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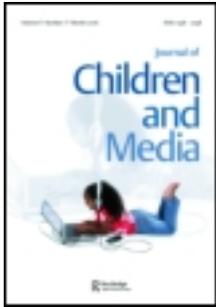
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BLOOD, LUST AND LOVE

Interrogating gender violence in the *Twilight* phenomenon

Meenakshi Gigi Durham

This paper interrogates the construction of gender relations in the Twilight books and films, vis-à-vis issues of implicit and overt gender violence. A combination of ideological analysis, semiology, and feminist critique is used to examine the verbal and visual codes at work in these texts. Five dominant themes emerge: (1) the representation of violence as an inherent characteristic of masculinity; (2) the portrayal of male violence as a justifiable by-product of heterosexual relationships; (3) the definition of masculinity in terms of a dualism wherein “good” boys repudiate their own “instinctive” predilection for violence and “bad” boys allow it to go unchecked; (4) the continual imperilment of girls in situations from which they are rescued by boys; and (5) the assertion of control by boys over girls’ crucial life decisions. I conclude that Twilight works ideologically and visually to coax audiences to expect boys to be violent and girls to be compliant in regard to violence in the context of heterosexual relationships.

KEYWORDS adolescent popular culture; battering; femininity; gender violence; masculinity; Stephenie Meyer; *Twilight*; vampire

Vampires are both sexy and sexual; as Christopher Craft has noted, “vampirism both expresses and distorts an original sexual energy” (1984, p. 107). It is therefore hardly surprising that the vampire has been an enduring figure in teen popular culture, its sinister presence manifested in novels, films, comic books, television programs and video games.

Most recently, the phenomenally popular vampire series *Twilight* has seduced millions of young adult readers worldwide since its inception in 2005. While much critical attention has been directed toward the “virgin vampire” or “abstinence porn” theme of these novels and films—wherein the vampire’s suppression of his thirst for his beloved’s blood carries a potent directive about adolescent sexual chastity—virtually no scholarship has focused on the intertwinement of violence, gender, and sexuality in the series. This paper seeks to interrogate the tensions in the construction of gender and sexuality in the *Twilight* books and films, especially regarding issues of implicit and overt gender violence. The analysis addresses the overarching research question, “How is gender violence implicated in the vampire narratives of *Twilight*?” Answering this question also necessarily raises the corollary issues of the construction of femininity, masculinity, heterosexual dynamics, and the dimensions of gendered power at work in these texts. Because of the texts’ immense and intense presence in the lives of contemporary adolescents, the gender ideologies at work in these narratives are salient to our understanding of contemporary adolescence. Critical media scholars have long been aware of the ideological functions of

media texts in contemporary social life, and although such texts are polysemic and can be variably interpreted, certain discourses are privileged and most likely to influence meaning because they are reinforced by cultural assumptions and expectations (Eco, 1990); as a result, they have greater real-world impact. The *Twilight* series is primarily targeted to young adult readers—ages 14 to 21—and its conspicuous presence in adolescents' lives indicates a need to consider its potential for shaping their realities.

Vampires in Adolescent Culture

Vampire tales occupy a central place in adolescent literature and media, though the relevance of the vampire to the adolescent imagination and experience is a fairly recently recognized phenomenon (Grossman, 2001; Overstreet, 2006). Although the vampire as a literary and cinematic trope has been extensively analyzed (see, for example, the work of Bentley, 1972; Carter, 1988; Frost, 1989; Jones, 1929; Twitchell, 1981), only since the mid-1980s has the vampire been understood in terms of its relevance to adolescence, especially in relation to identity formation, emergent sexualities and gender roles.

Though the vampire has been a staple of American adolescent media since *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* burst onto the scene in 1992, its significance has been reasserted in the twenty-first century, most notably through the overwhelming worldwide popularity of the *Twilight* series. *Twilight* is now a multibillion dollar franchise. The four-book series, written by Stephenie Meyer, has sold more than 85 million copies to date (Carpenter, 2010); as of March 2010, the books had spent a cumulative 134 weeks on *The New York Times'* bestseller list; and the three released films have earned more than \$1.6 billion worldwide, breaking box-office records (Dawn breaks, 2010; Fritz, 2009; McNary, 2010). Sales of *Twilight* merchandise have raked in millions in global sales (Dickson, 2009; Mostrous & Lewy, 2009). "The *Twilight* phenomenon is seemingly unstoppable," observed Tom Gatti in the *London Times* (2010).

The books have attracted critical as well as some scholarly attention, most of which tends to center on the "virgin vampire" theme of the stories and its relationship to the Mormon faith of the author (Toscano, 2010), or on the reasons for these books' enormous appeal to teen readers (Bode, 2010).

However, public discourse about the series harbors a strategic silence regarding a key underpinning of the story line. While on the surface, the *Twilight* story valorizes romantic love, sexual abstinence, and morality, the overwrought boy-girl relationships in the texts are also predicated on an ever-present danger—the danger of real violence. This possibility is central to the allure of the vampire in popular culture; as Hallab (2009) has pointed out, "the vampire is often a bringer of death, even a personification of death itself—a mortal danger to the protagonists" (p. 6). Vampire tales invariably carry with them a *frisson* of fear.

