, mainstream secular discourse about young adult sexuality today” (128). Analogous to his restraint in terms of sexual desire is Edward’s refusal to drink Bella’s blood. These two desires often work in tandem in vampire narratives, and the *Twilight* Saga is in line with this generic tradition. Appealingly, Edward, “with his ‘old-school’ ideas about love and sex . . . and his certainty about exactly what is entailed in his ‘job description’ as a husband, has a strikingly clear – if also rigid, or as he repeatedly describes himself, frozen – vision about exactly what constitutes correct, masculine behaviour” (Mukherjea, “Team Bella” 80).

Besides representing an old-fashioned approach to sexuality and relationships, Edward also symbolizes ideas about the desirability of the traditional nuclear family. As Silver suggests, “[t]he Cullens’ non-human, monstrous, adoptive family is, ironically, more of a family than Bella’s biological human family” (126). Bella is a child of divorce, and her parents no longer play a big part in each other’s lives except for their equal

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<sup>206</sup> Emphasis in the original.

involvement in their daughter's life. Renée, Bella's mother, has decided to prioritize her new husband's career as a minor league baseball player over her relationship with Bella. Throughout the Saga, Renée is portrayed as eccentric, childish and insufficient in her mothering capabilities. In contrast, Edward's mother Esme "defines herself primarily as a mother" (Silver 127) and thereby takes her 'appropriate' place in the traditional family hierarchy. In contrast to Bella's biological family, the Cullen family is depicted as harmonious and functional, with every family member fulfilling a particular gendered role: "Headed by the patriarchal but compassionate godlike father Carlisle (who, like God, creates his own wife when he finds her dying), balanced by the affectionate and protective mother Esme, and humanized by squabbling siblings, the Cullens are the family that Bella craves" (Silver 126). Essentially, the traditional family structure with its gendered division of labor is what Edward offers to Bella when he proposes to her. At the same time, he also advocates for Bella going to college instead of becoming a housewife – something she herself is rather reluctant to do – and thereby also represents a more contemporary approach to gender roles within the family.

Other characteristics associated with traditional masculinity are physical strength, competitiveness, social power, authority, cognitive skills and rationality (Milestone and Meyer 114-15). A closer look at the *Twilight* Saga reveals that Edward displays these characteristics as well. For instance, his superhuman strength becomes palpable in the first film when he saves Bella's life by stopping a van from crushing Bella with his bare hand, leaving a huge dent in the van's door. Edward's competitiveness is depicted most prominently in relation to Jacob, who is also courting Bella. Due to his appearance as a teenage boy, Edward is neither involved in the workplace nor in a position to "make important decisions in the public realm and directly shape society" (Milestone and Meyer 114), as a traditional man would be. However, being the son of the chief doctor at Forks hospital, he is similarly kindly regarded as his father. Carlisle Cullen, who used to be closely associated with the patriarchal royal family of the vampire world, the Volturi, is held in high esteem by the locals because of his professional skills and service to the community. Furthermore, Carlisle's job affords the Cullen family the opportunity to live in a spacious and modern mansion as well as lead an expensive lifestyle. The Cullens' wealth makes Edward perfectly able to provide financial support to Bella and – later in the narrative – his daughter Reneesme. As Bella learns upon arriving at Forks High School, Edward is admired by most of the school's female populace and has a high social standing among his peers. Although he usually keeps to himself, he is shown to be socially

competent and often assumes an assertive role in his interactions with the public world. Thanks to his immortality, Edward has not only completed the school cycle many times, but also attended several colleges and universities. His knowledgeability manifests itself for example in the classes he takes together with Bella.

Edward's rationality comes to the fore in *New Moon*, when he makes the thoroughly rational decision to leave Bella for her own good. Apparently able to distance himself from his feelings if it is the reasonable thing to do, he breaks up with Bella despite still wanting to be with her, telling her: "You're just not good for me" (*New Moon*). In this instance, Edward exerts authority over his and Bella's relationship without discussing with her the real reasons behind his decision to part with her. The manipulative and potentially abusive quality of Edward's actions, which has become infamous in both academic and media discourse about the *Twilight* Saga,<sup>207</sup> plays a role in all five films. *Eclipse* in particular details the ways in which Edward sets himself up as the sole decision-maker in his relationship with Bella. By assuming the role as authority figure, he basically follows the generic tradition of the romance hero who "protects the heroine from the consequences of immature behavior and teaches her how to behave in an appropriate manner as his wife" (Mussell 117). In various instances in *Eclipse*, Edward disciplines Bella and puts her under surveillance. Mainly, he forbids her to see her friend Jacob and goes to great lengths to keep her away from the supposedly dangerous werewolf; for instance, he manipulates the engine of her truck. In another situation, he deliberately withholds information from her; as he argues in his defense: "I was trying to protect you" (*Eclipse*).

Importantly, however, the movies make it a point to demonstrate Bella's refusal to put up with this type of dominating behavior from Edward. In response to Edward's above-cited defense, Bella identifies his action as lying and makes it clear that things like this are unacceptable to her. Instead, she insists that: "We're going to talk about this. . . . Edward, you have to trust me" (*Eclipse*). Thus, the movie adaptations deliberately highlight or even insert scenes which convey Bella's defiance against Edward's attempts

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<sup>207</sup> See for example: Goodfriend, Wind. "Relationship Violence in 'Twilight.' How 'Twilight' teaches teens to love abusive relationships." *Psychology Today*, 09 Nov. 2011, [www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psychologist-the-movies/201111/relationship-violence-in-twilight](http://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psychologist-the-movies/201111/relationship-violence-in-twilight). Accessed 28 Jun. 2018; Merskin, Debra. "A Boyfriend to Die for: Edward Cullen as Compensated Psychopath in Stephanie [sic] Meyer's *Twilight*." *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2011, pp. 157-178. doi:10.1177/0196859911402992; Miller, Melissa. "Maybe Edward Is the Most Dangerous Thing Out There. The Role of Patriarchy." *Theorizing Twilight. Critical Essays on What's at Stake in a Post-Vampire World*, edited by Maggie Parke, and Natalie Wilson, McFarland, 2011, pp. 165-177.

to control her. When he tells her to stay in the car while he handles a conflict, she does not listen and joins the conversation. When he imposes conditions in their discussion about their shared future, she negotiates her own conditions. When he ignores her voice in the debate about how to handle her unplanned pregnancy, she secures the support of her sister-in-law and asserts herself. In the course of the Saga, Edward thus learns to adjust his behavior and to act in a less domineering way. For instance, in *Breaking Dawn – Part 1*, he apologizes to Bella for failing to empathize with her experience and decision-making regarding the pregnancy: “I’m sorry I’ve been so angry. . . . I’ve left you alone in this.” As I argue, Edward’s capability of reflection and willingness to revise some of his problematic behaviors are a fundamental part of his appeal. As a character, Edward combines elements of traditional masculinity that may be read as ‘natural’ and possibly even desirable by audiences, and elements that reflect the incorporation of feminist principles into contemporary culture.

Likewise, while the films continually portray Edward’s and Jacob’s competition for Bella’s affection as a ‘naturally’ occurring phenomenon, they also at times problematize the two boys’ possessive behavior. When Edward and Jacob once again act competitively, measuring their strength against each other in a testosterone-filled verbal battle in *Eclipse*, Bella cuts in: “Stop! I’m tired of this.” In fact, Edward’s and Jacob’s performances of protective and competitive masculinity can be read as indicating a fundamental insecurity about their suitability as men and as partners for Bella. Nicole Willms has argued that Edward and Jacob “are preoccupied in their struggle over [Bella’s] affections with their relative attractiveness and masculine worth, as well as with what their respective bodies can or cannot do. They seem, in short, to have a degree of anxiety about their masculinity” (139). Because their confidence in their identity is fragile, they feel the need to “engag[e] in many demonstrations of masculine protectiveness toward Bella” (Willms 140). As previously discussed, the destabilization of manhood forms one key backdrop of postfeminist masculinity. The ways in which male characters handle this kind of destabilization is a central aspect of their portrayal as postfeminist men.

Not only is Edward aware of the constructedness of his own ‘masculinity,’ he also displays a consciousness for his appearance and deliberately invests in his attractiveness, as was already mentioned earlier. Indeed, the character is known for his particular hair and clothing style – Edward obviously grooms himself and has the necessary income to afford expensive fashion and sunglasses. In this regard, he clearly deviates from the script of traditional masculinity, since “appearance, aside from physical strength, is not key to

traditional masculinity: looking good, beautifying yourself and being sexually attractive is the realm of women, not men” (Milestone and Meyer 114). Edward’s interest in fashion and styling trends as well as his propensity to put his body on display for a heterosexual female gaze further mark him as a postfeminist man.

Another point in which Edward departs from traditional masculinity is his being comfortable with the display of emotions. While traditional masculinity is “associated with possessing information and knowledge, thinking logically and solving difficult mental tasks” (Milestone and Meyer 115) rather than relying on emotion and intuition, postfeminist masculinity has enveloped traits formerly exclusively associated with the realm of women. As I have shown earlier in this chapter, “sensitivity, emotional expressiveness and nurturing qualities” (MacKinnon 73) are part of the postfeminist man’s repertoire. Indeed, Edward openly talks about his feelings for Bella, and also discusses his concerns and fears, especially when it comes to his fear of hurting or losing her. He also displays a penchant for nurturing Bella; throughout the Saga, Edward makes sure that she eats enough, often carries her and is very attentive regarding her needs. As Ann Thurber points out, Edward’s empathy and capacity to discern the needs and feelings of others is in fact symbolized by his supernatural ability of telepathy:

Perhaps Edward Cullen’s most compelling ‘feminized’ attribute is his ability to read minds (a trait that is given to the human heroine of *True Blood*). His ‘special power’ could be related to the traditionally masculine super hero genre, but the very nature of his ability is anything if not feminine. . . . Mind reading is associated with ‘a woman’s intuition.’ (39)

As Doane argues in her work on the woman’s film of the 1940s, mind reading works as a stand-in for typically female-gendered capabilities, such as being “attentive to detail, minute incidents, and the complexities of intersubjective relations” (*The Desire to Desire* 116).<sup>208</sup>

While a certain sensitivity and readiness to take care of someone vulnerable are crucial elements of the conventional romance hero’s appeal (Mussell 117), the genre normally does not provide that the hero is outspoken about his feelings. Quite the reverse, romance heroes are usually “incapable of expressing emotions or of admitting dependence” (Radway 127). In this respect, Edward Cullen differs both from the format of traditional masculinity and the ideal romance hero. As Mussell suggests, typical romance heroes are “emotionally remote from the heroines. The hero rarely reveals

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<sup>208</sup> Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters, too, find that in the Gothic genre, supernatural powers such as “psychic insight, clairvoyance and telepathy . . . trade on, or appeal to, the ‘feminine’ capacity for sympathetic nurture” (140).

everything to other people, and he is especially circumspect about emotional matters. He confides in no one” (125). The function of emotional reticence on the part of the hero is not only to provide suspense in the plot, but also to reinforce male authority (Mussell 126). As Mussell argues, “[t]he man always unbends at the end to show his love and need for her, but he retains the mastery to be firmly in control of himself and the heroine” (126). Curiously, although Edward’s emotional expressiveness may be read as a relinquishing of authority over Bella, control plays a key role in Edward’s relationship with his own vampire body and, metaphorically, the threatening aspects of his own hegemonic masculinity.

As already pointed out, Edward leads a ‘vegetarian’ lifestyle, renouncing human blood and instead drawing on animal blood as an alternative food source. His “special diet” (*Twilight*), as he refers to it, is a result of his trying to come to grips with his vampire nature, which he sees as monstrous and sinful. Deeply uncomfortable with his urge to suck the blood out of humans, Edward tells Bella: “I don’t want to be a monster” (*Twilight*). Especially in the beginning of the narrative, Edward believes the lethality of his body to be an expression of his truly evil self (Bealer 142). Thus, “[h]is venomous fangs, superhuman strength, and bloodlust give him the capacity for brutal violence, and he initially misreads these *physical* traits that are endemic to vampirism as *behaviorally* prescriptive”<sup>209</sup> (Bealer 142). This is the dilemma of the reluctant vampire. Similar to Barnabas Collins, Edward “did not invite vampirism, and the persecution [he] suffer[s] is that of one caught tragically in circumstances outside of [his] control” (M. Williamson, “Vampire Transformations”). Like most of his family members, he was turned into a vampire by Carlisle on the brink of death, while he was succumbing to Spanish Influenza. Edward did not choose vampirism himself and is struggling to come to terms with his body’s monstrous power and (super)natural dominance. In the course of the *Twilight* Saga, he continually self-reflects and works on himself in order to lead an existence in which he does not endanger anyone, especially not Bella. Others are impressed by his extraordinary self-control. For instance, Aro wonders: “How can you stand to be so close to [Bella]?” (*New Moon*). “It’s not without difficulty,” Edward admits, modestly downplaying the enormous amount of willpower that is necessary for him to avoid exploiting his physical superiority over his human girlfriend. The situation is made even more difficult for Edward because Bella’s personal human scent appeals to him in a special way.

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<sup>209</sup> Emphasis in the original.

Crucially, Edward's impeccable self-control is two-fold: As mentioned earlier in this chapter, his restraint in terms of vampiric feeding goes hand in hand with his striving for sexual abstinence. It is here that the *Twilight* Saga provides an interesting reversal of gendered sexual relations between young adults. Throughout the Saga, it is Bella who is placed as the desiring subject, and Edward who refuses sexual gratification. The implications of these role assignments are unusual both for a romance text and a conventional vampire narrative. Historically, the figure of the male vampire has been "associated with dangerous sexual pleasure" (Wisker 63) at the least since the publication of *Dracula* by Bram Stoker (1897).<sup>210</sup> As Gina Wisker points out, the "equation of blood-draining with sexual ecstasy, the domination and swooning, the sensuality, the promise of eternal love and life, align the vampire motif with erotic depiction and imaginings" (63). Indeed, Edward as a vampire is "most definitely both a sexual menace and a sexual enticement" (Byron 181) for Bella. As Glennis Byron argues, "his threat and his allure lie in the way he works as a catalyst for desire" (181). However, although the vampire is "the sexual initiator *par excellence*"<sup>211</sup> (Creed 65) in conventional vampire narratives, in the *Twilight* Saga, it is Bella as the supposed victim of the vampire who is depicted as the sexual aggressor. Meanwhile, Edward repeatedly interrupts Bella's attempts to become intimate and cites both moral and physical concerns as reasons for why he prefers to delay sexual intimacy. Because Edward's vampiric urge to feed and his sexual arousal are linked, engaging in sex entails a tremendous physical risk for Bella. Corresponding to the successful 'diversion' of his dangerous appetite, Edward also manages his sexual desire.

Edward's and Bella's role distribution also deviates from classic romance scripts, in which "the heroine's innocence is often contrasted explicitly with the hero's previous promiscuity" (Radway 130). Thus, the romance hero is usually characterized by a considerable amount of sexual experience, which essentially functions as a sign of his "virility" (Radway 130). While the hero has the capacity to introduce the inexperienced romance heroine to the realm of sexuality, the heroine "*receives* sexual experience from the hero instead of actively participating"<sup>212</sup> (Mussell 128). In other words, romance

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<sup>210</sup> In his essay about nineteenth-century vampire fiction, Robert Tracy argues that *Dracula*'s assault on the female characters in the novel involves both penetration, as he pierces their skin with his fangs, and a kind of impregnation, as he forces his victims to drink some of his blood in order to turn them into vampires (35). Thus, the double threat that the vampire poses, which is "at once physical and spiritual, is in practice presented as essentially sexual" (Tracy 34). In contrast to other monsters of the Gothic novel, for example ghosts, the vampire has a body, and therefore represents a sexual menace (Tracy 33). Features such as strength and agility "emphasise the vampire's physicality and perverse vitality" (33), according to Tracy.

<sup>211</sup> Emphasis in the original.

