



## *TWILIGHT: MOVIE REVIEW*

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It's that time of year again: Hollywood has begun to release its winter films that it hopes will be blockbusters, or at least do well in box office returns in connection with the holiday movie viewing habits of consumers. The latest fantasy film involving youth and the supernatural (or supranormal) is doing very well in this regard. But this film is not the latest installment in the Harry Potter series. Move over, J.K. Rowling, there's a new player in town. Instead of wizards and wands its teenagers and vampires in the romantic vampire hybrid film *Twilight*,<sup>1</sup> which made \$70.5 million dollars through North American theaters in its opening weekend in November, making this the fourth-highest box office opening for a film in that month of the year.<sup>2</sup>

In case you're not a teenager girl, a woman, or keep up on developments in vampire mythology through literature and film, some background information might be helpful in understanding the *Twilight* phenomenon. The film is based on the first book in a four-part series that includes not only *Twilight* (Little, Brown Young Readers, 2005), but also *New Moon* (2006), *Eclipse* (2007), and *Breaking Dawn* (2008). The books are the brainchild of Stephenie Meyer,<sup>3</sup> housewife in Arizona who credited a vivid dream about an average girl and a sparkly vampire

falling in love and dealing with its implications as the inspiration for what would later become *Twilight*.<sup>4</sup> This unlikely idea for a literary phenomenon has gone to become just that, having spent a combined 143 weeks on the *New York Times* best-seller list, and selling more than 5 million copies of the books in the United States alone.<sup>5</sup>

*Twilight* introduces us to a Bella, a teenage girl living in Phoenix with her mom and step-dad who must temporarily move to the small town of Forks in Washington State to stay with her father. As the story unfolds the more mundane challenges of moving, the teenage *Angst* of developing a relationship between an estranged daughter and father, and developing an identity and social life in a new high school, are quickly complicated with a romantic angle. Bella becomes aware of a small group of fellow students from the Cullens Family, and soon falls in love with one of them, Edward, who she later discovers is more than he appears. After some research on local Native American legends and folklore on strange creatures in the area, as well as experiences and personal conversations with Edward, Bella learns that Edward is a vampire.

Meyer adds a few new twists to the ongoing development of the vampire mythology through the *Twilight* series. In keeping with the folkloric creatures of the past the *Twilight* characters are immortal blood-drinkers, but in Meyer's mythos the vampires possess great speed, do not sleep (in coffins or otherwise), do not avoid the sunlight (indeed, they glitter in the sunlight), and each enjoys singularly unique abilities such as Edward's power to read minds.

For horror movie fans thinking about rushing to theaters to catch *Twilight* a few words of clarification are in order. *Twilight* is probably best understood as a teenage romance film which incorporates elements of vampire mythology rather than a horror film that also includes



elements of romance. This emphasis on the romantic in vampire literature is not new. The romantic as well as the erotic aspects of vampire stories have a long history, even before Bram Stoker penned the infamous *Dracula* novel. Sheridan La Fanu wrote a short story in 1872 titled "Carmilla" which presented a female vampire and included "erotic undertones in the strange, unearthly bond that develops between the vampire and victim [which] echo throughout the story."<sup>6</sup> With the emphasis on romance, *Twilight* may be understood as the latest take on the vampire myth which emphasizes this facet. The year 2007 saw the first and only season of *Moonlight*,<sup>7</sup> a television program about a vampire private investigator and his romantic relationship with a human reporter. From 1997-2003 teenagers and other television viewers enjoyed the romantic relationship between Buffy in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*<sup>8</sup> and Angel, a vampire with a soul, as they pursued not only romance but also saved the world each week from various monsters and frequent near-apocalypses.

Given the romantic element of *Twilight* the above mentioned influences from treatments of the vampire in pop culture are most apparent, but other influences seem likely. Beyond the tragic teen love story elements of classic literature in *Romeo and Juliet*, other vampire films seem to have influenced the author. These include *Underworld* (2003)<sup>9</sup> and *Underworld: Evolution* (2006),<sup>10</sup> two films which not only involve romance between mortals and vampires, but also introduce the narrative element of conflict between the vampires and another iconic creature of horror, the werewolf. This is only hinted at as a subplot in *Twilight* through references to ancient folklore and hostility between these creatures, but this element is expanded upon in subsequent books in the series and will no doubt become major elements of the future films as

they are produced. An additional cinematic influence can be seen in *The Lost Boys* (1987),<sup>11</sup> a film about two teenage boys who move to a new town only to encounter trouble through romantic connections to a vampire. *The Lost Boys* involves a subtext of broken traditional family structures, a social issue that came to the fore in the 1980s, and while *Twilight* does not address this in a major way it can be seen as a background issue in regards to Bella's divorced parents and her fragile relationship with her father.<sup>12</sup>

In the 1996 volume which he edited, *Monster Theory*, Jeffrey Cohen suggested that monsters are a projection of the culture that creates them. In his view they are a metaphor that serve as symbolic expressions of cultural unease that pervade a society and shape its collective behavior.<sup>13</sup> As a result, he suggests that cultural theorists need to take monsters seriously, and that doing so results in new insights into the culture that creates them. What does our continued interest in the vampire in popular culture tell us about ourselves, and more specifically, what might we learn from the particular expression of the vampire in *Twilight*?