Yet the formal discourses around the *Twilight* texts overlook this element of the storyline. Scholars have recently recognized the problematic portrayals of adolescent female sexuality and corporeality in the *Twilight* saga (McGeough, 2010; Platt, 2010), but violence is not central to those analyses. Some popular and informal discussions and parodies of *Twilight*, like the *Buffy v. Edward* (Rebelliouspixels, 2009) mash-up on Youtube, acknowledge the overtones of violence in these texts, but scholarly work has largely disregarded it.

Gender Violence and Adolescent Media

Violence is a cultural hallmark of masculinity, and the articulation of violence to masculinity is asserted via the media as well as other cultural systems (Bowker, 1998; Katz, 2006; Kimmel, 2010; Sobieraj, 1998). Gender violence is an established motif in popular culture, especially in genres targeted to adolescent audiences. By normalizing male violence and female victimization, these mainstream media, writes Katz, “play a critical role in constructing violent male sexuality as a cultural norm” (2006, p. 153). And in fact, a growing body of literature confirms that violence against girls and women is an entrenched characteristic of contemporary adolescent media. Systematic analyses of digital games, for example, show repeated patterns of male violence and female sexual objectification and victimization (see, for example, Dietz, 1998; Dill & Thill, 2007; Robinson, Callister, Clark, & Phillips, 2008). Music videos similarly contain high levels of gender violence, with one study finding that more than 80 per cent of the violence portrayed in contemporary music videos is perpetrated by attractive male protagonists against women (Rich, Woods, Goodman, Emans, & DuRant, 1998). A prevailing trope in horror films, favorites of teenagers, is the male monster attacking the female victim, giving rise to “pathological connections of sex and violence, voyeurism and sadism, castration fear and misogyny, and the confusion about gender” (Rieser, 2001; Taubin, 1991, p. 125). Teens regularly watch “torture porn” films like the *Saw* and *Hostel* series, notorious for their depictions of graphic sexual violence (Murray, 2008). Grauerholz and King (1997) found that depictions of the sexual harassment of women “occur with regularity” on primetime television. Studies also show that adolescents’ exposure to violent media content is associated with real-life aggression and violent behavior, across media (Potera & Kennedy, 2009; Ybarra et al., 2008), though direct causality is difficult to establish.

Yet the viewing of media violence is a complex phenomenon; a diversity of spectatorial positions are brought to bear on viewing violence. Pinedo (1997) posits that horror films offer the possibility of “recreational terror” which “produces for female spectators a pleasurable encounter with violence and danger” (p. 6). Clover (1993) argued that horror films are characterized by feminist empowerment in the form of the so-called “final girl” who vanquishes the male monster. Dubois (2001) points out that more recent filmmaking troubles the hegemonic conventions of male voyeurism and female masochism in horror films, using *The Silence of the Lambs* to illustrate the representation of Clarice Starling as a “a stronger, more ambitious and determined kind of woman” and the possibility of a profoundly feminist horror film.

These ambivalences and negotiations of horror film texts play out in teen girls’ fan cultures relating to the vampire genre.

Girls, Vampires, and Power

Vampire novels, films and television programs have long attracted female audiences. The considerable body of scholarship on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, for example, finds in it polysemic prospects that appeal to a wide range of predominantly female viewers; *Buffy*, writes Early (2001), is “a narrative of the disorderly rebellious female” generating “open images ... that are inherently unsettling to the way things are” (p. 12). Jowett (2005) observes that *Buffy* presents a contradictory mixture of subversive and conservative ideologies of gender. The show’s enormous popularity among 12- to 24-year-old female audiences offers evidence of the vampire text’s ability to address a range of issues pertinent

to girls' and women's lives, like emergent and transgressive sexualities (Amy-Chinn, 2005; Burr, 2003; Early, 2001; Jarvis, 2001; Richards, 2004). *Buffy*, however, is a specifically feminist text that reverses the traditional gender roles of the vampire genre, featuring a female protagonist "vampire slayer" and male villains, and emphasizing girls' physical strength and leadership as well as the costs that come with asserting such power (Owen, 1999).

Williamson (2005) has explored girls' and women's relationships with less overtly feminist vampire tales, finding that women identify strongly with sympathetic male vampire characters (and not masochistically with female victims, as many psychoanalytic readings have hypothesized). The male vampires who inspire women's admiration are represented as "persecuted and soulful . . . at odds with their ontological status at vampires" (Williamson, 2005, p. 57). These vampires struggle against their malevolent tendencies, "trying to return to human form or . . . using their vampiric powers to solve crime and help the innocent" (Williamson, 2005, p. 57).

By Williamson's criteria, Edward Cullen is a "sympathetic vampire"—he strives to vanquish his craving for human blood, works to help humans and preserve the social order, and not only falls in love with a human girl but constantly puts her well-being before his own. Thus, the "sympathetic vampire's" self-confessed struggles against his depraved instincts render him desirable, especially to young girls, who "wear *Twilight* sweatshirts; put Edward Cullen stickers on their notebooks; and flock to the theatres to satiate their thirst for teenage love, rebellion, and independence" (Aram, Russell, & Potter, 2009, p. 771).