<sup>212</sup> Emphasis in the original.

heroes are typically assigned an active role when it comes to sexuality, being depicted as characters who are generally interested in and driven by the urge to have sex. In comparison, romance's heterosexual female protagonists are portrayed as less experienced and not active in the pursuit of their sexual pleasure. Instead, they are often represented as "enforcers of the traditional code of sexuality that limits sexual expression" (Christian-Smith 41), meaning that they often halt sexual activity, play coy or withdraw from their always-ready male partners. This allocation of male/active and female/passive roles within the sphere of sexuality is not confined to the romance genre but is representative of cultural norms in general. According to Milestone and Meyer, conventional gender roles provide that "[m]asculine sexuality is characterized by a natural, strong sex drive which needs constant satisfaction" (20), while "[f]emale sexuality is deeply bound up with emotions, relationships and commitment rather than purely bodily pleasure" (21). If (traditional) men are supposedly "focused on the sexual conquest of women" (Milestone and Meyer 115), women are expected to be "the sensible gender responsible for curbing men's excesses" (Milestone and Meyer 21). In this way, heterosexual women and girls become the sexual gatekeepers, responsible for deciding when is the 'right' time to have sex and the 'right' time to turn interested men and boys down. Performing their gender role adequately is complicated for women and girls in particular, since there is a range of contradictory cultural norms concerning 'appropriate' female sexual behavior (Nicol 119-120). However, staying within the norms is essential for women and girls: Jessica Valenti notes that women's "morality is defined by our sexuality" (qtd. in Nicol 120), and Christine Jarvis underlines that "girls continue to be judged in terms of their sexual desirability and sexual reputations" (105). Whether they are sexually active or lack sexual experience, "women are defined by the acts of their bodies and . . . those acts are read and interpreted by men" (Nicol 120).

In this cultural climate that defines men as pursuers of sexual activity and women as being in charge of granting or declining sexual requests – saying 'yes' or 'no' – in heterosexual encounters, the *Twilight* Saga provides an interesting complication of these typical roles. As described above, Bella emerges as the constant initiator of sex, while Edward presents himself as "the stalwart naysayer to any of the usual teenage fun," as Layla Forrest-White puts it (28). The Saga thus invites an ambiguous reading of gender roles. On the one hand, "the cultural script of male sexual desire remains essentially the same; it is still constructed as predatory and dangerous" (Nicol 116). In line with prevailing cultural notions which conceive of the male sex drive as an instinctual,



“unstoppable biological force” (Vitellone 377), Edward’s sexuality is built in a way that implies the constant risk of a loss of control, so that it must be contained by force of will. Nicol argues that “[t]he (male) vampire body both makes the dangers of male sexuality overt and obvious and pathologizes the male body rather than the female body; it is the male vampire body that is unruly and must be subject to discipline” (118). Throughout the narrative, the menacing nature of Edward’s male vampire sexuality is made abundantly clear. Not leaving any doubt about the dangers of his predatory body, Edward warns Bella repeatedly before becoming involved with her: “If you’re smart, you’ll stay away from me. . . . What if I’m the bad guy?” (*Twilight*).

On the other hand, being a postfeminist man, Edward is well aware that his bloodlust is triggered by his sexual impulses and that he must therefore rigorously police these impulses (Nicol 118). Indeed, Edward breaks off the couple’s first sexual encounter abruptly, telling Bella that “I can’t ever lose control with you” (*Twilight*). Based on his self-awareness, Edward is predestined to “bear the primary responsibility for reining in his darker impulses, ironically making him less of a threat than a human male” (Nicol 119). While human boys may be oblivious to their physical superiority and the ways their sexuality is shaped by discourses that frame the male body as an aggressive “instinctual force” (Vitellone 377), vampire Edward has done the mental labor of recognizing and working on his body’s pitfalls and has acquired decades of experience in curbing his sexual and culinary appetites. In this way, this vampire romance hero is – paradoxically – both more dangerous and more safe than a non-supernatural boyfriend. As Nicol stresses, the *Twilight* Saga makes “male sexuality less frightening by offering a strategy of separation and containment for dealing with predatory male sexuality via the figure of the vampire lover. If your boyfriend is a vampire, then his ‘otherness’ (read maleness) can be qualified and therefore made manageable” (118). The fantasy of the stable vampire romance hero who “can simply restrain the overriding vampiric impulse (to penetrate/bite, to consume)” (Nicol 119) holds great appeal for young female audiences concerned with real “fears of being damaged (emotionally and/or physically) even should they willingly choose to engage in physical intimacy” (Nicol 118). Indeed, Mukherjea, who conducted a survey of self-declared fans of the *Twilight* franchise, concludes that safety is a central aspect of Edward’s allure in the eyes of audiences (“Team Bella” 80).

A postfeminist vampire romance hero who is an expert at controlling his impulses also functions as an idealized romantic partner because he assumes the role of sexual gatekeeper, relieving the heroine of the responsibility of managing men’s sexual desire

as well as her own. As Sarah Seltzer comments, “*Twilight*’s sexual flowchart is the inversion of abstinence-only/purity ball culture, where girls are told that they must guard themselves against rabid boys, and that they must reign in both their own and their suitors’ impulses” (Seltzer). Because Edward takes over the burden of disciplining his male vampire body, Bella is “free to explore her sexual desires without fear of degradation” (Nicol 119). Indeed, the *Twilight* Saga radically foregrounds its female protagonist’s romantic and sexual desire, allowing audiences to experience Bella’s point of view first-hand.<sup>213</sup> Bella makes her transgressive desires known and actively pursues them over the course of the film series. Seltzer suggests that the role reversal in terms of sexual gatekeeping enables “a real fantasy: a world where young women are free to describe their desires openly, and launch themselves at men without shame” (Seltzer). It is a paradoxical scenario: While Bella cedes control over the couple’s sexual relationship to Edward, as he is the one responsible for setting the boundaries during their sexual encounters, she simultaneously receives sexual agency by being freed from conventional gender role ascriptions. Doreen Thierauf interprets the set-up in which Bella allows Edward to assume control as liberating viewers for a limited time from the kind of “rational and political thought-labor” (617) that normally structures straight women’s sex lives – thought-labor that involves not only the consideration of prevailing sexual norms and double standards in contemporary culture, but also “an intricate fine-tuning of social context, emotional disposition, and relationship with the partner” (613). As Thierauf argues, “[r]omance creates a contained space of irrational fantasy in which (mostly female) authors put overbearing men in charge of female sexuality because it allows readers to jettison temporarily an overdetermined ‘biopsychosocial’ realm of desire” (619).

Thus, Edward Cullen functions both as an ‘overbearing man’ and thereby as a revalidation of traditional masculinity, and a figure that facilitates a subversion of conventional gender roles concerning the realm of (hetero-)sexuality, but also in general. As a postfeminist male vampire, Edward allows the predominantly female heterosexual audience of the *Twilight* Saga to revel in the fantasy of secure, ‘old-fashioned’ gender relations, while also enjoying more progressive gender norms brought about by the influence of feminism and postmodernism. Although Edward perpetuates – and validates – established ideas about traditional masculinity, for instance through his predatory male

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<sup>213</sup> Chapter 4 has examined the ways in which the *Twilight* Saga focuses on Bella’s point of view and experience in detail.

sexuality and his propensity for violence and aggression, the character is also defined by an inclusion of traditionally ‘feminine’ skills and interests, and by a self-critical engagement with his gendered dominance as well as his complicity in the system of hegemonic masculinity. Thus, viewers may simultaneously appreciate the benevolent paternalism of their vampire romance hero and be able to rest assured that the troublesome aspects of their hero’s masculinity are safely contained. As Mukherjea concludes, “[v]ampire boyfriends are complex instantiations of every positive aspect of masculine privilege, without personifying those more threatening facets of hyper-masculinity – the violence or the uncontrolled sexuality” (“My Vampire Boyfriend” 16). This incorporation of contradictory elements makes Edward Cullen a functional bundling of discourses surrounding postfeminist masculinity.

### **6.5. A Compassionate Hero with a Penchant for Self-Criticism: Stefan Salvatore as a Postfeminist Man**

The portrayal of Stefan Salvatore in *The Vampire Diaries* offers many parallels to the depiction of Edward Cullen in the *Twilight* Saga; like Edward, vampire Stefan can be read as representing some of the main features of postfeminist masculinity. At first glance, *The Vampire Diaries* – similar to the *Twilight* Saga – can be criticized for providing a fairly retrogressive portrayal of gender roles, especially when it comes to the relationship between the human female protagonist Elena Gilbert and both of her vampire suitors, the Salvatore brothers. While Elena is often confined to a passive position based on her human and ‘feminine’ fragility, driven by emotions rather than reason, and characterized by empathy as well as a predilection to care for others, both Stefan and his brother Damon usually take an active role in rescuing or defending Elena, are portrayed as physically and mentally strong, and routinely “represented as going to extremes” (Milestone and Meyer 20). Here the series follows a typical script of the vampire romance genre. As Chiho Nakagawa argues, by “coupl[ing] a vulnerable human heroine with a dangerous, physically superior and much older male vampire” (Nakagawa), vampire romance fosters a troubling “gender inequality” (Nakagawa). This traditional binary split between gender roles is perpetuated in countless situations throughout the *Vampire Diaries* seasons. Similar to Bella, Elena is often kept in the dark about what is going on in conflicts with an enemy and assigned a protector – usually someone with supernatural powers who is then officially “on Elena patrol” (“By the Light of the Moon”), making sure that she does not get involved into any dangerous activity. She is also detained at her house, and even

drugged in order to be taken out of harm's way without a struggle. Season 1 establishes this pattern that continues to prevail even in the seasons in which Elena is a vampire and therefore technically more powerful than as a human:

Elena: "So what are we going to do?"

Stefan: "Damon and I are going to handle everything, I promise."

Elena: "What about me? I can't just sit here and do nothing."

Stefan: "That's exactly what you're going to do because that's what's going to keep you safe." ("Let the Right One In")

On the one hand, the display of traditional masculinity with its 'natural' features of authority and aggression is clearly validated within the series. Stefan in particular personifies the benevolent characteristics of traditional masculinity, and he is held in high esteem for them, for example by other characters: Stefan is described as "the guy who always comes to the rescue. Stefan's a hero. It's who he is at his core" ("The Cell"). The narrative frequently develops in ways that show that he was right and Elena was not, thereby affirming his rightful authority over her. On the other hand, the series also offers moments in which it sides with Elena. In these situations, Elena rebels against her dominating 'protectors,' either verbally or by action. In a quintessentially postfeminist manner, *The Vampire Diaries* is trying to have it both ways: While male-gendered dominance is romanticized, displayed as 'natural' and often as desirable, the series simultaneously manages to criticize and to counter it by pointing out the problematic aspects of traditional hegemonic masculinity.

In a number of circumstances, characters make self-referential comments which demonstrate the series creators' awareness of the sexist tropes they continually choose to re-employ. For instance, in the episode "All My Children," Rebekah gets worked up about the fact that "[f]or some reason everybody seems to want to bend over backwards to save [Elena's] life. Which is incredibly annoying" ("All My Children"). In "Daddy Issues," Elena declines her biological father's offer of help, insisting that "I don't want you here. I can't make that any more clear. . . . You're here to protect me. Got it. Get in line" ("Daddy Issues"). Comments like these draw attention to the fact that Elena is mostly confined to a passive role within the narrative and that there is usually a whole range of male protectors willing to jump to her side in the case of danger. On the one hand, these comments can be understood within the framework of the postfeminist strategies of irony and knowingness. These strategies are typical of postfeminist discourses and postmodern consumer culture in general (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 110). By relying on sexist tropes and simultaneously calling attention to them, *The Vampire Diaries* adopts an approach

that can frequently be found in postfeminist advertising. Gill calls this approach a “catch-all device that allows advertisers to have their cake and eat it” (*Gender and the Media* 110), i.e. to produce sexist representations while framing them as a deliberate joke.<sup>214</sup> With the help of this strategy of ironic distancing, the creators of the show are essentially pre-empting critique (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 111). Additionally, they are “hailing audiences as knowing and sophisticated consumers, flattering them with their awareness of intertextual references” (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 266) and their understanding of feminist principles. As is typical of postfeminist discourses, feminism is both paid tribute to and repudiated at the same time (Braithwaite 25).

On the other hand, some of the comments and interventions by Elena and other characters can be read as more serious attempts to illustrate Elena’s struggle for agency in a male-dominated supernatural environment. Similar to Bella, who negotiates her relationship with Edward, Elena, time and again, pursues her own interests, either by seeking autonomy from the vampire brothers or by demanding to be treated as their equal. To provide just one example, in “Katerina,” Elena decides to obtain more information about her role as the Petrova doppelgänger and the danger that the vampire Klaus Mikaelson will potentially pose to her instead of waiting for the Salvatores to take care of the issue – despite Stefan’s promise that “You don’t have to worry. I’m not going to let anything happen to you” (“Katerina”). A couple of episodes later, Elena strikes a deal with the Salvatores, standing up for her right to be filled in about events at all times, so that she is able to make informed decisions for herself: “If we’re going to do this, you can’t keep anything from me anymore. From this moment on, we’re doing it my way” (“The Dinner Party”).

In contrast to Damon, Stefan is usually willing to listen and be mindful of Elena’s opinion. Over the course of the seasons, it becomes a recognizable pattern that Stefan and Damon take opposing views regarding the question of how to deal with Elena’s preferences. In a series of instances, Damon disregards Elena’s choices and often comments sarcastically on her supposed inability to make sensible and rational decisions: “It’s a little hard to keep track of all your choices lately, Elena” (“Growing Pains”). According to Damon, “everything bad ever” (“The Departed”) has happened when Elena got to call the shots. Sometimes Damon even goes explicitly against what Elena wants

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<sup>214</sup> The series also makes a habit of applying this approach for the purpose of excusing and ironically distancing itself from the violence enacted by Damon that is often directed against women, for instance in “A Few Good Men,” where Damon proclaims: “I have to go and exploit some women in the name of grief. Which I’m sure you understand” (“A Few Good Men”).

for herself and her life. In “The Last Day,” Elena has made a plan that is supposed to ensure her survival of the ritual to break the Hybrid Curse, which will be performed by Klaus. While Damon dislikes Elena’s plan, Stefan respects her decision to work with Elijah, Klaus’ brother, in this matter, and instructs Damon: “You need to back off. . . . Look, I don’t like this any more than you do, but we need to trust her. We’ve got to just let her do her thing” (“Klaus”). Seeing that Elena’s plan entails a risk that she will not come out of the ritual alive, Damon then forces her to drink his blood, thus making sure that she will return as a vampire, should she die during the ritualistic procedure. In doing so, he not only disregards Elena’s authority to make plans for her own safety and the safety of her loved ones, but also her explicitly stated wish that she does not ever want to become a vampire. Set up in contrast to Damon, it turns out later in the same episode that Stefan puts Elena’s needs before his own when it comes to the option of transforming Elena into a vampire:

Stefan: “Look. If it were *my* choice, I’d want to be with you forever.”

Elena: “Why have you never brought it up?”

Stefan: “Because I knew if it was an option, *you* would have. It would be selfish for me to ask you.”

Elena: “It didn’t stop Damon.”

Stefan: “He shouldn’t have done what he did.”<sup>215</sup> (“The Last Day”)

While Damon acts selfishly, belittles Elena and explicitly ignores her choices, Stefan is painted as the brother who respects Elena and her decisions, no matter the consequences. Therefore, although Stefan displays some central features of traditional masculinity and although he may more generally symbolize conservative values due to his link to the past (he was born in 1846 and turned into a vampire in 1864), he can also be said to represent modern, feminist ideas. The text itself emphasizes Stefan’s advocacy for the recognition of Elena’s personhood as one of his most appealing traits. Thus, in later seasons, Elena looks back on her relationship with Stefan and remembers: “When we were together, you used to let me make my own decisions. You trusted me” (“Dangerous Liaisons”). According to Elena, Stefan’s willingness to acknowledge her autonomy makes him “the perfect boyfriend. You valued what I wanted, even if it wasn’t what you agreed with” (“For Whom the Bell Tolls”). Here *The Vampire Diaries* explicitly states where Stefan’s allure lies: While he is valued for his capacity to provide safeguard via his ‘masculinity’ – which makes him “a hero . . . at his core” (“The Cell”) –, he also lives up to values that could be described as based on feminism.

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<sup>215</sup> Emphases in the original.

Crucially, Stefan's respectful attitude towards Elena's decisions and his ability to empathize with her experience are grounded in his identity as a reluctant vampire. Despite the fact that he is always in danger of reverting back to his bloody 'ripper' ways, which he does for example in season 3, Stefan can be paralleled with Edward Cullen when it comes to his chosen eating behavior: Both draw on a diet of animal blood; bunnies are Stefan's preferred prey. Stefan's disturbing past, in which he made a name for himself as "the Ripper of Monterey" ("1912"), involved a loss of control as well as a loss of self for Stefan. The experience of not being able to steer one's own life has shaped his understanding of the importance of autonomy and agency as a fundamental need. Stefan knows what it feels like to be caught in circumstances beyond one's influence and to be at the mercy of outside forces, which is why he is able to empathize with Elena's experience of occupying a subordinated position in the context of largely male-dominated (supernatural) power structures. Thus, based on his identity as a reluctant vampire, Stefan radically supports Elena's claim to have a mind of her own:

Matt: "So, you're just going to let her call the shots?"

