

## *Twilight*: Cultural Phenomenon or Sexist Manifesto?

Alexandra Francois

As America becomes increasingly saturated by an economic recession and an abundance of foreign crises, both teenagers and adults have turned to the literary world as a means of escape. This escape has been found in Stephenie Meyer's nationally acclaimed *Twilight* series, as well as the much anticipated *Twilight* film released by Summit Entertainment in November of 2008. However, with Meyer's work praised as a cultural phenomenon, many individuals have denounced the series as "representing sexist views in almost every way" (Rice). The novels have generated a heated controversy in the literary world regarding whether the *Twilight* series is a brilliant representation of teenage angst and adolescence, or a sexist manifesto demeaning the female gender as inferior, weak, and dangerously vulnerable.

The plot of the first *Twilight* novel unfolded after author, Stephenie Meyer, experienced a dream involving an immortal, one hundred year old vampire. His appearance eternally remained that of a seventeen-year image of male perfection. The vampire fell in love with an ordinary, teenage mortal girl with damsel in distress attributes. However, the phrase "*happily ever after*" became lost in the struggle for survival and acceptance within the contrary realms of the human and supernatural worlds. Meyer's dream soon evolved into a plotline for a series of novels. The teenage vampire became known as the heartbreaking and beautiful Edward Cullen, while her heroine developed into the simple, yet complicated, Bella Swan. In Meyer's works, the Cullen Family remains a group of unique "vegetarian" vampires, who rely on the blood of

animals instead of humans in order to satisfy their hunger. The introductory novel of the *Twilight* series focuses on the discovery of the Cullens' secret, the passionate first love between Bella and Edward, and the eventual fall from grace Bella experiences for the sake of Edward. The second novel, *New Moon*, presents the disappearance of Edward as a method of protecting Bella, and her resulting cloud of depression. The third and final novel centers on Bella's desire to convert to Edward's vampire soul mate, a best friend who spontaneously transforms into a werewolf, the birth of a child who possesses the characteristics of both a human and a vampire, and the enduring threat of a power-hungry race of evil vampires.

The *Twilight* series has evoked adoration by readers, as well as impressive praise by literary critics. The first novel, *Twilight*, had already sold 1.5 million copies by August of 2008. The final novel, *Breaking Dawn*, sold 1.3 million copies in the first twenty-four hours following the release date (Hand). Meyer has received the *New York Times* Editor's Choice Award, the *Publisher's Weekly* Best Book of the Year Award, and the Amazon "Best Book of the Decade...So Far" Award for her first *Twilight* novel. *Twilight* has already been translated and published in twenty different languages. After the release of the first installment of Meyer's series, a critic for the *School Library Journal* claimed: "Realistic, subtle, succinct, and easy to follow, *Twilight* will have readers dying to sink their teeth into it" ("Official Bio"). In fact, readers have surrendered both their hearts and minds to the characters that Stephenie Meyer has so vividly created within her fantasy world.

Meyer's *Twilight* novels have a compelling parallel to Shakespeare's tragic love story, *Romeo and Juliet*. Edward Cullen and Bella Swan now occupy the literary scene as the 21<sup>st</sup> century version of hero and heroine. Lizzie Skurnick writes, "It's an impressive update of the Montagues and Capulets...and Meyer not only takes advantage

of the inherent dramatic tension embodied in knowing your love may destroy your beloved, she surrounds it with the typical world of a teenager.” Meyer incorporates chivalrous quotes so that readers relinquish their affection to the fictional romantic, Edward Cullen. In the first novel, Edward serenades Bella with charming, passionate lines, such as “[S]o the lion fell in love with the lamb” and “You’re like my own, personal brand of heroin” (Meyer 268, 274). Female readers may read the series because they are aware that Edward Cullen is merely a figment of their imagination – a figment of male perfection that can never truly exist outside their malleable minds and vulnerable, naïve hearts. Meyer replaces Shakespeare’s 16<sup>th</sup> century world with today’s 21<sup>st</sup> century teenage one in order to allow readers to identify with the characters throughout all four novels. Along with confronting issues involving vampires, werewolves, and immortality, Bella also encounters concerns of completing her schoolwork, earning her father’s trust, and scrutinizing ways to avoid accompanying Edward to her high school Prom. Another aspect of Meyer’s cultural phenomenon is *Twilight’s* capacity to grant readers an escape from reality – an escape from the angst of adolescence, along with an entry into a fantasy world filled with romance and intrigue where the impossible becomes possible.