Adolescent female readers are beguiled by *Twilight* for multiple and complex reasons. Aram et al. (2009) note that the *Twilight* saga is, at its heart, a tale of the protagonist Bella's transition from young adolescence to adulthood, addressing themes that resonate with girl audiences: peer relationships, the struggle for identity, romance, sexual self-control, and separation issues. "The *Twilight* saga is full of love and death, as well as a host of other topics central to the way we understand ourselves and navigate the world," observe Housel and Wisniewski (2009, p. 2). Teen girls are attracted to the abstinence-only theme of the books, embracing the stories' romanticism as a backlash against the hook-up culture (Stone, 2009).

Reviewers generally celebrate the books and films for their reflections of the adolescent experience, especially valorizing the relationship between Bella Swan and Edward Cullen. "Although this is a vampire tale, it is just as much a sweet and innocent love story," enthuses Blasingame (2006, p. 828). "Vampires aside, it's really just a simple love story," offers Stone (2009, p. 1A). Other reviewers recognize the overtones of menace in the stories, but find moral triumph in the characters' ability to transcend these impulses: Dunn (2009), for example, allows that "there is nothing figurative about [Edward's] desire to consume [Bella]" (p. 6); he makes the obvious connections between Edward's blood-lust and sexual lust, but ultimately extols Edward's moral choice of conscience over concupiscence. "Edward Cullen is the kind of vampire you'd want your daughter to date, if she had to date a vampire," writes Kazez (2009). "It's particularly reassuring the way he's in control of his appetites" (p. 25).

As in most analyses of vampire tales, the vampire's desire for human blood is interpreted as a sexual metaphor—and in general, the discourses around *Twilight* echo the ethics of a post-Bush America, privileging moral notions of sexual abstinence and self-regulation. In these metaphorical readings, the issue of violence itself is subsumed by the issue of sexuality. Yet in all vampire stories, the two cannot be unyoked: vampiric lust is inherently violent; vampires attack humans, drink their blood, kill them and turn them into

“undead” beings. As Hallab (2009) and others point out, vampirism is a complex sociocultural phenomenon that also speaks to our understandings of mortality, science versus the supernatural, religion, selfhood, and transgression. But sex and violence are the core elements of the vampire myth. Branch (2010) locates *Twilight* as an example of a post-secular contemporary Gothic literary genre—a genre in which “love and terror prove inextricable” (Morris, 1985).

My analysis in this paper is intended to resurface the elided issue of violence as it relates to sex in the *Twilight* saga. In this paper, I will focus my attention on all four novels and the first three films in the series.¹ The printed texts laid the groundwork for the cinematic interpretations, and the characters’ relationships are predicated on gender dynamics established early on in these vampire chronicles.

In recognizing the elision of violence in scholarly and critical reviews of *Twilight*, I seek not only to reassert its centrality in the sexual subtexts of these but to examine how it is represented, elucidated and ideologically constituted in these books and films.

Method

Parsing the nuances of these issues in the *Twilight* texts calls for a methodological approach geared to delving deeply into the manifest and latent content of both the literary and cinematic forms and their interconnected workings in the construction of meaning. Freeland (2004) notes that horror films are carriers of gender ideology and must be analyzed for “their representational content and the nature of their representational practices ... so as to scrutinize how the films represent gender, sexuality and power relations between the sexes” (p. 752); she finds the conventional psychoanalytic approach to cinema inadequate for gender analysis.

Following Freeland, this paper will apply analytic techniques that focus on the ideological and semiological meanings offered by these texts. Foss (2004) points out that feminist methods of analysis are a specific mode of ideological analysis deployed to interrogate “the conceptions of masculinity and femininity in [an artifact] and whose interests the conceptions seem to serve” (p. 159).

Texts are complicated and multilayered, and the process of “making ideologies visible” demands rigorous and versatile analytical methods. Denzin (1994) has reflected on the multiple interpretive philosophies and strategies at play in contemporary qualitative research, concluding that a *bricolage* or combination of methods is vital to “new forms and technologies of knowledge” (p. 501). Thus, the analysis of significations in texts can best be understood via a multimethodological technique designed to illuminate specific features of the texts in relation to each other.

Working toward such an end, I have used Foss’ feminist analytical protocols in combination with a semiological strategy. Barthes (1972) noted that ideological and semiological analysis must go hand-in-hand (p. 9), and in *Mythologies* he outlines a method for deconstructing myths that provides useful tools for interrogating the gendered ideologies of the vampire myth in the *Twilight* texts. Barthes points out that myth can manifest itself in various forms of representation. Because the *Twilight* tales cross genres, myth analysis offers a way to engage the tropes at work in various media. Barthes describes a way of reading myth that address both meaning and form—that is, the sign (in semiotic terms) is recognized as a means of conveying meaning through specific structures of visual and verbal elements whose functioning rests on their interrelationships. Thus, in a film

narrative, the dialogue, blocking, camera angles, and music comprise a coded system that constructs meaning through a “montage” effect (Eisenstein, 1949). The semiological method of myth analysis “explains the interaction between verbal and photographic texts in terms that complement Eisenstein’s formulations” by explicating how verbal and visual elements of messages work together in connotational codes to create interpretive frames for the viewer (McCracken, 1993, p. 26).