Stefan: "I'm letting her make her own decisions."

Matt: "Even if they're wrong?"

Stefan: "Nothing wrong with free will, Matt. Trust me, you don't realize that till you lose it." ("The Departed")

As I argue, Stefan's experience as a reluctant vampire who is determined by his bodily urges parallels Elena's struggle against a patriarchally structured environment which regularly restricts her agency. At the same time, Stefan himself functions as an active contributor to this same environment. Thus, on the one hand, Stefan benefits from the prevailing hierarchically constructed social system and is himself a part of it. On the other hand, he reflects on the consequences of his actions within that system and uses his privilege to take a stand for Elena, for example by confronting his own brother. Here *The Vampire Diaries* mobilizes the generic convention of the affinity between heroine and monster in a way that is based on Stefan's identity as a postfeminist man/vampire.

Similar to Edward Cullen, Stefan Salvatore is very much in conformity with Williamson's definition of the sympathetic or reluctant vampire as a "pathos-ridden creature" ("Television" par. 6) struggling with the urges that its undead body produces. Like Edward, Stefan did not choose vampirism for himself. As a human, he was romantically involved with the vampire Katherine, who compelled him to drink her blood for a few weeks without his knowledge. As a consequence of him having ingested vampire blood, Stefan returned as a vampire after being shot dead at age 17. In a flashback

to 1864, we learn that shortly after his transformation, Stefan accidentally hurt his human father in self-defense because he was not experienced in appropriately deploying his new-found supernatural strength. Overwhelmed by bloodlust, he then fed on his own father. As it turns out, he also persuaded his brother to complete his transition from human to vampire despite Damon's decision to let himself die ("Blood Brothers").<sup>216</sup> This selfish act, which was born out of Stefan's fear of being alone in the world, continues to haunt Stefan for the rest of his existence and is the root of the enduring conflict between the vampire brothers. After having been consumed by bloodlust and violence for a period of time, Stefan rehabilitated himself and began constructing his reluctant vampire identity. Appalled by the violent urges his vampire body generates, he interprets his body as "a sign of villainy" (M. Williamson, "Television" par. 14) and considers himself to be monstrous: "A monster, a predator, that's who I am, Elena. . . . The blood brings out what's inside of me" ("Miss Mystic Falls"). As mentioned previously, the crux in *The Vampire Diaries* is that "[w]hen someone becomes a vampire, all of their natural behaviors get sort of amplified" ("Bad Moon Rising"). For Stefan, this means that "as a human, I cared deeply for people, how they felt. If they were hurting, I felt their pain, and I felt guilty if I was the one who caused it. And as a vampire, all of that got magnified" ("Bad Moon Rising"). Thus, empathy as well as a sense of responsibility were already part of Stefan's emotional repertoire when he was human. As a vampire, he now displays an amount of compassion and self-criticism that is unusual among vampires. In typical reluctant vampire fashion, Stefan makes the individual decision to reign in his dangerous appetite and to use his supernatural powers to do good. Early in the first season, we learn that Stefan believes that "[w]e choose our own path. Our values and our actions, they define who we are" ("Haunted"). Elena reminds him of this decision to strive to redeem himself<sup>217</sup> when he is in danger of losing his way at the end of season 1: "You made a choice to be good, Stefan. . . . That's the person who jumped in the water to save the family whose car had driven off the bridge . . . That's the person who saved my life" ("Blood Brothers").

In terms of romance conventions, Stefan conforms to the characteristics of the type of hero whom Mussell describes as "the more conventional, sensitive, mature and

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<sup>216</sup> Damon had also been involved with Katherine and had drunk her blood before his death. In *The Vampire Diaries*, after their human death, persons 'infected' with vampirism are in a temporary state of transition. In order to complete their transition to vampirism, they have to drink human blood; otherwise, they perish. This state of transition provides an opportunity of choice for the persons concerned.

<sup>217</sup> To make amends for his transgressions, Stefan even served in World War II as "penance for the pain that he's caused" ("We'll Always Have Bourbon Street").



competent husband-lover” (119). In contrast to the alternative romance hero, who is defined as a mysterious and “passionate lover” (Mussell 119) and whom Damon approximates, the ‘husband-lover’ “has great strength and stability and seems particularly solid and trustworthy” (Mussell 119-20). Although the position of the two brothers switches in the course of the seasons, with Damon temporarily taking over Stefan’s role as the sensible, responsible one while his brother is roaming through the country as a ‘ripper,’ generally speaking, Stefan can be said to represent the archetype of the ‘husband-lover.’ However, as in Edward’s case, Stefan’s character goes beyond the typical attributes of the traditional romance hero as well as those of traditional masculinity. Like Edward, Stefan is adept in expressing emotions and talking about his feelings for Elena, something which is not part of the traditional romance hero’s repertoire. For instance, Stefan keeps a diary in which he records his thoughts and feelings; many of his entries are relayed to viewers through voiceover across the episodes. As pointed out earlier, empathy is one of Stefan’s core traits, and this characteristic is even more pronounced since his transformation into a vampire. As Elena defines Stefan’s personality, he is “the most compassionate person” (“For Whom the Bell Tolls”) she has ever met. The ability to discern the needs and feelings of others, which is traditionally ascribed to women rather than men (Milestone and Meyer 20), marks Stefan as a postfeminist man. In addition, his long-standing exercise in curbing his vampiric urges indicates that Stefan has been able to form a high emotional intelligence. As he explains to Elena, being a (newborn) vampire involves being overwhelmed by a range of emotions: “The thing is, . . . especially when you’re new, it’s difficult to separate your feelings. Love, lust, anger, desire, it can all blur into one urge, hunger” (“Haunted”). Stefan’s ability to recognize his own emotions and those of others, distinguish between different feelings and manage his emotions to achieve his goal of becoming a ‘good’ vampire is the result of years of exercise, and demonstrates his high emotional IQ. Despite his propensity for violence due to his vampire nature, Stefan functions as an appropriate romantic partner for Elena because he is willing to direct his ‘masculinity’ into benevolent channels: “His love is pure. He’ll always be good for her” (“Heart of Darkness”).

While Stefan’s pure heart is referred to as his “curse” (“Blood Brothers”) within the series, for Elena and for audiences of the series, it is precisely the factor that makes Stefan attractive as a reluctant postfeminist vampire. The fact that his vampire body is continuously at risk of spiralling out of control creates a constant state of awareness for Stefan, and he is continually interrogating himself and his body’s aggressive (read:

‘masculine’) impulses. This engagement with one’s own ‘masculinity,’ which is a fundamental feature of the postfeminist man, is represented by Stefan’s “brooding and existing in [his] own head” (“162 Candles”). In turn, a “brooding and tortured” (“Miss Mystic Falls”) state of mind is a well-known staple in the representation of the figure of the sympathetic or reluctant vampire, so much so that the “annoyingly excessive level” (“Under Control”) to which Stefan engages in self-reflection is frequently made fun of within the series. Contrary to the *Twilight Saga*, *The Vampire Diaries* does not combine Stefan’s self-restraint in terms of biting humans with sexual abstinence.<sup>218</sup> The series does not provide any revolutionary representation of sexuality: Sex is primarily depicted as taking place within monogamous heterosexual relationships. However, it is worth noting that the show provides a surprisingly uncomplicated depiction of teenage sexuality. Unlike in the *Twilight Saga*, Stefan’s vampirism in *The Vampire Diaries* does not constitute an obstacle to him maintaining a healthy sexual relationship with Elena.

Interestingly, the series points out that Stefan’s choice to self-reflect and reign in his vampire urges has resulted in a loss of supernatural abilities for him: Because he subsists on animal blood instead of human blood, Stefan is not as physically strong as Damon and he cannot compel humans properly. Damon ridicules Stefan for his inability – and/or his unwillingness – to fight back ‘appropriately’ when attacked: “Your choice of lifestyle has made you weak” (“The Night of the Comet”). As a result of his ‘lifestyle,’ Stefan is at risk of failing to protect Elena and is apparently less capable of exerting control over other people’s actions. In other words, a consequence of Stefan’s self-critical engagement with his own ‘masculinity’ is his loss of some of his ‘masculine’ power and privileges. The series circumvents this issue by having Stefan start drinking small amounts of human blood in order to boost his ‘masculine’ performance. In the long-term, he thus relies on banked blood; an advantage of this way of feeding is that he does not have to bite actual people and be tempted to kill them. By combining Stefan’s traditional ‘masculine’ features, which are employed in favor of the romance heroine, and his self-critical reflection with regard to these features, *The Vampire Diaries* constructs a postfeminist man who holds high appeal for heterosexual female audiences. On the one hand, Stefan embodies conventionally ‘masculine’ characteristics that continue to be valued in contemporary postfeminist culture. At the same time, the more threatening

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<sup>218</sup> One exception is a scene in the episode “Under Control,” in which Stefan interrupts one of his sexual encounters with Elena because he is suddenly overcome by bloodlust. This scene remains the only explicit reference to the fact that there might be a connection between Stefan’s vampiric and sexual impulses.

aspects of his traditional hegemonic masculinity are effectively under control, which makes Stefan a welcome romantic partner. Elena summarizes Stefan's attractive features: He gives her a feeling of safety, he will never stop loving her, and he will never die ("1912").

An additional aspect regarding Stefan's appeal as a postfeminist man is that even more obviously than Edward, Stefan is characterized by a predilection to beautify and groom himself. Having access to adequate resources as well as a large wardrobe containing clothes in the style of all decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Stefan embodies the fashion-consciousness of the postfeminist man. Throughout the seasons, his well-trained, muscular body is regularly put on eroticized display for the enjoyment of the audience. In terms of style, Stefan is frequently modelled after 1950s style icons and sex symbols James Dean and Marlon Brando – sometimes explicitly, when Stefan dresses up as James Dean at the Whitmore Historical Ball in season 5, sometimes implicitly by visual reference. These visual historical references exemplify postfeminism's "tendency . . . to locate and idealize masculinities in and of the past" (Hamad 110) and to blend them with modern images of idealized 'masculinity.' As Carol Dyhouse writes, in contemporary culture, "historical performances of masculinity – as well as femininity – are endlessly reshuffled, judged, and reassessed. . . . the past is continually raided to enrich and to inform the imagination of the present" (191). This combination of 'old and 'new,' of regressive and progressive features constitutes the key characteristic of postfeminist masculinity.

## **6.6. An Old-Fashioned Gentleman Willing to Look Forward: Bill Compton as a Postfeminist Man**

In the HBO series *True Blood*, which addresses a mature rather than a teen audience, the vampire character Bill Compton exhibits a number of the above-discussed traits of postfeminist masculinity. As a character, he is certainly related to Edward Cullen from the *Twilight* Saga and Stefan Salvatore from *The Vampire Diaries* but also differs from them, potentially due to the differing target audiences of the texts. In comparison to the previously analyzed shows, *True Blood* adopts a darker tone and is decidedly more graphic in terms of sex, violence and gore.<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> The following reading of the character of Bill Compton mainly focuses on the first two seasons of the series; the subsequent seasons present some fundamental revisions to the character, so that Bill can no longer be described as a typical romance hero. As a matter of fact, the show ends up retrospectively re-writing the events of the first season: In the season 3 finale, Sookie learns that the circumstances of her

Like Edward and Stefan, Bill – via his vampire nature – retains the link to a past associated with traditional, supposedly more clear-cut and satisfying gender roles, while simultaneously being rooted in a contemporary setting and “embrac[ing] the future” (Abbott, *Celluloid Vampires* 3). Bill’s appreciation of traditional gender relations becomes visible for example in his courtship of Sookie. Being an old-fashioned gentleman, Bill politely asks Sookie out on a date when they meet for the second time. The language he uses to do this stems from a different era and is therefore initially not understandable to Sookie:

Bill: “May I call on you sometime?”

Sookie: “Call on me?”

Bill: “May I come and visit with you at your home?” (“Strange Love”)

Unlike most of the human men whom Sookie deals with, Bill acts respectfully towards her, asks for permission before kissing her and follows gendered rules of etiquette. For Sookie, Bill’s old-school understanding of romance, courtship and gender are both attractive and deterring. While she appreciates his unusually courteous and considerate attitude, she also voices her disagreement with some of the traditionally ‘masculine’ behaviors that Bill displays. These behaviors include protective paternalism, violence, and an overly dominant, possessive and patronizing demeanor. For instance, in the third episode, Sookie calls Bill out on proclaiming that Sookie belongs to him in front of a group of vampires occupying Bill’s house. After the other vampires have left, she confronts him:

Sookie: “And what the hell did you mean, ‘Sookie is mine’?”

Bill: “I was communicating to the others that you were my human and therefore I was the only one who could feed on you.”

Sookie: “You most certainly cannot feed on me.” (“Mine”)

Here Sookie expresses her disapproval of Bill’s possessiveness and draws clear boundaries as to what she is comfortable with in her relationship. In the first episode of season 2, she deals with a similar kind of situation as Bella and Elena: Bill has hidden important information from her, and Sookie has found this out. Bill’s apology – “If I withheld anything, it was only to protect you” (“Nothing But the Blood”) – is reminiscent of Edward’s response when charged with manipulating Bella. Like Bella and Elena, Sookie demands to be informed about things that might impact her life, and exposes Bill’s

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getting acquainted with Bill were actually staged, and that Bill manipulated her into falling in love with him. That Bill is turned from an appealing romance hero into a questionable manipulator could be related to the fact that the series uses fewer and fewer romance conventions overall. Crucially, for example, Sookie’s perspective is increasingly less foregrounded from season 2 on.

authoritative concept of ‘protection’ as a lack of confidence in her ability to deal with whatever issue arises: “That’s not protecting me, that’s lying to me. How am I supposed to ever trust you if you keep something like that from me? What else are you keeping from me?” (“Nothing But the Blood”); “Talk to me. Lean on me. I’ve leaned on you plenty” (“Never Let Me Go”). After communicating her disappointment in her vampire lover, Sookie discovers later in the same episode that Bill has murdered her uncle Bartlett after she had told Bill about her uncle sexually abusing her as a child. Horrified by Bill’s propensity for violence, Sookie rejects this characteristic of toxic masculinity:<sup>220</sup> “I cannot have people dying every time I confide in you. . . . I feel sick” (“Never Let Me Go”). Afterwards, Bill promises to make amends for his actions: “Sookie. I cannot, and I will not lose you. For all the ways I have dismayed, aggrieved, or failed you, I swear I will atone” (“Never Let Me Go”).

Similar to the *Twilight* Saga and *The Vampire Diaries*, *True Blood* both presents images of traditional hegemonic masculinity, and contextualizes/problematises them via its female protagonist’s reactions to them. Crucially, these elements of traditional masculinity are also complemented by more contemporary conceptions of masculinity that can be identified as defining features of the postfeminist man. One of these aspects associated with postfeminist masculinity involves Bill’s willingness to reflect on and revise his toxic behavior after being called out by Sookie. Nudged into the ‘right’ direction by the romantic heroine, vampire Bill learns to reconsider his old-school ways and to adapt to a present shaped by the influence of feminism. His sensitivity and emotional expressiveness also differentiate him from traditional masculinity and mark him as a postfeminist man. Furthermore, Bill is characterized as a vampire embracing modern ideas based on his juxtaposition with the vampire populace that opposes the ‘mainstreaming’ agenda of the American Vampire League. As mentioned already, the American Vampire League is spearheading a social movement which stipulates the integration of vampires into everyday human society. A fundamental part of this process of mainstreaming is that vampires refrain from killing humans and instead fall back on synthetic blood. Bill is a vocal supporter of the movement. As we learn in the fourth season, he was recruited by Nan Flanagan in 1982 when vampire scientists were close to synthesizing human blood, moving one step closer to realizing the dream of “emerg[ing]

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<sup>220</sup> Toxic masculinity is defined by Terry A. Cupers as incorporating the following traits: “act tough, never appear weak or vulnerable, . . . stand up for yourself if disrespected or challenged to fight, win the fight and humiliate or destroy your opponent in any way you can, . . . don’t depend on anyone for anything, and above all else don’t do anything that might appear feminine” (648).

from the shadows of society, maybe even fit into it one day” (“You Smell Like Dinner”). At the time, Bill was a great fit for the then-secret movement since he was already sparing human lives when feeding: “They might be dinner, but they don’t deserve to die” (“You Smell Like Dinner”). Since the Great Revelation – the day when vampires made their existence known to the world – and the launch of ‘Tru Blood,’ Bill openly advocates his standpoint on alternative feeding. The mainstreaming agenda is now officially supported by the Vampire Authority. Nevertheless, there are still factions among the vampire community that reject the idea of mainstreaming and continue to cling to the traditional ways of predatory feeding and killing humans. In “Mine,” Bill is confronted with members of one of these factions. They lead a lively discussion about the costs and benefits of giving up the ‘old ways’ of being a vampire:

Liam: “Yo, Mr. Mainstream. Thirsty?”