The vampire has long been recognized as a mythical symbol that embodies a variety of concepts and fears. These include death (and all of its psychological ramifications), immortality, forbidden sexuality, sexual power and surrender, intimacy, alienation, rebellion, violence, and a fascination with the mysterious.<sup>14</sup> Although the zombie has perhaps become the most popular monster figure in late modern Western culture,<sup>15</sup> the vampire continues to fascinate us as we wrestle with what it means to be human.

Beyond the general considerations related to the vampire figure, *Twilight*'s appropriation of the creature seems to function as a significant metaphor where ethical choices take center stage:



Resisting temptation is a constant struggle. Edward's choice of and the willingness to choose a different way in general is a major theme in Meyer's books. "I really think that's the underlying metaphor of my vampires," she says. "It doesn't matter where you're stuck in life or what you think that you have to do; you can always choose something else. There's always a different path."<sup>16</sup>

The centrality of ethical choice-making in *Twilight* may be due to Meyer's Mormon background which includes a strong emphasis on avoiding temptation and choosing the correct moral path, summarized in the Mormon culture with the phrase, "Choose the right." In the continued development of vampire mythology Meyer has incorporated not only the more traditional vampiric elements of death, immortality, and sexual conflict, but has also infused ethical considerations into this mix that builds upon previous treatments of this issue. In the 1990s *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*<sup>17</sup> television series, Angel and Buffy wrestled with their own temptations and the negative ramifications associated with sex that held the potential to unleash the worst in Angel's nature. In *Twilight*, Bella and Edward also wrestle with this challenge, and the overarching ethical framework of Meyer provides Edward with the strength to not only avoid sexual transgression, but also an overwhelming violence toward Bella and the rest of humanity. In the *Twilight* universe this ethical dimension is extensive and is summarized by one of the merchandizing tag lines associated with the series that reads, "I don't want to be a monster." Through her books and film Meyer reminds us that the monster may not just dwell in others, but also lies within us. It is only through love and the exercise of will and self-restraint that we are able to contain the monster seeking release from within.

It appears that Meyer has the potential to enjoy pop culture success for quite some time. Just recently Summit Entertainment announced that it is moving forward with the second installment in the *Twilight* series with production of *New Moon*.<sup>18</sup> Although readers of her books will have to be content with continued re-reading of the completed series of volumes, her fans can anticipate many more years of cinematic enjoyment as future volumes in the Meyer series are translated into film.

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<sup>1</sup> The official *Twilight* movie page may be accessed at <http://www.twilightthemovie.com/>.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Verrier, "Twilight leaves its box-office mark," *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 24, 2008, <http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-boxoffice24-2008nov24,0,2796210.story/>

<sup>3</sup> Meyer's website is found at <http://www.stephaniemyer.com/bio.html>.

<sup>4</sup> "The Story Behind *Twilight*," <http://stephaniemeyer.com/twilight.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Lev Grossman, "Stephenie Meyer: A New J.K. Rowling?," *TIME* (Apr. 24, 2008), <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1734838,00.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Martin V. Riccardo, "Foreword: A Brief Cultural History of the Vampire," p. xi in J. Gordon Melton, *The Vampire Book: The Encyclopedia of the Undead* (Visible Ink Press, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> "Moonlight" entry at the Internet Movie Database, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0955346/>.

<sup>8</sup> "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" entry at the Internet Movie Database, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0118276/>.



<sup>9</sup> "Underworld" entry at the Internet Movie Database,

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0320691/>.

<sup>10</sup> *Underworld: Evolution* entry at the Internet Movie Database,

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0401855/>.

<sup>11</sup> "The Lost Boys" entry at the Internet Movie Database,

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0093437/>.

<sup>12</sup> Jeremy Tirrell, "The Bloodsucking Brady Bunch: Reforming the Family Unit in The Lost Boys," paper presented at the 2004 meeting of the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association, available at <http://www.digitalparlor.org/jtirrell/sites/default/files/blood.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Jeffrey J. Cohen, *Monster Theory* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006)/

<sup>14</sup> Melton, *The Vampire Book*, xvi.

<sup>15</sup> There is a plethora of books and movies and phenomenon such as public zombie walks and crawls that take place internationally testifying to the zombie's increasing and continued popularity rivaling the vampire. Like vampires and other monsters in the academic study of horror, zombies have also become the subject of scholarly investigation as evidenced by the Religion and Popular Culture group of Yahoo! call for papers on an interdisciplinary collection of essays on the zombie.

<sup>16</sup> Grossman, "Stephanie Meyer," *TIME*.

<sup>17</sup> "Angel" entry at the Internet Movie Database,

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0162065/>.

<sup>18</sup> Press release, "Summit Entertainment Announces Twilight Sequel 'New Moon,'" [http://stephaniemeyher.com/twilight\\_movie.html](http://stephaniemeyher.com/twilight_movie.html).