Employing the theoretical and methodological directives of Foss and Barthes, then, the four novels of the *Twilight* saga—*Twilight*, *New Moon*, *Eclipse*, and *Breaking Dawn*—and the three released films were selected for analysis for this study. The series of questions posed by Foss were used as heuristics to examine the texts, viz. What does the artifact present as standard, normal, desirable, and appropriate behavior for women and men? What is the particular nature of the construction in the selected artifact? Are women absent in the texts? How does the artifact position its audience? Does the artifact provide a preferred viewpoint from which to view the world of the artifact? How is this accomplished in terms of the structures of characters, meanings, aesthetic codes, attitudes, norms, and values the rhetor projects into the texts? With whom is the viewer/reader asked to identify? How does the artifact represent the various choices open to women and men in terms of their standpoints, the material conditions of their lives, the degree to which they assume agency, and even how they define the dominant system and their status vis-à-vis that system? (Foss, 2004, pp. 158–159).

In addition to these probes, the visual and verbal codes at work in the texts were parsed in terms of their interlinkages and ideological valences. Foss’ basic questions served as a driving mechanism for examining the romantic relationships in the *Twilight* texts. Using her questions as a foundation, I examined characterization, dialogue, plot, *mis-en-scène*, and point of view in the texts, both printed and cinematic; these devices were also read semiologically in terms of the syntagmatic and paradigmatic interrelationships among these elements and their function in constructing and conveying meaning. Once these elements were identified, patterns of organization and repetition were aggregated in order to track dominant themes in these narratives.

Analysis and Findings: Five Ideological Myths of Gender Violence

Five dominant ideological themes emerged from this analysis, all of which offer insights into the intersections of gender, sexuality and violence in these texts. First, the texts recurrently represented violence as an inherent and presumptive characteristic of masculinity. Second, male violence was portrayed as an acceptable and justifiable by-product of male-female relationships. Third, masculinity was defined in terms of a Manichean dualism wherein in “good” boys recognized and repudiated their own “instinctive” predilection for violence and “bad” boys allowed it to go unchecked. Fourth, the human girl protagonists were continually imperiled, not just in the context of their relationships with nonhuman boys, but also by means of the narrative events that cast them into dangerous situations from which they were rescued by boys. And fifth, boys almost inevitably asserted control over Bella’s life in various ways, especially in decision-making over significant life choices.

"I swear not to hurt you": Violence as a Male Trait

The central relationship in the story—the romance that forms the crux of the saga—is that between the human girl Bella Swan and the “sympathetic” male vampire Edward Cullen, both 17 years old when they meet. Potential violence is an undercurrent of their association from the start, as the novel *Twilight* makes clear:

He was glaring down at me again, his black eyes full of revulsion. As I flinched away from him, shrinking against my chair, the phrase *if looks could kill* suddenly ran through my mind. (Meyer, 2005, pp. 23–24)

Later the same day, he frightens her again: “. . . he turned slowly to glare at me — his face was absurdly handsome — with piercing, hate-filled eyes. For an instant, I felt a thrill of genuine fear, raising the hair on my arms” (Meyer, 2005, p. 27).

Edward’s hostility toward Bella frightens and puzzles her, yet on their next meeting he is friendly and charming, and her initial terror is immediately allayed, especially because of his extraordinary good looks, “dazzling face” and “flawless lips” (Meyer, 2005, p. 43). Bella’s attraction to Edward grows, and she begins to suspect he is a vampire. Time and again, Edward warns her of the danger of associating with him, and inevitably Bella denies it:

“You’re dangerous?” I guessed, my pulse quickening as I intuitively realized the truth of my own words. He was dangerous. He’d been trying to tell me that all along.

He just looked at me, eyes full of some emotion I couldn’t comprehend.

“But not bad,” I whispered, shaking my head. “No, I don’t believe that you’re bad.”

“You’re wrong.” His voice was almost inaudible. (Meyer, 2005, p. 93)

As the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that while Edward is always, excruciatingly, aware that he could kill Bella easily—and that he wants to—he holds back from harming her as his affection for her grows. Edward’s insistence on his own inherent malevolence reasserts the trope of hegemonic masculinity that yokes manliness with violence and aggression (Connell, 1987; Connell, 1995).

In the film *Twilight* (Hardwicke, 2008), scenes from the novel taken on even more menacing dimensions through the montage of light, shadow, music, *mis-en-scène* and dialogue that merge to convey meaning. In the fog and dusk of the woods, Bella confronts Edward about his vampirism. Their figures are dwarfed by the sinister, moss-draped trees around them. Menacing music swells with Bella’s growing certainty about Edward’s ghoulish nature. Edward is behind Bella; the camera cuts from a close-up of her nervous face to Edward’s brooding gaze; he advances on her as her voice becomes gasping and more insistent. The scene is one of imminent peril. The silence is punctuated with Bella’s trembling, gasping breath; Edward looms behind and over her. “I know what you are,” Bella tells Edward. “Say it,” he demands. “*Out loud.*” The intensity of the music, the situation, the setting, the camera angles on their faces, all point to a violent *dénouement*. “Vampire,” whispers Bella. “Are you afraid?” demands Edward. Bella turns to look at him, her face terrified. “No,” she responds, and then in a few moments, “You won’t hurt me.”