Bill: “No. . . . You know, you’re doing nothing to help our cause.”

Diane: “Not everyone wants to dress up and play human, Bill.”

Liam: “Yeah, not everybody wants to live off that Japanese shit they call blood, either. As if we could.”

Bill: “We have to moderate our behavior now that we are out in the open.”

Malcolm: “Not everybody thinks that it was such a great idea. And not everybody intends to tow the party line. Honey, if we can’t kill people, what’s the point of being a vampire?” (“Mine”)

Another opponent of mainstreaming with a superior position in the vampire society is the Magister, who played a decisive role in the Spanish Inquisition and still enjoys inflicting pain through torture in his position as the Vampire Magister of North America. Although he works for the Vampire Authority, he clings to the vampire society’s established rules which date back centuries. During a tribunal, the Magister criticizes Bill for diverging from the ancient traditions: “You have no nest. You prefer to consort with humans. You seem to have lost all sense of our priorities” (“I Don’t Wanna Know”). In setting up the ‘mainstreamers’ and the ‘non-mainstreamers’ as antagonists in the series, *True Blood* fits into a pattern which Abbott defines as typical for the contemporary vampire genre. As she argues, current vampire narratives frequently revolve around modern vampire protagonists who seek to replace a group of traditionally-oriented vampires, often the former ruling class of the vampire world (*Celluloid Vampires* 4). These forward-looking vampire protagonists, among whom Bill can be counted, “are modern, not only because of their contempt for the old ways . . . , but also because the act of destroying the traditional vampire in order to take its place, effectively replacing the old with the new, is one of the distinctive characteristics of modernity” (Abbott, *Celluloid Vampires* 4).

Like Edward and Stefan, Bill did not wish to be turned into a vampire, and struggles with his body's violent urges. A flashback in the fifth episode reveals that Bill was transformed in 1865 by his maker Lorena, who posed as a lonely widow and tried to seduce Bill when he was on his way home to his family after serving in the Civil War. Tellingly, it is Bill's moral code and decency that convince Lorena to make him her supernatural companion instead of feeding on him and killing him in the process: When she begins making sexual advances towards Bill, he rejects her and insists that his wife is waiting for him at home ("Sparks Fly Out"). Similar to Stefan's biography, what follows for Bill is a period of hedonism and violence, which he spends with his maker. In 1935, Bill distances himself from Lorena and the bloodshed of their shared lifestyle. He has come to despise himself for the cruelties he engaged in and starts to become a reluctant vampire:

Bill: "I'm seeing clearly for the first time in years. I won't do this any longer. It's over. No more innocent lives and bloody beds and cruelty for sport."

Lorena: "You are a vampire. They are food. That's your nature."

Bill: "No, it is *your* nature. You have lost your humanity, and you have stolen mine, made me into a monster. I forgot myself, and I will have to live with the things we've done for an eternity."

Lorena: "I sometimes forget how young you are. This conscience of yours, you will outgrow it. Trust me. We will get through this together."

Bill: "I will never again be what you want me to be."<sup>221</sup> ("Release Me")

In contrast to his maker, Bill makes the decision to become a 'good' vampire and to "hang onto some semblance of [his] former humanity" ("Mine").<sup>222</sup> Naturally, this means that he must reign in his violent impulses and consume 'Tru Blood' instead of human blood.<sup>223</sup> As a reluctant vampire, Bill constantly interrogates himself and his vampire body. The extraordinarily high level of self-awareness and self-criticism he displays is one of his defining features. Similar to *The Vampire Diaries*, *True Blood* self-referentially comments on its use of the reluctant vampire trope in the character of Bill:

Sookie: "I think deep down you don't like vampires, even though you are one. . . . Hating yourself is a bad thing."

Bill: "I am a vampire, I'm supposed to be tormented." ("Shake and Fingerpop")

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<sup>221</sup> Emphasis in the original.

<sup>222</sup> The thought that actions define a person's being 'good' or 'bad' rather than their 'nature' runs through *True Blood* as well. In "I Wish I Was the Moon," Sookie articulates this premise which is also formulated in the *Twilight* Saga and *The Vampire Diaries*: "Most of my life, when I'd say my prayers at night, I'd wish to God to be normal. And I realized there ain't no such thing as normal. Everybody's got something they're ashamed of or can just do without even trying. . . . But those ain't the things that make us who we are. It's what we do with them that really matters."

<sup>223</sup> In contrast to the *Twilight* Saga, in which Edward strictly refuses to bite Bella, Bill starts regularly drinking Sookie's blood when their relationship grows steadier. Bill's feeding on Sookie is a consensual part of their sexual relationship, and the show never implies that Bill runs the risk of losing control in the way that the *Twilight* Saga does.

As is the case for Edward and Stefan, Bill's willingness to self-reflect and control his predatory vampire body can be read as an active engagement with his own 'masculinity.' In this way, vampire Bill works as a representation of the postfeminist man who is in the process of negotiating his privileges as well as responsibilities in the contemporary world. The redefinition of postfeminist masculinity in terms of conventionally 'feminine' skills becomes visible in the character as well. Bill's deeply felt sympathy for his victims reveals his connection to the 'feminine' realm of emotion and care for others. Besides, Bill matches Williamson's description of the reluctant/sympathetic television vampire as a creature marked by pathos ("Television" par. 6). The reluctant vampire's melodramatic identity finds expression in emotional excess (M. Williamson, "Television" par. 19) – in Bill's case the enormous sense of guilt he is carrying, and the utter horror he feels regarding his natural capacity for brutal violence. Bill understands his body as a sign of evil: "I have spent my entire life as a vampire apologizing, believing I was inherently wrong somehow. Living in fear. Fear that God had forsaken me, that I was damned" ("Save Yourself"). As already elaborated earlier, the reluctant vampire protagonist occupies a similar position as the Gothic heroine based on his melodramatic identity (M. Williamson, "Television" pars. 6-7).

Interestingly, the parallels between Bill Compton and *True Blood's* heroine, Sookie Stackhouse, are clearly emphasized in the series. On the one hand, Bill and Sookie share a kind of outsider status that is based on each of their supernatural natures, respectively. While Bill is a vampire, it is revealed in season 3 that Sookie is a human/faerie halfling. Part of Sookie's supernatural skillset is telepathy. From early childhood on, she has been able to listen to people's thoughts – a skill that constrains her more often than it is useful to her. Because she can hear people's darkest secrets and ugliest ideas, she has difficulties in forming relationships. In episode 2, we learn that Sookie's ability is the reason she had to quit every previous job before her current one; it is implied that she felt sexually harassed by her former bosses' thoughts about her. To block people's thoughts from entering her mind, Sookie has to concentrate very hard, which leads to her often being absent-minded and clumsy around others. Because of her social awkwardness, people frequently underestimate her wit. Sookie has gained notoriety in her small town based on her telepathic abilities, which some think are creepy. In "Never Let Me Go," she reveals that she has struggled with not being 'normal,' often feeling "like I have a disability." Sookie's Otherness is constructed as a parallel to Bill's Otherness in the series. As Sookie herself points out: "I used to get so mad when people judged vampires just for being



different. It's like they were judging me, too" ("Scratches"). The correlation between Bill's and Sookie's positions as (supernatural) outsiders is made explicit by Sookie in "Night on the Sun": "What I can do in my brain, it's every bit as deadly as Bill's fangs. I know what it's like to be afraid of my own body, to not be sure what it's going to do next. I've killed. I may not have cheated but I wanted to. Me and Bill, we ain't so different."<sup>224</sup> Interestingly, Sookie describes her and Bill's similarity as one based on bodily characteristics. Here *True Blood* is in line with horror's tendency to suggest a "sympathy and affinity . . . between the monster and the girl" (L. Williams 21) that is grounded in the fact that each of their bodies are (perceived as) different from the male body.

Sookie's feeling of kinship with Bill is what initially draws her to him, and it is also why she is committed to making him feel welcome when he first arrives in town. As the first vampire taking up residence in Bon Temps, Bill has a particularly hard time with the citizens of the small town, and is often faced with exclusion, discrimination and violence based on his vampire nature. For instance, when Bill spends a night at the bar, a waitress refuses to serve him the 'Tru Blood' flavor he ordered. Her hostile attitude towards him is representative of the general social rejection vampires deal with on a daily basis: "Fuck him. I'm giving him [blood type] A. And don't microwave it neither. He can have it cold" ("Escape from Dragon House"). In *True Blood*, "[v]ampirism serves as a trope for social and legal marginalization and minoritization" (Hudson 665). Thus, the series presents vampires as equivalent to other real-world marginalized groups like Black and gay people. Obvious examples of this parallelization are the show's linguistic invention of 'Vampire American' as a counterpart of 'African American,' and the background story of the legalization of vampire marriage. As I argue, Bill's struggle with people's bias and discriminatory practices mirrors Sookie's experience of gender-based discrimination, for example in the workplace. As a human and a white woman, Sookie is neither affected by racism – like her friend Tara, a Black woman – nor by institutionalized "speciesism" (Blayde and Dunn 43), like Bill. However, she regularly faces sexism in her private as well as professional life.<sup>225</sup> It is perhaps this shared experience of prejudice and discrimination that plays a key role in *True Blood*'s parallelization of Gothic heroine and

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<sup>224</sup> In this particular instance, the equation of Sookie's Otherness with Bill's is rather problematic, as it serves to excuse Bill's horrific domestic violence towards Sookie. After being tortured and starved by Lorena, Bill has attacked Sookie and almost killed her by sucking her blood. Sookie's friend Tara criticizes Sookie for relativizing Bill's violence: "You know what you sound like? One of that sad country songs about dumb bitches who let their man cheat and beat on them, all for the sake of true love" ("Night on the Sun").

<sup>225</sup> Sookie's experience of sexism in all its facets was examined in detail in subchapter 4.5.1.

monster. Bill's ability to understand and empathize with structural inequality may then be particularly appealing for female viewers who can identify very well with Sookie's experience. As a postfeminist man/vampire, Bill sees through the workings of power and the ways in which marginalized communities are oppressed by groups which constantly seek to bolster and maintain their hegemonic social position. Even as Bill himself at times functions as an upholder of sexist gendered hierarchies, his experience-based knowledge of social inequalities and his willingness to critically examine his own practices of (toxic) masculinity render him a compelling romantic hero for postfeminist audiences.

## **6.7. The Contradictions of the Postfeminist Vampire Romance Hero**

This chapter set out to examine the appeal of contemporary vampire romance for the female heterosexual audiences who are the primary consumers of this genre. In a number of case studies, the chapter analyzed three vampire romance heroes, Edward Cullen from the *Twilight* Saga, Stefan Salvatore from *The Vampire Diaries*, and Bill Compton from *True Blood*, and tried to get to the bottom of the allure that these heroes' hold for viewers. Crucially, the analyzed reluctant vampire lovers, who are in heterosexual relationships with the series' female protagonists Bella Swan, Elena Gilbert and Sookie Stackhouse, work as embodiments of contemporary postfeminist masculinity based on their identity as reluctant vampires. As I have argued, the figure of the humanized, reluctant vampire accurately captures the contradictory, hybrid nature of the postfeminist man. In a nutshell, Edward, Stefan and Bill combine traditionally 'masculine' features, such as aggression and authority, with characteristics more in tune with feminism. These characteristics include empathy, sensitivity and a willingness to self-reflect and change to fit the standards of a more egalitarian world. In the examined popular cultural productions, postfeminist masculinity is represented as the idealized and preferred, i.e. the hegemonic version of masculinity as it allows viewers to immerse themselves into a fantasy of "old-school gentleman-vampires" (Mukherjea, "My Vampire Boyfriend" 3) who incorporate all the benevolent characteristics of traditional masculinity without eschewing feminism's ideals.

Based on their blending of 'old' hegemonic masculinity and 'new' masculine images, the analyzed postfeminist vampire romance heroes invite both progressive and regressive readings. A regressive reading of postfeminist masculinity is offered by Sarah Godfrey and Hannah Hamad in their essay "Save the Cheerleader, Save the Males:

Resurgent Protective Paternalism in Popular Film and Television after 9/11” (2014). Godfrey and Hamad do not include vampire romance narratives in their analysis, but they put forward a general argument about current popular culture’s tendency to valorize masculinities which reconcile “traditional protectorate masculinity” (165) with more progressive versions of masculinity that have emerged in the context of postfeminism, namely with postfeminist fatherhood. As I propose, the hybrid figure of the male paternal protector shines through in the above-discussed vampire romance heroes as well. In their essay, Godfrey and Hamad identify a “current cultural preoccupation with rescuer masculinity” (166), which they differentiate from earlier representations of protective masculinity like the 1980s action hero. As can be gleaned from the title of their article, Godfrey and Hamad instead locate the resurgence of the protective male in a post-9/11 context. The crux about this ‘new’ version of ‘rescuer masculinity’ is its blending of the protective, aggressive action hero with the figure of the postfeminist father (Godfrey and Hamad 157). As Hamad has argued elsewhere, there is a “cultural imperative for ideal masculinity in contemporary popular cinema to be articulated in paternal terms” (111). A similar emergence of paternal masculinities can be found in television drama (Godfrey and Hamad 166). Thus, in postfeminist media culture, fatherhood is in vogue. As such, the focus on male paternity is representative of the tendency in postfeminist culture towards male investment in traditionally ‘female’ responsibilities, such as child-rearing, domestic duties and taking care of others. What films like *Die Hard 4.0* (2007) and *Taken* (2008), and TV shows like *Heroes* (2006-2010) and *24* (2001-2010), whose protagonists’ identities as fathers play a crucial role for the respective plot, have done is to “showcase the inter-dependence and cooperation of . . . private sphere fatherhood and . . . public sphere protective paternalism” (Godfrey and Hamad 165). As Godfrey and Hamad put it,

action-oriented machismo has been renegotiated into extant postfeminist masculinities in which sensitivity (particularly paternal sensitivity) has been normalized. In this respect, the patriarchally charged recuperated machismo of these iterations of protective paternalism qualify [sic] and complement [sic] postfeminist paternal sensitivity. (170)

The combination of machismo with paternal sensitivities finds expression in the ways in which fatherhood is used to legitimize the violence that is enacted by the male protagonists of the above-mentioned texts. Thus, the potentially troubling traits of machismo are offset “through explicatory recourse to fatherhood” (Godfrey and Hamad 169). On the flipside of the male protector, we have women and children, particularly daughters, who are depicted as vulnerable and fearful. Because innocent individuals – and, above all, the macho father’s own family – need protection from outside forces, the

“benevolent protective patriarch” (Godfrey and Hamad 169) is exonerated even from morally dubious and extremely violent actions.

As I want to argue, the paranormal romance narratives examined in this dissertation follow a similar logic, in the sense that the protective paternalism displayed by the vampire romance heroes of the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* is frequently contextualized as occurring out of concern for the vulnerable human heroine and her safety. As I have elaborated at length in this chapter, Edward, Stefan and Bill are characterized by a combination of patriarchal and progressive elements – a hybridization of traits which indicates their rootedness in postfeminist discourse. As became clear in the preceding subchapters, the analyzed vampire lovers frequently fulfill the role of rescuer and protector due to their supernatural powers. Interestingly, besides this function of patriarchal protection, these characters not only display conventionally ‘feminine’ characteristics, such as emotional expressiveness, empathy and a willingness to moderate themselves, but they also sometimes perform a kind of paternal role for their beloved romance heroines. Needless to say, because of their vampire nature, they are all substantially older and more experienced than the female protagonists. Edward Cullen most clearly works as a father figure for Bella: His position of authority is complemented by the ability to take care of his human girlfriend’s physical and emotional needs at any time. Edward runs with Bella on his back, sometimes carries and cradles her, helps her put on the buckles in the car, composes a lullaby for her, sees to it that she eats enough, and encourages her to send out college applications.