Contrastingly, numerous readers and critics have categorized Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series as a sexist and demeaning literary collection that ultimately undermines gender equality in relationships and friendships. Critics believe Meyer is depicting the female gender as inferior and weak in comparison to the superior, dominant male gender. In the second novel, Bella slips into a bleak haze of sorrow and anguish after Edward disappears in order to diminish the possibility of harming her both emotionally and physically in the future. As a result, Bella participates in dangerous activities and behaviors as a tactic to hear Edward’s sweet words of warning within her conscience. Kellen Rice states, “What does this say to readers, bearing in mind that the target

audience is the tragically impressionable 12-17 year old girls? That they should fall apart at the seams for *months* if their boyfriend leaves them? That reckless self-endangerment is okay, so long as it's to be close to your lover? What a lovely message to send to young women." Edward and Bella's intense first love relationship becomes a matter of life and death, which further explains the reasoning behind *Twilight's* criticism among parents and teachers.

Select critics have categorized the work of Meyer as "girl porn," which "[D]oes not rely on graphic material to captivate its female audience. Rather, this special type of porn manifests itself in the form of emotional binges, excessive romanticizing and interaction with impossibly perfect male characters". This literary category of "girl porn" can also be traced back to the novels of Jane Austen and Charlotte Bronte (Leavines).

The structure and diction Meyer utilizes within her novels have also been a focus of criticism. In a recent article in *USA Weekend*, author Stephen King, voiced his opinion on Meyer's writing ability. King states, "Stephenie Meyer can't write worth a darn. She's not very good." One example of a targeted device occurs in her second novel, *New Moon*. During Edward's disappearance, Bella slips into an emotionally wretched and suicidal state of mind. Consequently, Meyer includes blank pages simply stating the names of the consecutive months Bella is grieving as a means to avoid the obligation of chronicling the angst and sorrow of heartache and abandonment (Leavines). Meyer is also criticized for her excessive use of adjectives glorifying Edward's perfection, as well as her poor diction: "This series devotes a total of 2,443 pages to sappy prose, abused adjectives, nauseatingly detailed descriptions and sub-par dialogue. References to Edward's '...heavenly, seraphic' beauty tally at a vomit-inducing 165 in the first book, and only increases as the series progresses" (Leavines). The adjectives and description Stephenie Meyer includes only adds to the façade of a male ideal that simply cannot exist

within teenage reality.

Since the release of Meyer's first novel, critics and readers have endeavored to determine whether the *Twilight* series is either a failure or success within the teenage literary realm. The astronomical number of *Twilight* book and movie sales sufficiently exemplifies Meyer's collection as a triumphant reinvention. However, critics who deem Meyer's novels as sexist and demeaning strongly believe that "Books like *Twilight* are nothing more than junk food for the female soul masquerading as literature" (Leavines). Whether perceived as a cultural phenomenon or a sexist manifesto, Stephenie Meyer's fictional series has raised the issue of gender inequality in adolescent relationships, as well as the emotional intensity within the core of vulnerable, innocent teenagers.

## Works Cited

Hand, Elizabeth. "Love Bites: The final book in a mega-selling series sucks the romance out of teen vampires." Book World. 38.32. (2008): 7.

Leavines, Linnie. "Juxtaposed Notions: 'Twilight' is cleverly disguised porn for women." Daily Reveille. 8 March 2009. 13 March 2009  
<<http://www.lsureveille.com>>.

Lynch, Lorrie. "Stephen King on J.K. Rowling, Stephenie Meyer." USA Weekend. 2 February 2009. 16 March 2009 <<http://www.blogs.usaweekend.com>>.

Meyer, Stephenie. *Twilight*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005.

"Official Bio." The Official Website of Stephenie Meyer. 22 March 2009  
<<http://www.stepheniemeyer.com/bio.html>>.

Rice, Kellen. "'Twilight' Sucks... And Not in a Good Way." PSA. 16 August 2008. 8 March 2009 <<http://www.psa.blastmagazine.com>>.

Skurnick, Lizzie. "An essay: Stephenie Meyer's take on life." Chicago Tribune. 2 August 2008. 16 March 2009 <<http://www.archives.chicagotribune.com>>.