The very question “Are you afraid?” is at the heart of their relationship. Bella should be afraid. Edward knows she should be afraid. The audience is also cautioned via the visual and verbal motifs of this scene that Bella should be afraid. Edward’s capacity to harm her is key to this moment and, indeed, to their entire relationship. The imbrication of female fear and male violence echoes Connell’s (1987) concepts of emphasized femininity and hegemonic masculinity, a relationship based on the patriarchal subordination of women.

Immediately following this exchange, Edward grabs Bella’s arm and pulls her roughly through the woods, then seizes her and carries her on his back to the top of the mountain. The music becomes faster; the potential of the scene becomes ambiguous. Edward shows Bella that he glitters in the sunlight, but then reinforces his potential to hurt her. “You’re beautiful,” Bella tells him. “Beautiful!” he sneers. “It’s the skin of a killer, Bella. I’m a killer.”

In a pivotal scene, Edward tells Bella he is “the world’s most dangerous predator.” He taunts her with his supernatural powers, his quickness, his strength. “As if you could outrun me,” he says. “As if you could fight me off. I’m designed to kill.” Bella tells him she doesn’t care; he says desperately, “I want to kill you. I’ve never wanted a human’s blood so much.” Again, the music is menacing. Bella is overshadowed by him; he moves close to her, his eyes intent; they are alone on the mountaintop. As he speaks to her, the camera looks up at him and down at her—Bella is diminished, Edward enhanced, rendered visually dominant. In the book, he tells her, “I swear not to hurt you” (Meyer, 2005, p. 263).

In the film, the scene ends lovingly. The menace turns seamlessly to romance; Bella and Edward, as lovers, lie next to each other in a field of flowers. The audience knows that Edward is struggling to contain his twin sexual and savage desires for Bella’s body. The music becomes sweet and poignant, in accord with the beauty and nobility of Edward’s constraint, the power of his love.

These themes are continued in the novel *New Moon*, which begins with an incident in which a seemingly innocuous paper cut thrusts Bella into mortal danger as Edward and his vampire family become aroused by the scent of her blood. Edward decides to leave Bella over this incident, disgusted with himself for “fighting the urge to kill you the whole time,” as he tells her. Again, the filmic representation of this incident plays up the danger to Bella and the threat posed by the male vampires in particular. A crashing, splashing sound accompanies the camera’s sudden focus on a single crimson drop of Bella’s blood falling on the carpet; the scene escalates into immediate bloody mayhem as Jasper, Edward’s putative brother, lunges for Bella and Edward hurls Bella out of the way. The camera focuses on Jasper’s crazed, snarling face, then on Bella’s supine body. Jangling musical rhythms swell as the vampires turn to slaver over the blood pouring down Bella’s arm. Edward’s internal struggle is apparent as he turns away from Bella. After Edward leaves Bella on this premise, she collapses in the woods, alone. In the novel, “Have you been hurt?” is the first thing her [male] rescuer Sam Uley asks when he finds her (Meyer, 2006, p. 75). Bella senses there is more to the question than it appears. We, the readers, know that the implication is that the vampires—Edward in particular—may have attacked her. Again, the male-female relationship pivots on feminine weakness and vulnerability in relation to male aggression, a reinscription of Connell’s (1987) concepts of “emphasized femininity” and “hegemonic masculinity.”

New Moon also develops the character of Jacob Black, introduced in *Twilight*, a Native American boy who also enters into a romantic relationship with Bella. It transpires that Jacob is a werewolf—once again a male possessed of beastly violent instincts he cannot

control. "You can't imagine how tight I'm bound . . ." he tells Bella. "I'm in this for life. A life sentence. . . . It's not something I can run away from, Bella" (pp. 286–287).

In the film, Bella confronts the band of young men/werewolves with whom Jacob has become entangled. Paul, one of the gang, laughs at her, then becomes enraged when she slaps him. His snarling, furious visage morphs into that of a giant wolf who comes after her, only to be fought off by Jacob, who also turns into a wolf in order to defend Bella. Once again, Bella is in danger from preternaturally powerful males.

It is significant that the werewolves are Native American. Men of color are routinely represented in the mainstream media as violent and less than human (Ferber, 2007; hooks, 1992), and *Twilight's* construction does nothing to challenge that stereotype, though the werewolves are self-proclaimed "protectors" of humans against vampires.

The boys in the *Twilight* stories, regardless of race, are at once both young men and monsters. As such, they are predisposed to violence. Violence is an essential and inexorable part of who they are—it characterizes their very subjectivity. They recognize and regret it, but realize they cannot change that core fact. "I don't think you realize how much easier it will be for me, Bella," Edward tells his love in *Eclipse*, "when I don't have to concentrate all the time on not killing you." (p. 274).