By characterizing its vampire hero in this way, the *Twilight* Saga conforms to romance formulas which provide that the romance hero is defined by a “combination of paternal and erotic qualities” (Mussell 133). As Mussell suggests, in ‘classic’ romance, “[m]any of the qualities the heroine looks for and responds to in the hero might pertain as much to a father as a lover” (109).<sup>226</sup> Thus, our vampire romance heroes, especially Edward Cullen, could be described as “paternally signified, and therefore ‘sensitive,’ leading men” (Hamad 105), although they are not literally the heroines’ fathers. Within the respective narratives, the vampires’ assumption of responsibility for the female protagonists’ physical and emotional safety is often explained with recourse to how much they love and care for them – perhaps even in a paternal way. Godfrey and Hamad refer to this legitimizing mechanism as an “ideological alibi for the revalidated enactment of

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<sup>226</sup> Radway even suggests that “the heroine’s often expressed desire to be the hero’s formally recognized wife in fact camouflages an equally insistent wish to be his child” (145).

protectorate masculinities” (162). Crucially, because the analyzed narratives “construct a fictional framework allowing heroic masculinity to succeed” (Godfrey and Hamad 168) – the vulnerable heroines are saved, the town is defended from the season’s antagonist(s), the status quo is more or less restored –, they “have a cathartic function in the context of the national trauma of 9/11” (Godfrey and Hamad 168). Following Godfrey and Hamad, the texts “narrativize cultural anxieties over masculinity” (170) and quell these anxieties by bolstering benevolent rescuer masculinity. In the process, they “rearticulate and reinvest in female powerlessness” (Godfrey and Hamad 170). Essentially, Godfrey and Hamad argue that patriarchal masculinity, which had become “increasingly anachronistic in a climate that hegemonically reified sensitivity and emotional articulacy” (159), is able to re-establish itself by using postfeminist masculinity/fatherhood as a validating factor.

A similar argument can be found in the work of MacKinnon, who writes that through “interpretations of idealized masculinity as incorporating the traditionally feminine trait of nurturing, it might be argued that masculinity holds on to its hegemony” (10). In this pessimistic view, men have not really changed but have selectively taken on some ‘feminine’ characteristics for strategic reasons; their ultimate goal is the maintenance of their dominant social position, which they are unwilling to share or give up. MacKinnon questions the validity of the postfeminist redefinition of masculinity in terms of sensitivity and nurturing qualities, suggesting that a “sizable proportion of gender critics see it as largely a means to hold on to male power” (73). As he argues, “[t]he most cynical interpretation would be that, in order for masculinity to remain hegemonic, it must admit the feminine at certain historical moments” (15).

Rather than adopting the above-discussed cynical, regressive reading, this research aims to emphasize the ambivalence of the analyzed narratives by pointing to their openness towards not only regressive but also progressive interpretations. Importantly, more progressive readings are also built into the representations of postfeminist masculinity as they appear in the analyzed paranormal romances. As the previous case studies have shown, the protective paternalism performed by Edward, Stefan and Bill does not remain unquestioned by the analyzed texts. Traditionally ‘masculine’ behaviors which seem anachronistic in their modern-day context are frequently addressed and problematized by the female protagonists of the narratives. The fact that events are in large part narrated from a young woman’s perspective comes into play here, as the female point of view encourages viewers to relate to and focus on the heroines’ reactions to the values which the male vampires stand for (Hanser 124). The *Twilight Saga*, *The Vampire*

*Diaries* and *True Blood* thus set out to stage their heroines' active resistance to some of the regressive gender norms that the texts' vampire heroes are – consciously or subconsciously – carrying as a result of their socialization in a distant, 'traditional' past. In this way, normative ideas about traditional masculinity are effectively deconstructed. As a result of the heroines' criticism, the male vampire protagonists make conscious efforts to re-evaluate their notions of appropriate and acceptable behavior. Thus, in contrast to the 1980s romance texts examined by Modleski, today's vampire romances do not neutralize their heroines' anger but seem to represent it as justified and consequential. As we have seen, Edward, Stefan and Bill exceed both traditional masculinity and the conventional romance hero in their capacity to express, recognize and manage emotions. Displaying the ability to take care of their female lovers' needs and desires, they keep up the established romance formula of the nurturing lover, which apparently continues to be relevant in contemporary culture. The incorporation of conventionally 'feminine' skills, which structures the vampire heroes' relationships with the female protagonists, distinguishes them from the benevolent protective patriarchs discussed by Godfrey and Hamad. The authors describe post-9/11 rescuer masculinity as "hav[ing] dispelled the emasculatory effects of postfeminist reconstruction, expressing fatherly protection through action, violence, and sacrifice over nurturing sensitivity" (168). This is not true of the analyzed vampire romance heroes, whose incorporation of 'feminine' traits is actually central to their gender performance and their appeal for postfeminist (female) audiences. This fact can perhaps be taken as an indication that the postfeminist revision of masculinity is indeed more profound than Godfrey's/Hamad's and MacKinnon's pessimistic reading would suggest.

In this context, MacKinnon points out that a number of "commentators voice suspicion of the way that masculinity may soften, become more feminine, without addressing patriarchal power or capitalist work relations" (15). Countering this suspicion, I maintain that the postfeminist male vampires in the analyzed paranormal romances *are* represented as having an awareness about patriarchal power relations and making an effort to rework them. As I have stressed in my analyses in this chapter, the examined narratives present a vision of postfeminist masculinity which is in the process of interrogating and revising its approach to its own gendered dominance. In the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*, this process of interrogation and revision is projected onto the male vampire body, with the vampire heroes Edward, Stefan and Bill constantly reflecting on and keeping in check their predatory vampire urges. Based on

their experience as reluctant vampires, all three protagonists have acquired a deep understanding of what it means to have one's agency restricted by outside forces, and of how power structures operate in society. As I have argued, this experience-based knowledge about social inequalities, which may parallel many female viewers' struggle with institutionalized gender-based discrimination in a patriarchally structured world, is the reason for the vampire heroes' readiness to question and modify their patriarchal behaviors. The fact that the vampires continually restrain themselves can be read as an indication that power relations are actually challenged here, which would refute MacKinnon's argument. As becomes clear, the analyzed narratives – despite their problematic aspects – do invite progressive readings.

In fact, both Godfrey/Hamad and MacKinnon do refer to the double movement inherent in postfeminist masculinity. For instance, Godfrey and Hamad observe the simultaneous occurrence of acknowledgement and rebuttal, 'writing in' and 'writing out' of feminism in the figure of the protective patriarch – a dynamic that is of course central to postfeminist discourses. As they conclude, "these mediations of [paternal rescuer] masculinity are complicit in a discursive undoing of feminism while perpetuating, recuperating, and celebrating the discourses of involved fatherhood granted by postfeminism" (170). This paradox, which is constitutive of postfeminist masculinity, is also commented on by MacKinnon when he writes that "[m]asculinity . . . becomes less hegemonic precisely in order to stay hegemonic" (73). Following this understanding, postfeminist masculinity has become subordinated and is still hegemonic at the same time, which is a contradiction in itself. Interestingly, in their 2005 article "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," Connell and Messerschmidt argue that the concept of hegemonic masculinity allows for such a paradoxical construction, as it does not preclude the possibility of achieving gender equality:

Put another way, the conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity should explicitly acknowledge the possibility of democratizing gender relations, of abolishing power differentials, not just of reproducing hierarchy. A transitional move in this direction requires an attempt to establish as hegemonic among men . . . a version of masculinity open to equality with women. In this sense, it is possible to define a hegemonic masculinity that is thoroughly "positive" . . . Recent history has shown the difficulty of doing this in practice. A positive hegemony remains, nevertheless, a key strategy for contemporary efforts at reform. (853)

As I would like to suggest, the postfeminist masculinities exemplified by Edward, Stefan and Bill can be considered such 'transitional' forms of masculinity, seeing as they are simultaneously hegemonic and open to critically reflecting and potentially shedding their hegemonic status in society. Consequently, the *Twilight Saga*, *The Vampire Diaries* and

*True Blood* – despite their limitations – could be understood as offering attempts to reform contemporary gendered hierarchies.

Considering that the examined paranormal romances are highly popular and commercial products, the inherently ambivalent vampire romance hero may work as a model of masculinity which speaks to a variety of consumers with differing values, from liberals to conservatives. A version of masculinity which is conflicted at its core can engage a wide range of viewers. These viewers are drawn to paranormal romance because it serves as a productive space in which current gender norms and relations can be negotiated in interesting ways. Introducing a paradoxical construction of contemporary masculinity, the discussed texts present viewers with the choice of ascribing to regressive and/or progressive readings. As MacKinnon argues,

[a]s with so many apparently stark choices offered by popular culture, the viewer may not only opt for one or [the] other, possibly at different times and in different moods, but may take both. This probable scenario, when applied at various times and in the context of various media, gives us remarkable insight into the ways that not only television, but wider popular culture, operates – and precisely how, indeed, it manages to stay popular.  
(86)

As this chapter has shown, Edward Cullen, Stefan Salvatore and Bill Compton in the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* work as supernatural characters accommodating the contradictoriness of the idealized postfeminist man. A figure having emerged in the wake of feminist gains in American culture, the humanized/reluctant vampire hero harbors both the risk of backlash and the potential for (additional) change. As Mukherjea phrases it, “[v]ampire boyfriends . . . offer us known territory and the reliability of men with vast amounts of experience to hone their principles and actions” (“My Vampire Boyfriend” 16). The appeal of paranormal romance is two-fold: Mukherjea points out that “[t]he great popularity of this genre suggests that many female readers are seeking certainty and protection and to maximize their options as women” (“My Vampire Boyfriend” 16) without ceding feminist rights and responsibilities (“My Vampire Boyfriend” 1). In other words, the analyzed vampire romances offer the satisfaction of resisting and challenging patriarchal masculinity, combined with the rewards of submitting to it. In this way, they provide fantasy solutions for some real tensions which affect young women’s lives today.



## 7. Conclusion: The Postfeminist Agenda of Contemporary Vampire Romance

This work has situated and investigated the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* in their contemporary American cultural context. These tremendously popular paranormal romances have been understood and examined within this dissertation as a locus for the articulation of postfeminist ideologies, and a host to current discourses about gender, sexuality, subjectivity, agency and the body. Adopting a Cultural Studies framework, this research set out to determine the cultural politics of the selected texts. Applying key ideas of this field of cultural analysis, my study started from the premise that “culture is never only a site of consumption or manipulation but also allows for productive, tactical, and even subversive engagements with even the most conservative of texts/ideologies” (Wilson, *Seduced by Twilight* 7). Conceiving of the mentioned popular cultural products as a terrain of ideological struggle or a “semiotic battlefield in which . . . a conflict [is] fought out between the forces of incorporation and the forces of resistance” (Storey 217-18), this work sought to bring to light and discuss some of the conflicting meanings contained in the texts. To this end, this study has addressed such questions as: Why are these vampire romances popular right now? What specific desires, issues and fears are addressed and negotiated by them? What concerns in women’s/girls’ (and men’s/boys’) lives are being played out, explored, alleviated, resolved, concealed, ignored here? In what ways is the figure of the vampire drafted and employed in these narratives, and how does it intersect with the discourses of postfeminism?

As my analysis has shown, the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* can be understood both as indicators of deep cultural tensions rooted in the contemporary postfeminist age, and an imaginary space for the articulation of pleasures and desires, some of which tend(ed) to remain unaddressed in mainstream popular culture overall. In this respect, this dissertation has highlighted the pleasures that these texts offer to (heterosexual) female viewers in particular. As I argue, a focus on the desires and concerns of this demographic is what the selected series share, and what makes them so outstandingly successful with their target audiences. It is also one of the reasons for their widespread dismissal and ridiculing in the media as well as some circles of academia. As a review of the public reaction to the texts and their enormous popularity has illustrated, the analyzed paranormal romances have had a polarizing effect. Among the selected vampire texts, particularly the *Twilight* franchise has an incongruous reception history. Rejected, criticized and despised by many, it is loved and worshipped in equal measure

by others. On the one hand, this polarizing effect connects *Twilight* with its generic forerunners and their contemporary reception: As discussed in subchapter 3.5, both Gothic romance and 20<sup>th</sup> century popular romance, which are hybridized in the relatively young paranormal romance genre, were perceived as low-status genres during their heyday because of their association with a predominantly female writer- and readership. Seen in this light, the gendered denigration of paranormal romance in general, and the *Twilight* Saga in particular, follows a familiar pattern of devaluing media that are popular with girls and women. On the other hand, the polarizing effect of the *Twilight* Saga can be attributed to its highly contradictory representation of gender and sexuality, which is indicative of its being a product of today's postfeminist media culture. Thus, in the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*, conflicting discourses surrounding 'femininity,' 'masculinity,' heterosexuality, subjectivity, and agency coexist.

As elaborated in chapter 3, Gothic and romance, the historical precursors of contemporary paranormal romance, have both been theorized as inherently ambivalent genres torn between conservative generic conventions and feminist subtext. Scholars like Ellen Moers and Kate Ferguson Ellis have read Gothic romance's stereotypical portrayal of female victimization by the hands of violent male villains as a subversive commentary on women's experience and oppression in a male-dominated society, particularly their confinement to the domestic sphere. Similarly, a scholarly consensus in romance studies has been that romance as a genre is "structured both by familiar romance formulas as well as an engagement with feminism" (Veldman-Genz, "The More the Merrier?" 115). Thus, Tania Modleski and Janice A. Radway have argued that despite romance's precarious depiction of male violence against the romantic heroine, the genre's function is to represent, protest and find symbolic solutions for problems in women's circumscribed lives under patriarchy. My dissertation has taken its cue from these feminist analyses of these 'women's genres,' and has critically looked at the hybrid paranormal romance genre's engagement with (post)feminist issues, such as everyday sexism and violence against women, power relations in heterosexual relationships, sexual autonomy and pleasure, (self-)empowerment, and (self-)surveillance. For this purpose, the narratives employ the figure of the vampire, which turns out to be ideal for the incorporation of postfeminist discourses surrounding gender, sexuality, identity and the body. One central result of this research is that the three analyzed vampire romance narratives not only address persisting gendered inequalities in a deeply ambivalent way, but also open spaces for innovative versions or resignifications of gender and sexual roles. In other words, I

have read the *Twilight Saga*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* as giving voice to the plurality and contradictions of women's/girl's and men's/boys' experience in a contemporary culture characterized by such developments as constantly shifting gender norms, neo-liberalist ideas of consumer capitalism, and the unsettling of former economic, environmental and social stabilities.

As the case studies have shown, the examined vampire texts are deeply problematic in some respects, but also offer highly interesting, potentially subversive moments in which gendered power dynamics are challenged. The texts thereby engage in what Siegel has called a “politics of ambiguity” (*Sisterhood, Interrupted* 154), which is characteristic of postfeminism. Thus, contrary to some scholars' opinion that “the transition to a postfeminist culture involves an evident erasure of feminist politics from the popular” (Tasker and Negra 5), this dissertation does not conceive postfeminism as depoliticized. Rather, this work follows Genz and Brabon, who argue that “the second wave's interpretative framework and models of political action need to be expanded in order to include the multiple agency and subject positions that individuals take up in twenty-first-century culture and society” (39). (Post)feminism now “often materializes in identities and practices that are not immediately associated with previously established forms of feminism” (Budgeon, “The Contradictions” 281). Thus, postfeminist approaches are marked by attempts to resignify ‘femininity’ and sexuality, a focus on individual empowerment, an acceptance of “the paradoxes of postmodern subjectivity” (Brabon, “Chuck Flick” 126), and a straddling of binaries – features that have been indeed identified as central in the *Twilight Saga*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* through the analyses performed here.

Postfeminism has been conceived within this research as a hybrid phenomenon emerging in and from a number of contexts and influences, such as feminism, neo-liberalism, consumer culture, individualism, postmodernism, and mainstream media. My understanding of postfeminism was established and explained in chapter 2, where I gave a definition of the study's contextualizing approach to the phenomenon. Chapter 2 identified one of the key characteristics of postfeminist discourses, namely the double movement between the threat of backlash and the potential for innovation. Thus, due to its hybridity, “postfeminism is by definition contradictory, simultaneously feminist, liberating and repressive, productive and obstructive of progressive social change. Whether critics see feminism or antifeminism as more dominant in the end is a matter of interpretation and degree” (Projansky 68). As Elana Levine suggests, “it does feminist

critiques a disservice to classify particular instances as wholly disruptive of dominant discourses or as all-out efforts of containment against such disruptions” (141). Rather than adopting an ‘either/or’ approach in the sense that the selected paranormal romances would be either defined as feminist or anti-feminist texts, this dissertation has shown in a detailed and systematic manner that the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* can really be considered ‘both/and’ texts: They are simultaneously innovatory and old-fashioned when it comes to their representations of gender roles and relationships. This finding can be tied back to postfeminism’s existence as a “junction between a number of often competing discourses and interests” (Genz and Brabon 6). Despite its considerable limitations, it is therefore possible to “provide a political reading of postfeminism that does not eschew the possibilities of change and resistance” (Genz and Brabon 33).

The ‘both/and’ nature that is fundamental to postfeminist media culture is perhaps what is reflected in many consumers’ mixed reactions to the postfeminist vampire romances analyzed in the frame of this dissertation. Thus, as Petersen has found in her ethnographic study of readers of the *Twilight* series,

the single best way to characterize feminist readers’ response to *Twilight* is *ambivalence*. Having voiced immense pleasure in the narrative, these readers were nonetheless deeply troubled by it – incensed and repulsed by several elements of the text that were readily labeled by readers as culturally regressive, non-feminist, and affirmative of patriarchal values.<sup>227</sup> (61)

This ambivalent reading/viewing experience is referred to by Merri Lisa Johnson as a “‘paradox of spectatorship’ – [rooted in] the conflicted identity of the feminist fangirl” (10).<sup>228</sup> As she observes, a delicate “balance between appreciation and skepticism” (19) shapes her own viewing experience of contemporary television. Considering that the progressive moves of currently popular TV shows are often “intercut with moments of containment, flashes of stereotypes, plot crutches, and predictable jokes” (19), Johnson proposes a media theory that takes into account the fact that

we take what we need from the available culture, sieve out the rest. This ‘negotiated reading’ is . . . an acknowledgement that incremental shifts in power may be the most we can hope for, and that the kinds of pleasure available to women in the current media culture include the pleasures of oppositional reading as well as the pleasures of seeing feminist concepts dramatized on television. (11)

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<sup>227</sup> Emphasis in the original.

<sup>228</sup> Mirroring this phrase, Sarah Wagenseller Goletz coins the term “Giddyshame Paradox” (147) to describe “the contradictory reactions of many friends – usually women, often self-described feminists . . . – upon reading the love story of Bella and Edward” (147).

Committing itself to the notion of polysemic texts as well as adopting Hall's theory that audiences are actively involved in the meaning production of popular cultural products, this dissertation – like Johnson – has operated under the assumption that viewers of the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* not only actively construct their own interpretations of these narratives, but also draw a number of meaningful pleasures from the texts. These pleasures are flexible and contradictory in themselves, as the preceding analyses have demonstrated. Thus, while some satisfactions may be derived from resisting the hegemonic culture, others may involve a “complicity in subordination” (Gill, *Gender and the Media* 16). As Gill points out, implicitly acknowledging the multiple subject positions of individuals today, “it is perfectly possible to derive significant pleasure from representations that politically one may wish to critique” (*Gender and the Media* 16). While mass culture theory suggests that “the experience of pleasure in mass culture is a false kind of pleasure” (Ang, *Watching Dallas* 17) which manipulates consumers into buying into the dominant messages conserving the status quo, this dissertation has taken seriously the complicated pleasures that the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* offer their predominantly female audiences. Here I have followed Ang, who argues that “[i]t is certainly not the aim to simply glorify those pleasures because they are popular among women . . . but to understand more thoroughly what concerns women today, so that feminists can connect up with it more efficiently” (*Watching Dallas* 132).

Generally speaking, popular cultural texts offer a number of potential pleasures to consumers. Fiske has theorized that (popular) “[c]ulture is the constant process of producing meanings of and from our social experience, and such meanings necessarily produce a social identity for the people involved. . . . Within the production and circulation of these meanings lies pleasure” (*Reading the Popular* 1). As pointed out in subchapter 3.6, the consumption of media texts functions as a process of deliberate identity construction in which audiences are enabled to appropriate or reject elements of respective texts, thereby negotiating cultural ideas and values. Furthermore, identity formation takes place through consumers' active participation in fan communities (Thomas 212). Relatedly, Pamela H. Demory underlines the particular pleasures provided by the film adaptations of the *Twilight* series in opposition to the novels:

One of those pleasures is experiencing the story in a community of like-minded people. . . . Reading is a solitary experience; film-going is (or can be) a group experience. For the target audience – teenage girls – the way that the film fosters a community experience may be part of the attraction (206)

Adding to Demory's observation, one could argue that the screen adaptations of the *Twilight* Saga, and perhaps also *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*,<sup>229</sup> create particularly momentous opportunities for audiences to engage in the satisfactory processes of identity formation.

Subchapter 3.1 discussed the pleasure potential contained in reading/viewing genre texts. As explained in this subchapter, genre products combine the pleasures of recognizing familiar structures, and being surprised by new combinations of generic elements or even ruptures of these structures. In other words, consumers may enjoy genre texts not only based on the fact that their expectations are being met, but also that the latter are defied (Branston and Stafford 74-78). Throughout its chapters, this work has pointed towards instances in which the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* conform to or deviate significantly from genre conventions, and has highlighted the ways in which such deviations change the ideological impetus of the narratives. Following Branston and Stafford, the identified shifts in representation provide a range of potential pleasures to audiences familiar with genre conventions, seeing as these shifts offer alternative configurations of gender that run counter to hegemonic norms (78).

For instance, chapter 4 discussed some of the playful, self-aware approaches adopted by the analyzed vampire romances in order to draw attention to, question and/or disrupt sexist genre/media tropes, first and foremost the male gaze but also, for example, the figure of the *femme fatale*. Potential destabilizations of genre conventions and encapsulated gender roles are achieved through the strategies of camp and parody, which I have detected in *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*. Chapter 5 drew attention to the fact that both Caroline in *The Vampire Diaries* and Jessica in *True Blood* break generic expectations by shifting the conventional story of the female vampire victim as it is exemplified by Lucy Westenra's character development in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Instead of suffering under their transformation into vampires and receiving deadly punishments for their transgression of traditional gender roles, these contemporary female vampires experience their conversion into vampires as personally empowering. Chapter 6, then, elaborated the ways in which the selected texts' vampire romance heroes Edward, Stefan and Bill deviate from conventional genre scripts, which exhibits these characters' embeddedness in contemporary postfeminist culture. Subchapter 6.4 detailed how the *Twilight* Saga in particular reverses the roles of romance hero and heroine with regard to

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<sup>229</sup> Although film-going is assumably done in groups more frequently than television-watching is, both media can facilitate community experiences. The same is hard to achieve with the consumption of literary texts.

the portrayal of sexuality in the text. Contrary to classic romance tropes, Bella is afforded an active role as sexually desiring subject and pursuer of sexual intimacy, while Edward is delegated the responsibility of being the gatekeeper of sexual action, assuming the passive role of the pursued.

Importantly, pleasure has emerged as one of the defining keywords or catchphrases of postfeminism. For instance, Gill and Herdieckerhoff acknowledge postfeminism as “a discourse of freedom, liberation and pleasure-seeking” (500). As discussed in 2.3, postfeminism is discursively constructed as contrary to a supposedly restrictive, serious and extremist ‘old’ feminism through its focus on the pleasures connected with the realm of sexuality, consumerism and individualism. Postfeminism is understood here as a feminism which focuses on and celebrates the power as well as empowerment of (individual) women. In the postfeminist logic, empowerment can be drawn from “individualistic assertions of (consumer) choice and self-rule” (Genz and Brabon 24) as well as the visual display of one’s sexy body (Genz and Brabon 92). Esther Sonnet emphasizes the postfeminist “‘return’ to feminine pleasures” (170), which includes an appreciation for and investment in ‘feminine’ adornment, make-up, fashion, and the like (Genz and Brabon 93). As the analyses conducted within this dissertation have shown, part of the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*’s postfeminist agenda is their provision of a number of compelling pleasures for their audiences, which come with their very own opportunities and problems.

Chapter 4 has argued that one of the central pleasures offered by all three paranormal romances is their privileging of a heterosexual female gaze. Thus, pleasure may be drawn from the series’ feminine address and their potential for feminine identification. Through the systematic representation and foregrounding of a subjective female gaze, girls and women are offered the opportunity to locate themselves as subjects in the analyzed texts. This is especially important in light of the dominant patriarchal culture in which the perspectives and stories of women and girls remain underrepresented. By visually conveying the experiences of female protagonists, the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* present alluring alternatives to the usual “dilemma facing girls in a world where men hold the central if not the exclusive access to the position of subject” (Driscoll 31). With the help of what Soloway terms “the being seen gaze [and] the I SEE YOU gaze truth gaze” (Soloway), particularly the *Twilight* Saga and *True Blood* further grapple with young women’s experiences of becoming the object of the gaze in the context of a male-dominated society. The (straight) female gaze found in

these texts is therefore a critical gaze, which lays bare the constraining, pressuring and potentially violating experiences of women and girls with being observed and controlled by men. By addressing women as subjects while also showing how they are treated as objects in the culture, the texts under analysis represent “the ambiguity and contradictions of women’s living experience under patriarchy: the experience of the body as both the self and not the self” (Vera-Gray 158). In the series, the female protagonists are then allowed to return the gaze. As Athena Bellas describes this process, “[b]y looking back at the male gaze that objectifies her, the heroine critically reflects on her position in patriarchal culture. She then opposes it by reversing the dominant terms of the gaze, which ordinarily serves masculine desires and fantasies” (*Fairy Tales on the Teen Screen* 22).

In keeping with postfeminist discourses of female sexual self-determination and empowerment, the examined paranormal romances represent their heroines as assertive sexual subjects. Sookie’s personal empowerment entails her knowingly playing with her sexual power and exploiting the dynamics of the male gaze for her own benefit in *True Blood* – an ambiguous strategy which raises questions concerning the extent of her agency while catering to a sexist gaze paradigm. What becomes visible here is that “postmodern/postfeminist discourse offers a paradoxical critique that works within the very systems it attempts to undermine” (Genz and Brabon 118). In contrast, the sexual subjecthood of the female protagonists in the *Twilight* Saga and *The Vampire Diaries* is predominantly illustrated through their sexually desiring gazes at their vampire lovers. As I have demonstrated, all three series use the figure of the vampire to invite and legitimize the straight female gaze. A supernatural creature that represents difference in a variety of ways, the vampire occupies the position of the eroticized object here, which is conventionally assigned to women in mainstream screen texts. Thus, in *Twilight*, “Edward as embodiment of the vampire figure becomes the symbol on to which the woman maps her desires” (Wasson and Artt 188); *The Vampire Diaries* offers the vampire brothers Stefan and Damon, and *True Blood* provides a whole range of supernatural male characters, first and foremost the vampires Bill and Eric, for the consumption of the audience. On the one hand, Edward’s and Stefan’s secret vampire nature functions as a catalyst for Bella’s and Elena’s investigative gazes. On the other hand, the sexualized bodies of the above-mentioned vampires are presented as visual spectacle at numerous points throughout the three series. A result of the vampires’ objectification is their fluctuation between ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ positions.



Chapter 5 investigated the *Twilight Saga*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* in relation to their incorporation of postfeminist/neo-liberal discourses of entrepreneurial subjectivity, self-optimization and individualism, which are projected onto the female vampire body. As my analyses have shown, Bella's, Caroline's and Jessica's transformations from human to vampire, which are narrated within each of their series, can be read as representations of postfeminist makeovers. Here it became clear that the examined female characters exist in a tug of war between active self-realization and the disciplinary forces that determine the limits of their becoming subjects. Through their makeovers, the analyzed characters are individually empowered while simultaneously being subjected to new social norms. The latter require them to continually monitor, discipline, and work on their powerful vampire bodies in order to be socially accepted subjects. On the one hand, the makeovers depicted here portray the female body as a project which facilitates a process of self-realization and self-empowerment for the female agent. All three young women enjoy an increase in agency and (supernatural) power after their vampire transformations, and they experience their vampire natures as their 'true' or 'better selves.' As Ferriss suggests, the pleasures of makeover narratives lie in the idea that empowerment is available to each individual woman: "Ultimately, both makeover television and flicks offer the female viewer reassurance. . . . they suggest that the means of gaining recognition are easily within her reach, and, in more recent films, increasingly under control" (56). On the other hand, Bella's, Caroline's and Jessica's agency is compromised by the governing influence of the series' respective vampire social orders, which are often represented by male authorities who introduce the female vampires to their new world and its relevant rules. All three young women are expected to reign in their bloodthirst and perform socially acceptable 'femininity' by keeping their violent impulses in check.

Thus, in the course of their vampire makeovers, Bella, Caroline and Jessica gain subjectivity and agency while simultaneously submitting to normative ideals. The paradox at the heart of successful postfeminist femininity, which entails being subject and object in one, mirrors the contradictory status of women as both subject and object of the gaze that emerged in chapter 4. What comes to light here are the conflicting expectations women/girls are faced with in contemporary postfeminist culture. Thus, they are both called upon to be self-determined and seek self-realization by means of body work and more extreme forms of body enhancement like cosmetic surgery, and asked to orient themselves towards cultural beauty norms. Despite the makeover's presentation as a

'choice' and an emancipatory practice, it must be noted that "the concept of choice is itself enmeshed in social and cultural norms" (Gillespie 79). Genz and Brabon point out that this is "one of the contradictions of the rhetoric of choice that the postfeminist woman grapples with: what looks like individual empowerment, agency and self-determination can also signal conformity and docility" (151). O'Reilly writes that TV shows featuring female characters with supernatural powers seem to offer

viewers a foot in two worlds: a fantastic one in which women could be the most powerful beings in their universe and a realistic one in which that same universe limits that power. In other words, such series present the fusion of one world that is only imaginable and another that is relatable. Thus, women who are athletes, politicians, business owners, celebrities, parents, etc., can all recognize some aspects of their own lives – the frustrations and obstacles they face as women – mirrored by superpowered women on television. (198)

Thus, the ambiguous representations of empowerment found in the selected vampire romances may mirror the experience of many women in postfeminist culture, which tells them that feminism is no longer needed, while their lives are actually shaped by very real hurdles and restrictions.

Chapter 6 dealt with the pleasures contained in the consumption of images of idealized masculinity in the form of the vampire romance heroes of the *Twilight Saga*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*. As I have argued here, the selected paranormal romances provide a redefinition of hegemonic masculinity through the characterization of their male vampire protagonists as postfeminist men. This redefinition of socially admired masculinity is a highly attractive one for (heterosexual) female audiences in particular, as the postfeminist man offers a configuration of masculinity which is less oppressive and more open towards a reduction of gendered inequalities than for example the 'old man.' As the analyses in this chapter have illuminated, Edward, Stefan and Bill exemplify "the requirement for men in postfeminist media texts to remain 'masculine' while also acquiring the emergent traits of being caring, soft, aestheticized and domesticated" (Thompson 151). These contradictory characteristics are perfectly captured by the figure of the humanized/reluctant vampire, which is simultaneously rooted in a distant past nostalgically associated with traditional gender roles, and located in the contemporary present that has been shaped by the influences of feminism and postmodernism. On the one hand, the series' vampire heroes retain culturally valued markers of 'masculinity,' such as physical strength, authority, power, and aggression, which are depicted as 'natural' features of the vampire. On the other hand, these heroes also comfortably incorporate traits traditionally designated as typically 'feminine,' such

as emotionality, empathy, and the inclination to take care of others. Included in this adoption of ‘feminine’ behaviors are the postfeminist man’s indulgence in beauty routines as well as the (sexualized) display of his body. That the examined paranormal romances’ vampire heroes conform to this defining characteristic of the postfeminist man was clearly demonstrated in chapter 4. It is perhaps the exaggerated ‘masculinity’ of the vampire – he is considerably stronger, more powerful and more aggressive than human men because of his supernatural status – that enables it to carry conventionally ‘feminine’ features without becoming unattractive within the hegemonic system that penalizes extensive transgressions of gender.

A central part of postfeminist masculinity is an increasing self-awareness and willingness to question and problematize its own privileges as well as responsibilities in a patriarchally structured world. As I have shown by means of the case studies in chapter 6, this readiness to interrogate and challenge one’s own gendered dominance is mapped onto the male vampire body in the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*. Thus, the *Twilight* films metaphorically depict the difficult process of negotiating a progressive male identity in a patriarchally structured world influenced by feminist principles. A similar narrative unfolds in *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*, in which the vampires Stefan and Bill are represented as idealized versions of postfeminist men who possess all the benevolent characteristics of traditional masculinity while also “embracing a softer and more reflexive notion of masculinity [which] can be read as both enlightening and potentially empowering” (Feasey 154). Despite the progressive potential of these versions of ‘postfeminist vampire masculinity,’ they can also be read as regressive representations, considering that the adoption of ‘feminine’/feminist traits may function as a strategic move serving to legitimize male protective paternalism, which reinscribes ‘femininity’ as powerless and in need of rescuing. Because of their oscillation between liberating and containing impulses, the postfeminist masculinities exemplified by Edward, Stefan and Bill can be considered ‘transitional’ forms of masculinity – still hegemonic but potentially open towards rethinking their own hegemony.