Theorists of masculinity have observed that men's violence against women is an issue deeply rooted in cultural traditions and reinforced structurally and institutionally (Blazina, 2003; Katz, 2006; Kimmel, 2010; Pollack, 1998). By defining violence as a constant and immutable characteristic of boyhood, these traditions and myths are reestablished and reified. Moreover, the girls in their lives deny the boys' malevolent potential and stay in romantic relationships with them, sure of the power of love, trusting that they will not be harmed.

"Hanging out around werewolves has its risks": Girlhood as Pain

In *New Moon*, Bella meets Emily Young, a Native American girl from the Quileute tribe who is engaged to Sam Uley, the chief werewolf. One of the other werewolves cautions Bella not to stare at Emily when she meets her, an injunction that puzzles Bella until she sees that Emily's face is disfigured by scarring.

The right side of her face was scarred from hairline to chin by three thick, red lines, livid in color though they were long healed. One line pulled down the corner of her dark, almond-shaped right eye, another twisted the right side of her mouth into a permanent grimace. (Meyer, 2006, p. 331)

Bella learns that the werewolf Sam caused Emily's disfigurement.

"You've seen Emily," Jacob tells her. "Sam lost control of his temper for just one second . . . and she was standing too close. And now there's nothing he can ever do to put it right again." (Meyer, 2006, p. 345)

Yet Emily's relationship with Sam after this incident is never questioned. In fact, the story makes it clear that after this brutal attack, Emily not only stayed with Sam but became engaged to him. Meyer describes how affectionately Emily gazes at Sam, and their relationship remains unremarked upon in the novel. In the film, Bella's first glimpse of Emily is startling. Emily's back is turned to her, and to the camera, when Bella first enters Emily's

home; when she turns, the camera zooms into a close-up of her ravaged face (Weitz, 2009). When her fiancé Sam walks in, he gathers her into his arms and covers her face with kisses as Emily giggles. The fact that he attacked her so savagely that she was permanently scarred matters not a whit. In fact, Emily is held in high esteem among the wolves for her loyalty and understanding of Sam's uncontrollable outburst. "Hanging out with werewolves has its risks," one of the werewolves tells Bella lightly (Meyer, 2006, p. 331).

The third novel, *Eclipse*, carries the theme of dating violence forward. In one scene, the werewolf Jacob forcibly kisses Bella; she tries to resist but is powerless against his strength. She tells him she sees this as an assault, but when he does it again, she ends up kissing him back: the assault is invalidated and justified through Bella's acquiescent physical response.

Breaking Dawn sees Bella married to Edward; the honeymoon, in particular, is fraught with male-on-female violence. When Jacob learns that Bella is planning to have sex with Edward, he becomes enraged, seizing her and shaking her angrily: "He shook me again. His hands, tight as tourniquets, were quivering, sending vibrations deep into my bones" (Meyer, 2008, p. 68). Edward appears, yelling "Take your hands off her!" Seth Clearwater, another werewolf also shows up: "You'll hurt her," Seth whispered. "Let her go." "Now!" snarled Edward (Meyer, 2008, p. 68).

Bella blames herself for Jacob's anger: "I'd ruined it, turned his gift into a disaster. I should be quarantined. But my idiocy would not ruin anything else tonight." (Meyer, 2008, p. 68)

When she and Edward finally have sex, she is battered black-and-blue by the experience:

... large purplish bruises were beginning to blossom across the pale skin of my arm. My eyes followed the trail they made up to my shoulder, then down across my ribs. I pulled my hand free to poke at a discoloration on my left forearm, watching it fade where I touched and then reappear. It throbbed a little. (Meyer, 2008, p. 89)

But, like a classic battered wife, Bella figures out ways to hide her bruises and glory in the experience of sex, as physically painful and potentially life-threatening as it is. The bruising is portrayed as an expected and acceptable aspect of heterosexual intercourse.

Thus, the rhetoric of Bella's body is construed through physical pain, again and again; other girls' bodies are similarly targets of battering, assault and injury. It is not until Bella herself becomes a vampire that these torments of the flesh cease. But human girls, in these tales, are natural and easy victims of male-perpetrated violence—and in most cases, they come to accept and even enjoy it. The adaptation of *Twilight's* girls to battering situations theoretically aligns with scholarly analyses of sociocultural factors that impede women from fleeing intimate partner violence; the cultural emphasis is frequently on preserving the relationship or naturalizing the situation, so that breaking the cycle of violence becomes difficult, if not impossible (Barnett, 2000; Enander, 2011).

"The hardest part is feeling ... out of control": Good Guys Don't Kill

Throughout the two books and films, Edward and Jacob wrestle to subjugate their savagery. Both condemn their own proclivities for violence; both recognize their instinctual leanings toward mayhem. Edward confesses to Bella that when he first saw her he could think only of how to kill her. "Bella, I couldn't live with myself if I ever hurt you," he tells her.