If romance permits (female) audiences to temporarily withdraw from the pressures and challenges of the contemporary world (Radway 212), the vampire romance hero “embodies . . . a desire for *limited* escape: not a wild flight into amoral liberty, just a version of ordinary life which is a bit freer and more exciting than the one most of us actually inhabit”<sup>230</sup> (Crawford 104). The configurations of masculinity manifested by

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<sup>230</sup> Emphasis in the original.

Edward, Stefan and Bill are not radically revolutionary ones. Thus, despite the progressive potential contained in these representations, it is important to also acknowledge their limits. In the analyzed vampire romances, female subjectivation, the expansion of agency, and the achievement of empowerment do not work in uncomplicated ways either. Thus, the conception of “‘empowerment’ as it is understood within postfeminist discourse” (Gwynne and Muller 8) is highly debatable, and has indeed been criticized by many feminist scholars because of its exclusionary workings. As Tasker and Negra write with a nod to bell hooks, subjectivation and empowerment are not accessible to everyone in a postfeminist culture that elevates “consumption as a strategy . . . for the production of the self” (2): “the limited inclusion of certain women within privileged educational, professional, and other work contexts results . . . from the demands of a consumer-led capitalism” (2). The fact that the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* privilege the experiences, opportunities, gazes and desires of young, white, cis, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class<sup>231</sup> women confirms Gill’s argument that postfeminist themes “coexist with stark and continuing inequalities and exclusions that relate to ‘race’ and ethnicity, class, age, sexuality and disability – as well as gender” (*Gender and the Media* 255) in the media. Postfeminism’s omissions and “cultural erasure of non-mainstream representation” (Gwynne and Muller 9) remain extremely problematic elements of a phenomenon that is highly conflict-ridden, and that often presents only partially useful solutions to existing inequalities in the “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks, *Feminist Theory* 118) because of its willful ignorance of systemic and institutionalized power structures.

One way to make sense of the fundamental flaws ingrained in postfeminism is to consider its incorporation into popular/consumer culture. While this work has not considered “feminism’s entry into the popular as necessarily a depoliticisation and dilution” (Genz and Brabon 25), it should be noted that a popular version of feminism may have to make certain concessions in terms of its radicalism (Genz and Brabon 25). Thus, postfeminism can only amplify women’s/girls’ voices and bring more people to feminism if it does not alienate too many media consumers. As Genz and Brabon point out, postfeminism walks a tightrope between different aspirations, “seeking to reconcile feminist ideas of female emancipation and equality, consumerist demands of capitalist societies and media-friendly depictions of feminine/masculine empowerment” (41). The

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<sup>231</sup> An exception is Sookie Stackhouse, who has a working-class background; her father was a mechanic, her mother a waitress/homemaker.

“tension between . . . disruption and containment” (Projansky 69) is an essential ingredient of postfeminist media texts, and sometimes the balance tilts to one side or the other. Mostly, however, both elements exist simultaneously. An aspect that surfaced at several points throughout the preceding analyses is that problematic, limiting or retrogressive representations are acknowledged but at the same time reinscribed in the texts. This double movement can be seen as “emblematic of postfeminist media culture” (Fradley 205), and is one of its central predicaments. Postfeminism’s paradoxical practices cannot be considered separately from its existence as a “cultural media phenomenon” (Genz and Brabon 18). Thus, an undisputed defining characteristic of postfeminism is that it “[s]peaks ‘through’ popular culture” (Whelehan, “Remaking Feminism” 161). Instead of envisioning a complete turning upside down of patriarchal power structures, postfeminism’s “form of politics accepts the necessity of working within what already exists and forging a future from resources inevitably impure” (Genz and Brabon 40). As Ferriss and Young suggest, postfeminism is “cognizant that, despite naïve expectations to the contrary, there is no way of living outside of contemporary consumer culture” (55). Thus, for instance, while Mulvey opted for the complete destruction of the cinematic apparatus and its accompanying scopophilic pleasures because of their entrenchment in the patriarchy, the analyzed postfeminist media products manage to offer female visual pleasures in the frame of mainstream screen texts. These visual pleasures are neither straightforward nor without problems (see for example the racist rendering of *Twilight*’s character Jacob Black as sexualized object of the gaze). What they demonstrate, however, is “that the contradictions of capitalism and patriarchy allow space for disturbances of dominant meanings to occur in the mainstream, with results that may not be free of contradictions, but which do signify shifts in regimes of representation” (Gamman and Marshment 4).

Postfeminist political practice may also be understood as containing fundamental “problem areas” (Gwynne and Muller 9) because it mirrors the complicated and necessarily flawed everyday practice of feminism in an unequal contemporary society. As already stated, postfeminism does not invest in second wave “feminist politics and critique, which have historically been dependent on separatist, collective and activist practice” (Genz and Brabon 35). Instead, it proposes a “reconceptualisation of political and critical practices” (Genz and Brabon 34), for example by reworking notions of individual agency. Crucially, postfeminist politics are a “politics of contradiction” (Genz and Brabon 36) since they reflect the plurality of people’s experiences in the

contemporary culture. The *Twilight Saga*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* engage in this kind of postfeminist politics by raising and examining in a supernatural context situations which illustrate the complex struggles of women and girls in the current society. Here the liminal figure of the vampire is made productive for the ‘both/and’ approach of postfeminism by becoming a projection surface for a variety of contradictory discourses surrounding gender, sexuality, identity, and the body.

Interestingly, Budgeon argues that “lived contradictions associated with new femininities reveal the instability of gender categories and create the possibility for reclaiming femininity through the reappropriation and resignification of dominant codings of femininity” (“The Contradictions” 283). Concurrently, Abele suggests that “rather than seeing postfeminism as necessarily a step backward from gender equality, . . . it might operate more as a plateau – with liberating possibilities available to *men and women*”<sup>232</sup> (xiv). Thus, like the selected paranormal romances’ teenaged protagonists, who occupy a state of in-between-ness, postfeminism might be conceptualized as inhabiting a “transitory space” (de Toro 20) that maintains continuities with established paradigms but is also able to foster innovations. This transitory space, which is inherently incomplete, conflicted, undecided, and polysemic, works as a site of struggle for meaning and representation – a struggle that might produce new and creative configurations of gender. As this dissertation has demonstrated throughout its extensive and nuanced analyses, in the *Twilight Saga*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*, a range of cultural values are actively debated, which shows that definitions of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ are continually evolving.

By understanding gender as continually fluctuating and shifting discursive constructs, this research participates in the rich tradition of scholarly investigations of ‘masculinity,’ ‘femininity,’ and non-binary gender identities. In its analyses, this work has mostly focused on prominent characters of the *Twilight Saga*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood*, who are, as pointed out earlier, predominantly young, white, cis, heterosexual, able-bodied, and middle-class. While I have made an effort to remain mindful as well as critical of the exclusions that my own analyses entail, it would further be worthwhile for (post)feminist scholarship to examine and concentrate on the representation of non-hegemonic identities either in the texts selected for this dissertation, or in other (related) texts. As Bellas argues, identifying and writing about alternative

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<sup>232</sup> Emphasis in the original.

masculinities and femininities “validates and makes them visible, thus activating their cultural power” (*Fairy Tales on the Teen Screen* 237).

Around the time of writing, the vampire craze in Anglo-American popular culture may have passed its peak but it still continues to thrive. The upcoming years will see the launch of a number of re-inventions of older vampire narratives, among them *The Lost Boys*, which is currently adapted into a TV series by Rob Thomas on *The CW* (Andreeva, “‘The Lost Boys’ TV Series”), and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (*The WB/UPN*, 1997-2003), whose TV sequel with an African-American actress in the lead role was announced in July 2018 (T. Robinson). Meanwhile, people involved in the creation of the *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* and *True Blood* are going on to contribute to other vampire/paranormal texts. Stephenie Meyer, author of the *Twilight* series, is currently executive-producing, together with Stephen Garrett, a supernatural spy-thriller series named *The Rook*, which is to be released on *Starz* in 2019 (at the time of writing, it remains unclear whether vampires will play a role in the series’ paranormal setting) (Clarke); Charlaine Harris, author of *The Sookie Stackhouse Novels*, has provided the novel basis for another vampire TV series called *Midnight, Texas* (*NBC*, 2017-running), which has been renewed for a second season starting in the fall of 2018 (Andreeva, “‘Midnight, Texas’ Drama”); Ian Somerhalder, who appeared as Damon Salvatore on *The Vampire Diaries*, has been cast to play a leading part in *V-Wars*, a TV adaptation of the print anthology series *V-Wars: Chronicles of the Vampire Wars* by best-selling author Jonathan Maberry for the streaming service Netflix (Goldberg); and *The Vampire Diaries* will be followed by a brand-new spin-off entitled *Legacies*, premiering in October 2018 on *The CW* (Pena).<sup>233</sup> Thus, it seems as if a number of things are happening in terms of vampire TV. An interesting task for future research would be to observe developments regarding genre, ideology, and (post)feminisms within these related popular cultural products. Will upcoming vampire TV and film offer fresh configurations of gender? Will postfeminism continue to produce complex, yet problematic representations, and what will the role of the vampire figure be in the frame of prospective texts? The fact that Monica Owusu-Breen, an American woman of color, has signed on to oversee the *Buffy* sequel,<sup>234</sup> and that the show will revolve around the experiences of a Black female protagonist, suggests that paranormal romances/urban fantasy narratives of the near future may hold some significant new meanings and pleasures for audiences. As the

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<sup>233</sup> At the same time, *The Vampire Diaries*’ first spin-off, *The Originals*, will air its final episode in August 2018.

<sup>234</sup> Coincidentally, Owusu-Breen is also the showrunner of the above-mentioned *Midnight, Texas* series.

producers of the sequel have announced, “[l]ike our world, it will be richly diverse, and like the original, some aspects of the series could be seen as metaphors for issues facing us all today” (T. Robinson). Considering the long-standing academic interest in Whedon’s vampire universe – an academic field which has become known as *Buffy Studies* –, the upcoming TV series is likely to inspire a new wave of critical studies, including new analyses of the current state of a potentially more intersectional (post)feminism in American (popular) culture and society.



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## Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Die vorliegende Dissertation beschäftigt sich mit der Repräsentation und Inszenierung von Geschlechterrollen, Geschlechterbeziehungen und Sexualität in der *Twilight*-Filmreihe (2008-2012) sowie den Fernsehserien *The Vampire Diaries* (*The CW*, 2009-2017) und *True Blood* (*HBO*, 2008-2014). Die Arbeit verortet diese ungemein erfolgreichen und beliebten populärkulturellen Produkte in ihrem zeitgenössischen US-amerikanischen kulturellen Kontext und analysiert sie im Hinblick auf die Verbreitung postfeministischer Ideologien sowie die Verhandlung aktueller Diskurse über Geschlecht, Sexualität, Subjektivität, Handlungsfähigkeit (*agency*) und den Körper.

Die untersuchten audio-visuellen Texte, welche jeweils die Liebesgeschichte zwischen einer jungen, weiblichen, menschlichen Protagonistin und einem deutlich älteren männlichen Vampir in den Mittelpunkt stellen, sind als Ausdruck der außerordentlichen Konjunktur der Vampirfigur seit der Mitte der 2000er Jahre zu verstehen. Glennis Byron verweist in diesem Zusammenhang auf den ökonomischen Erfolg einer „massive vampire romance industry, now generally considered to be the most popular subgenre of paranormal romance“ (172). Dabei ist ausschlaggebend, dass es sich bei dem Vampir-Boom um eine multimediale Erscheinung handelt: Das *paranormal romance*-Genre spiegelt sich nicht nur in der literarischen Gattung der Romane wider, sondern vor allem auch in Kinofilmen und Fernsehserien. Auch die drei im Rahmen der Dissertation analysierten Film- und Fernsehserien beruhen allesamt auf literarischen Vorlagen. Die *Twilight* Saga, welche aus fünf Filmen besteht, nämlich *Twilight* (2008, Regisseurin: Catherine Hardwicke), *New Moon* (2009, Regisseur: Chris Weitz), *Eclipse* (2010, Regisseur: David Slade), *Breaking Dawn – Part 1* (2011, Regisseur: Bill Condon) und *Breaking Dawn – Part 2* (2012, Regisseur: Bill Condon), ist eine Reihe von Buchverfilmungen der *Twilight*-Reihe von Stephenie Meyer (erschieden zwischen 2005 und 2008); *The Vampire Diaries* beruht auf der gleichnamigen Buchreihe von L.J. Smith von 1991/92; und *True Bloods* literarische Vorlage ist die Romanreihe *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* (auch bekannt unter dem Titel *The Sookie Stackhouse Novels*; 2001-2013) von Charlaine Harris.

In das Feld der *Cultural Studies* eingebettet, basiert die vorliegende Arbeit auf einem konstruktivistischen Kulturverständnis und begreift Repräsentation als Teil des Prozesses, in dem innerhalb einer Kultur Bedeutung geschaffen und ausgetauscht wird. Die Leitfrage des Projekts bezieht sich demnach auf die Konstruktion von geschlechtlichen Identitäten in den genannten aktuellen Medienproduktionen. Wie Heike



Paul und Alexandra Ganser herausstellen, ist die Geschlechterdifferenz „keinesfalls losgelöst von anderen Differenzkategorien und -phänomenen“ (1) wie *race*, *class* und *age* zu betrachten. Innerhalb der Dissertation werden deshalb auch andere Differenzkategorien, die grundlegend für populärkulturelle Konstruktionen von Identität und Alterität sind, mit in den Blick genommen, wobei die „Geschlechterdifferenz als Leitdifferenz“ (Paul and Ganser 1) jedoch zentral bleibt. Indem der Zusammenhang zwischen den ausgesuchten zeitgenössischen *vampire romances* und aktuellen postfeministischen Diskursen untersucht wird, leistet das Projekt damit einen Beitrag zur fortlaufenden Debatte um das Konzept des Postfeminismus. In diesem Sinne wird Populärkultur begriffen als „critical location for the constitution of the meanings of feminism, a site on, through and against which the contents and significations of feminism are produced and understood“ (Genz and Brabon 19).

Das Dissertationsprojekt fragt des Weiteren nach der Bedeutung sowie auch der Anziehungskraft der kontemporären Vampirfigur und trägt durch seine Analysen zum umfangreichen Forschungsbereich der *vampire studies* bei. Nina Auerbach hat in ihrem viel zitierten Werk *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (1995) auf die Tatsache hingewiesen, dass das Vampirmotiv kulturellen Veränderungen unterworfen sei: „vampires shape themselves to personal and national moods . . . Because they are always changing, their appeal is dramatically generational“ (5). Im Rahmen der Dissertation werden die Charakteristika des Vampirs der heutigen Generation bestimmt; hier fokussiert sich die Arbeit auf den Zusammenhang zwischen der populärkulturellen Figur des modernen Vampirs und postfeministischen Diskursen. Die literarische und filmische Figur des Vampirs funktioniert als äußerst wandelbare Metapher für ‚das Andere‘ und erlangt in verschiedenen Kontexten unterschiedliche kulturelle, gesellschaftliche sowie politische Bedeutungen (Gordon and Hollinger, „Introduction“ 2). So kann der Vampir als Projektionsfläche gelten, auf der kulturelle Aspekte illustriert und verhandelt werden. Im Falle des gegenwärtig populären Vampirtyps lässt sich als Forschungsergebnis formulieren, dass dieser aktuell zirkulierende Ideen des Postfeminismus widerspiegelt und sogleich essentiell an der Etablierung dieser Ideen mitwirkt.