"You don't know how it's tortured me" (Meyer, 2005, p. 273). Later, he says, "My very existence puts you at risk. Sometimes I truly hate myself" (Meyer, 2005, p. 366). "I don't *want* to be a monster," he agonizes (Meyer, 2005, p. 187). The books and films conflate Edward's craving for Bella's blood with his sexual longing for her; the desires work in tandem so that sex is inseparable from violence.

"... I've told you, on the one hand, the hunger — the thirst — that, deplorable creature that I am, I feel for you. And I think you can understand that, to an extent. Though —" he half-smiled — "as you are not addicted to any illegal substances, you probably can't empathize completely.

"But ..." his fingers touched my lips lightly, making me shiver again. "There are other hungers. Hungers I don't even understand, that are foreign to me." (Meyer, 2005, p. 277)

Similarly, Jacob warns Bella of the danger of associating with him: "I'm not supposed to be around you, Bella ... it's not safe for you. If I get too mad ... too upset ... you might get hurt" (Meyer, 2006, p. 311). He condemns his own predatory tendencies, confessing to Bella, "The hardest part is feeling ... out of control. Feeling like I can't be sure of myself — like maybe you shouldn't be around me, like maybe nobody should. Like I'm a monster who might hurt somebody" (Meyer, 2006, p. 345). Violence, he says, "comes easily to him" (Meyer, 2006, p. 246).

Both characters attain their "hero" status because they quell these base instincts. Their nobility lies in their awareness of their own natural inclinations toward violence and their vigilant suppression of these urges. By contrast, the "bad vampires"—James and Laurent—prey freely on humans, indulging their appetites. The message is that all males are inclined toward violence, but the good ones are able to curb those impulses. As Connell (1987) has observed, the classical heroes of Western culture are specialists in violence, but are exalted for their refusal to use it. "Violence is part of the framework of these epics, but it is also posed as a moral and human issue," he notes (p. 249). Katz (2006) describes this trope as "the chivalry trap," a notion that "good guys" position themselves as the protectors of women from the "bad guys" who would otherwise prey on them (p. 52). As Katz observes, this construction perpetuates sexist gender relations in which women must depend on men for protection, thus depriving them of agency or equality.

"A magnet for danger": A Damsel in Distress

Bella's most endearing characteristic is her clumsiness, which frequently causes her to fall and hurt herself. This trait is also used as a reason for the fact that she is constantly stumbling into precarious situations from which Edward rescues her: first, a parking lot accident in which she is nearly crushed by an out-of-control car that Edward deflects with his superhuman strength (Meyer, 2005, p. 56); later, a run-in with would-be rapists, where Edward miraculously turns up in his silver Volvo and whisks her out of danger (Meyer, 2005, p. 161). The culmination of *Twilight* is a harrowing sequence of events in which Bella is lured and attacked by a "bad" vampire (James), but she is saved by Edward, who sucks James' venom from her wound and restores her life.

In *New Moon*, Bella risks assault from the same group of thugs she encountered in *Twilight*, in order to summon Edward to the rescue again (she fails). She also almost falls

prey to another “bad” vampire, Laurent, whose attack on her is prevented by Edward’s phantasmatic presence and the timely arrival of Jacob and his band of werewolves (Meyer, 2006, pp. 241–243).

Although in the second book and movie Bella ultimately prevents Edward’s death, her vulnerability is constantly reiterated, and every time she is imperiled, she is inevitably rescued by Edward, Jacob, or another male character. Alice Cullen, Edward’s so-called sister, teasingly dubs her a “magnet for danger” (Meyer, 2006, p. 387). Bella is a classic “damsel in distress” whose frailties call constantly for male salvation. At one point, Edward tells Bella, “You are the only thing that can hurt me,” but then minutes later says, “It’s my job to protect you,” immediately reversing the power positions (Weitz, 2009). Indeed, Bella’s vulnerability becomes the crux of the plot in *Eclipse*, when a coven of avenging vampires bear down on the Cullens, and Bella is their prime target. Edward and Jacob make plans for Bella as they strategize about the vampire attack; Bella is voiceless and powerless as they work out how to “protect” her from a vampire assault. Bella’s vulnerability devolves into infantilization as Jacob is ordered by Edward to carry her to safety (Meyer, 2007).

A longstanding body of feminist theory has addressed the issue of women’s physical vulnerability, interrogating the ways in which this understanding of women’s corporeality contributes to their subordination and victimization (Bergoffen, 2001; Butler, 2004; Murphy, 2009). Along these lines, Bella’s clumsiness and lack of physical prowess contribute to her lack of empowerment in the *Twilight* narratives.

Controlling Passions: Masculinity as Mastery

Throughout the *Twilight* saga, Edward exerts inordinate control over Bella’s life. Not only does Bella fall into a depressive coma when Edward leaves her in *New Moon*, but he dictates the “rules” of their physical relationship, deciding against sexual activity—despite her desire to have sex—to protect her from harm. Edward is always the one who sets boundaries and decides on the extent of their physical contact. Bella is also constantly under Edward’s surveillance, as he spies on her, eavesdrops on her conversations, and watches her while she sleeps.