Im Rahmen der Arbeit wurden die ausgewählten *paranormal romances* in einem *close reading*, also einer textgenauen, detailbezogenen Lektüre und Analyse, untersucht. Diese Lektüre beinhaltete die kritische Evaluation und die Analyse formaler Eigenschaften sowie medialer Techniken, narrativer Strategien und Charakterdarstellungen. In einem *wide reading* wurden die Texte zudem in Beziehung zu

ihrem historischen und kulturellen Kontext, nämlich dem des Postfeminismus, gesetzt. Dieser wird im Rahmen dieser Arbeit verstanden als „the cultural formation that has become the dominant framework in western culture’s discourses of gender“ (Levine 137). Im Gegensatz zu einer Reihe von ForscherInnen, die Postfeminismus ausschließlich als regressive und anti-feministische Formation verstehen, geht diese Dissertation davon aus, dass es sich beim Postfeminismus im Kern um ein hybrides, widersprüchliches Phänomen handelt, welches im Schnittpunkt verschiedener kultureller Einflüsse – wie Feminismus, Neoliberalismus, Konsumkultur, Populärkultur, Individualismus und Postmodernismus – entsteht. Postfeministische Diskurse zeichnen sich demnach durch eine Gleichzeitigkeit von rückwärtsgewandten wie liberalen Elementen, von *backlash* und innovativem Potenzial aus. Wie Yvonne Tasker und Diane Negra formulieren: „[p]ostfeminist culture does not allow us to make straightforward distinctions between progressive and regressive texts“ (“Introduction” 22). In der Postfeminismus-Forschung wird dieses Charakteristikum postfeministischer Diskurse als „double movement“ (Genz and Brabon 8) oder auch als „both/and“-Moment (Rutland 74) bezeichnet. Im Rahmen der Dissertation wird auf detaillierte und systematische Weise herausgearbeitet, dass dieses Element der Widersprüchlichkeit bzw. Gleichzeitigkeit von Rück- und Fortschritt ein zentrales Merkmal der hier analysierten *Twilight*-Filmreihe sowie der Fernsehserien *The Vampire Diaries* und *True Blood* darstellt.

Wie argumentiert wird, steht das Element der Widersprüchlichkeit im Zentrum der untersuchten zeitgenössischen *paranormal romances*: Sie oszillieren zwischen der Bestätigung konventioneller Geschlechterstrukturen und dem Bruch mit ihnen. Dies bedeutet, dass die analysierten Texte zum Teil höchst problematische Elemente enthalten, sie aber gleichzeitig die Möglichkeit einer Subversion oder gar Aufhebung geschlechtsspezifischer Machtdynamiken vermitteln. Dieses „double movement“ (Genz and Brabon 8) im Kern dieser kulturellen Produkte ist, wie oben geschildert, eines der wesentlichen Merkmale des Postfeminismus. Im Wesentlichen wird im Rahmen dieser Arbeit deutlich, dass die *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* und *True Blood* eine postfeministische Agenda verfolgen. Das heißt, sie reflektieren und schreiben Ideen fest, die in der zeitgenössischen postfeministischen Kultur verwurzelt sind. Wie gezeigt wird, fungiert die übernatürliche Figur des Vampirs, die in den analysierten Serien prominent vertreten ist, als Trope, die postfeministische Vorstellungen von Geschlecht, Sexualität, Körper und Identität repräsentiert und verhandelt. So eignen sich Vampirerzählungen nicht nur dazu, Machthierarchien – insbesondere hinsichtlich der Kategorien Sexualität,

*gender* und *race* – zu bestätigen, zu diskutieren und/oder zu unterlaufen, sondern sie dienen auch als Projektionsfläche für postfeministische Diskurse der Subjektivierung, Selbstdisziplin und der Selbstoptimierung.

Wie die vorliegende Arbeit illustriert, stehen die hier analysierten hybriden *vampire romances* in der Tradition sowohl des *Gothic*-Genres als auch des *romance*-Genres, die in der feministischen Forschung beide als grundsätzlich ambivalente Genres interpretiert worden sind, welche sich zwischen konservativen generischen Konventionen und feministischem Subtext bewegen. Ellen Moers und Kate Ferguson Ellis beispielsweise lesen die stereotype Darstellung der weiblichen *Gothic*-Heldin, die im Laufe der Erzählung typischerweise zum Opfer eines gewalttätigen männlichen Schurken wird, als subversiven Kommentar zur Unterdrückung von Frauen in einer von Männern dominierten Gesellschaft. Ein wissenschaftlicher Konsens besteht weiterhin darin, dass das *romance*-Genre sowohl durch etablierte Genre-Schemata als auch durch den Einfluss des Feminismus strukturiert wird (Veldman-Genz, "The More the Merrier?" 115). So argumentieren Tania Modleski und Janice A. Radway, dass trotz der oft fragwürdigen Darstellung von männlicher Gewalt gegenüber der romantischen Heldin die Funktion des Genres darin bestehe, Herausforderungen von Frauen angesichts einer patriarchalen Gesellschaft darzustellen, gegen Ungleichheiten zu protestieren und symbolische Lösungen dafür zu finden. Die Dissertation orientiert sich an feministischen Analysen dieser Art und setzt sich kritisch mit dem *paranormal romance*-Genre auseinander, dem die ausgewählten Film- und Fernsehserien zuzuordnen sind.

Wie die Analysekapitel zeigen, beschäftigen sich die untersuchten Vampirtexte mit (post)feministischen Themen wie Alltagssexismus und Gewalt gegen Frauen und Mädchen, mit Machtverhältnissen in heterosexuellen Beziehungen, sexueller Autonomie und Lust, (Selbst-)Ermächtigung und (Selbst-)Überwachung. Wie bereits erwähnt, sind die genannten Texte in mancher Hinsicht zutiefst problematisch, bieten zugleich aber auch hochinteressante, potenziell subversive Momente, in denen geschlechtsspezifische Machtdynamiken herausgefordert werden. Ein zentrales Ergebnis dieser Forschungsarbeit ist, dass die drei analysierten *paranormal romance*-Texte nicht nur fortdauernde geschlechtsspezifische Ungleichheiten auf ambivalente Weise thematisieren, sondern auch innovative Versionen oder Resignifizierungen von Geschlechterrollen anbieten. Die *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* und *True Blood* spiegeln somit die Pluralität und Widersprüchlichkeit der Erfahrungen junger Frauen und Männer in der aktuellen postfeministischen Kultur wider, welche durch Entwicklungen

wie sich ständig verschiebende Geschlechternormen, neoliberalistische Ideen und die Auflösung wirtschaftlicher, ökologischer und sozialer Stabilitäten gekennzeichnet ist. Wodurch sich die Texte demnach auszeichnen, ist eine typisch postfeministische „politics of ambiguity“ (*Sisterhood, Interrupted* 154), wie Deborah Siegel es formuliert hat. Entgegen der Meinung einiger ForscherInnen, dass postfeministische (Populär-)Kultur grundlegend apolitisch sei (Tasker and Negra 5), versteht diese Dissertation Postfeminismus nicht als entpolitisiert. Vielmehr orientiert sie sich an Stéphanie Genz und Benjamin A. Brabon, die argumentieren, dass „the second wave’s interpretative framework and models of political action need to be expanded in order to include the multiple agency and subject positions that individuals take up in twenty-first-century culture and society“ (39). Im Gegensatz zu etablierten Formen des feministischen Aktivismus sind postfeministische Ansätze gekennzeichnet durch Versuche, Weiblichkeit und Sexualität mit neuer Bedeutung zu versehen, durch den Fokus auf individuelle Ermächtigungsstrategien, durch die Akzeptanz und das Arbeiten mit den „paradoxes of postmodern subjectivity“ (Brabon, ““Chuck Flick”” 126) sowie durch die Überbrückung von Binaritäten – allesamt Merkmale, die sich in der *Twilight Saga*, *The Vampire Diaries* und *True Blood* wiederfinden.

So untersucht die Dissertation beispielsweise die bewusste Privilegierung weiblichen heterosexuellen Begehrens und weiblicher Subjektivität in den ausgewählten *paranormal romances* und setzt diese in Beziehung zu postfeministischen Diskursen über weibliche sexuelle Ermächtigung und Selbstbestimmung. Wie Kapitel 4 zeigt, inszenieren die Texte keinen männlichen, sondern einen weiblichen heterosexuellen Blick, der es einer weiblichen (jugendlichen) Zielgruppe ermöglicht, sich in den untersuchten Texten als Subjekte zu verorten. Zu diesem Zweck setzen die analysierten Serien sowohl auf narrativer als auch auf visueller Ebene strategisch die Figur des männlichen Vampirs ein. Hier ist es der übernatürlich-attraktive Körper des Vampirs, der zum Hauptobjekt des erotischen Blicks wird. Als eine Figur, die kulturell gesehen in vielerlei Hinsicht ‚das Andere‘ repräsentiert, nimmt der Vampir in den betrachteten *paranormal romances* die Position ein, die in Mainstream-Film und -Fernsehen typischerweise Frauen zugewiesen wird. In Übereinstimmung mit postfeministischen Diskursen um weibliche sexuelle Subjektivität und Selbstbestimmung werden in der *Twilight Saga*, *The Vampire Diaries* und *True Blood* die sexuell begehrenden Blicke der weiblichen Protagonistinnen Bella Swan, Elena Gilbert und Sookie Stackhouse auf ihre Vampirliebhaber in Szene gesetzt. Gleichzeitig wird dem Publikum eindrücklich

vermittelt, wie die Heldinnen Bella und Sookie zum sexualisierten Objekt eines heterosexuellen männlichen Blicks werden. Dabei werden sowohl die einschränkenden und übergriffigen als auch die potenziell ermächtigenden Aspekte dieser Erfahrung dargestellt. Indem die Texte einen (heterosexuellen) weiblichen Blick hervorheben, kritisieren, verkomplizieren und/oder instrumentalisieren sie die konventionelle Blickdynamik in populären Medientexten sowie die sexistische, patriarchale Kultur, in welche diese Texte einzuordnen sind.

Des Weiteren beschäftigt sich die vorliegende Arbeit mit postfeministischen Diskursen der individuellen Ermächtigung sowie der Körper- und Selbstoptimierung, wie sie in den untersuchten Texten auftreten. Durch die Analysen in Kapitel 5 wird deutlich, dass die *Twilight Saga*, *The Vampire Diaries* und *True Blood* die Figur des weiblichen Vampirs nutzen, um die Idee der ständigen disziplinären Gestaltung des Selbst durch Arbeit am Körper zu verhandeln. So lässt sich das in allen drei Texten vorkommende Narrativ der weiblichen vampirischen Transformation als Erzählung eines postfeministischen Makeovers lesen. Im Verlauf ihrer Verwandlung in Vampirinnen verkörpern die weiblichen Charaktere Bella Swan, Caroline Forbes und Jessica Hamby jeweils das Paradoxon des aktiven/passiven postfeministischen Subjekts, das individuell ermächtigt ist, jedoch gleichzeitig durch soziale Normen beherrscht wird. Bella, Caroline und Jessica gewinnen im Zuge ihrer Vampir-Makeover einerseits Subjektivität sowie Handlungsfähigkeit (*agency*) und nehmen ihr Vampirdasein als Möglichkeit aktiver Selbstverwirklichung wahr. Andererseits werden die Grenzen ihres Subjektwerdens durch disziplinäre Kräfte bestimmt, da sich die Vampirinnen gleichzeitig normativen Idealen unterwerfen (müssen). So wird Bellas, Carolines und Jessicas Handlungsfähigkeit durch die soziale Ordnung der Vampire in den jeweiligen Serien eingeschränkt. Diese in der Regel durch männliche Autoritäten vertretene soziale Ordnung schreibt den jungen Frauen vor, ihren Blutdurst jederzeit zu kontrollieren und eine sozial verträgliche Form von Weiblichkeit zu performen, indem sie ihre gewalttätigen Impulse in Schach halten. Zusammengefasst werden in den analysierten *vampire romances* postfeministische/neoliberale Diskurse rund um unternehmerische Formen von Subjektivität, Selbstoptimierung und Individualismus auf den weiblichen Vampirkörper projiziert.

Ein weiteres Ergebnis der Analysen lautet, dass die untersuchten populärkulturellen Produkte eine Neudefinition hegemonialer Männlichkeit bieten, indem die männlichen Vampirprotagonisten in allen drei Texten als postfeministische Männer charakterisiert

werden. Der postfeministische Mann, eine an sich widersprüchliche Formation, führt einerseits Aspekte älterer, traditioneller Formen von Männlichkeit fort, hält andererseits jedoch neue Entwürfe einer selbstreflexiven, potenziell progressiven Männlichkeit bereit, die sich im Einklang mit feministischen Ideen befindet. In Kapitel 6 wird deutlich, dass auf dem Körper des männlichen sympathischen Vampirs Diskurse rund um diese hybride Form von Männlichkeit abgebildet werden, die im Begriff ist, ihre eigene geschlechtsspezifische Dominanz in Frage zu stellen. Die widersprüchlichen Eigenschaften des postfeministischen Mannes werden von der Figur des sympathischen Vampirs überzeugend eingefangen. Letztere ist sowohl mit einer weit zurückliegenden Vergangenheit verbunden, die auf nostalgische Weise mit traditionellen Geschlechterrollen assoziiert wird, als auch in der Gegenwart verwurzelt, welche durch den Einfluss des Feminismus und der Postmoderne geprägt ist. Einerseits behalten die Vampirhelden in der *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* und *True Blood* kulturell positiv bewertete Aspekte von Männlichkeit – wie körperliche Stärke, Autorität, Macht und Aggression – bei, die hier als ‚natürliche‘ Merkmale des Vampirs dargestellt werden. Andererseits weisen die Vampirhelden Edward Cullen, Stefan Salvatore und Bill Compton auch Eigenschaften auf, die traditionellerweise als typisch ‚weiblich‘ gelten, wie z.B. Sensibilität, Empathie und die Bereitschaft, emotionale Arbeit zu übernehmen. Mit ihren postfeministischen Vampirhelden präsentieren die untersuchten *paranormal romances* einen Entwurf von Männlichkeit, der zwar weiterhin hegemonial, gleichzeitig aber offen für die Auflösung von Geschlechterhierarchien ist.

Die untersuchten postfeministischen Texte weisen ein progressives Potenzial auf und bieten aufgrund ihrer ‚both/and‘-Struktur (Rutland 74) faszinierende Repräsentationen von Geschlecht und Sexualität, stoßen jedoch auch an ganz bestimmte Grenzen. So bestehen die primären Ziele postfeministischer Ansätze weder im kompletten Umsturz noch der grundsätzlichen Neu-Ordnung kultureller Machtverhältnisse. Vielmehr arbeitet der Postfeminismus mit etablierten Elementen eines ungleichen Systems, das durch patriarchale, kapitalistische Strukturen und Ideen weißer Vorherrschaft geprägt ist: „postmodern/postfeminist discourse offers a paradoxical critique that works within the very systems it attempts to undermine“ (Genz and Brabon 118). Die charakteristische Widersprüchlichkeit und Polysemie postfeministischer Diskurse lässt sich dadurch erklären, dass sie eine schwierige Gratwanderung zwischen verschiedenen Bestrebungen vollziehen, indem sie „feminist ideas of female emancipation and equality, consumerist demands of capitalist societies and media-

friendly depictions of feminine/masculine empowerment“ (Genz and Brabon 41) zu kombinieren versuchen. Die Tatsache, dass die analysierten populärkulturellen Produkte die Erfahrungen, Wünsche und Handlungsoptionen junger, weißer, cis-identifizierter, heterosexueller, nicht behinderter, bürgerlicher Frauen in den Vordergrund rücken, bestätigt Gills Feststellung, dass postfeministische Diskurse häufig durch Ungleichheiten und Ausgrenzungsmechanismen geprägt sind (*Gender and the Media* 255). Die Vernachlässigung und Unsichtbarmachung marginalisierter Identitäten – von Joel Gwynne und Nadine Muller als „cultural erasure of non-mainstream representation“ (9) bezeichnet – bleiben kritisch zu betrachtende Elemente postfeministischer Medienkultur. Letztlich stellen der Postfeminismus wie auch die in ihm produzierten kulturellen Produkte konfliktbeladene Phänomene dar, die oft nur mäßig nützliche Lösungen für bestehende Ungleichheiten bieten, da sie dazu tendieren, systemische und institutionalisierte Machtstrukturen zu ignorieren. Trotz dieser erheblichen Einschränkungen ist, so zeigt die vorliegende Dissertation, eine politische Lesart postfeministischer Medientexte möglich. Obgleich die *Twilight* Saga, *The Vampire Diaries* und *True Blood* keine radikal neuen, revolutionären Entwürfe von Geschlecht vorlegen, so bieten sie doch eine Reihe spielerischer und potenziell progressiver Repräsentationen und Bedeutungsverschiebungen an, die sie für ein postfeministisches Publikum überaus attraktiv machen.