The level of his control escalates as the series progresses. In *Eclipse*, Edward disables Bella’s truck so she can’t see Jacob, bribes his sister Alice to keep her “hostage” when he is out of town, and stalks her obsessively to keep her from fraternizing with the werewolves.

Edward, because of his superior knowledge of both the supernatural and the natural world, sees himself as the authority in the relationship: he asserts power when it comes to major life decisions. For example, in *Breaking Dawn*, when Edward learns of Bella’s pregnancy, he singlehandedly decides it should be terminated: “We’re going to get that thing out of you before it can hurt any part of you . . .” (Meyer, 2008, p. 133).

He assumes that Bella will accede to this plan without discussing it with her. Later Edward persuades Jacob to try to convince Bella to abort the child: the men collude, again without including Bella in the decision-making process. And finally, it is Edward who makes the decision to turn Bella into a vampire as her life ebbs from her during childbirth: though they have talked about her “transformation” before, it is Edward who takes the decisive step, with Jacob’s help, while Bella is incapacitated (Meyers, 2008, pp. 354–355).

Time and again, Bella’s fate is decided by male protagonists in the role of protectors. In *Breaking Dawn*, Bella is a bargaining chip between Edward and Jacob after she becomes pregnant; they discuss arrangements between them that would purportedly spare her life.

Even after she is turned into a vampire and acquires otherworldly strength and power, Edward is tacitly in charge of their relationship; for instance, when Bella's father Charlie is about to visit her and she questions whether she'll attack him, she relies on Edward to prevent such an incident: "Was he strong enough to stop me if I made a wrong move?" (p. 500).

Breaking Dawn, however, does ultimately counter the dogged coupling of femininity with passivity. Bella refuses to go along with Edward's plan to abort their child; her resistance counters his protective instinct and his ostensibly superior understanding of the pregnancy's potential harm to her. Despite the fact that Bella prevails in this situation, Edward's impulses to control the situation are naturalized, presented as rational and altruistic, while Bella's preference for maintaining the pregnancy is portrayed as irrational and sentimental, though it is in alignment with the overall conservative politics of the saga (see Platt, 2010).

Johnson (2008) notes that the "control dynamics" of relationships are central to understanding domestic violence (p. 5). Intimate partner violence, he writes, "is embedded in a larger pattern of power and control that permeates that relationship" (p. 6). Edward's behaviors, from his surveillance of Bella's actions and relationships to his management of their sex life to his taken-for-granted move to terminate her pregnancy, are classic symptoms of a potential batterer.

Breaking Dawn offers another glimmer of opposition to these tropes of dominant masculinity. In the book's climactic denouement, Bella's newfound power to "shield" her allies from vampire assaults turns tragedy to triumph. While a shield is a passive rather than active weapon, Edward nonetheless concedes that the victory "was a combination of things there at the end, but what it really boiled down to was . . . Bella," (Meyer, 2008, p. 742). Bella, the clumsy, mortal, dim-witted and emotionally dependent human girl, turns out to be the vampire clan's guardian angel, a turn of events that offers a utopian future for the protagonist—though only with the aid of superhuman power bestowed on her by Edward. Rhetorically, this can be seen as an "inoculation," by Barthes' analytical definition—an aberration that inoculates readers to the "principal evil" of the whole (Barthes, 1972, p. 150).

Conclusions

Overall, the diegetic structure of the books and films recurrently reinforces the vulnerable-girl/savior-male dichotomy, adding up to a construction of a particularly defenseless and debilitated femininity that can gain legitimacy and potency only by means of a romantic relationship with a male benefactor.

The five themes that dominate the construction of the central male-female relationships in the *Twilight* novels and films serve to normalize and naturalize male violence and, as a corollary, female passivity. By presenting Edward and Jacob as heroic characters because of their struggle to quell their violent instincts, these texts reinscribe the notion that boys are inherently violent—that such urges are endemic to masculinity and therefore a taken-for-granted aspect of male-female relationships. As Barthes (1972) notes, mythical forms naturalize meanings (p. 129); myths are read as unmotivated and innocent, and thus accepted as true, "not because [their] intentions are hidden . . . but because they are naturalized" (p. 131). In defining the dynamics of heterosexual couplehood, the mythical representations in the *Twilight* texts sustain regressive gender ideologies that yoke masculinity with violence and femininity with victimhood. This construction fits with

Connell's (1987) concept of hegemonic masculinity, a social construction of masculinity that sustains patriarchal power and women's subordination. "The connection between hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal violence is close," he notes (p. 184).

In this regard, Katz (2006) points out,

There is general agreement among researchers in the domestic and sexual violence fields that boys' and men's violence against girls and women is not the expression of innate, biological impulses, but is the result of some combination of personal experience and social conditioning. (p. 228)

However, the texts of *Twilight* resituate masculinity in terms of innate violent tendencies. The most attractive of the saga's male protagonists are Edward and Jacob: these are the boys to whom Bella is most powerfully drawn, and with whom she enters into romantic relationships. They are also the boys with the most potential to hurt or kill her, and both she and they know that. Despite this knowledge, she remains in the relationships, trusting that she will not be harmed, despite evidence to the contrary. Per Foss' analytical questions, these decisions define the limits of women's agency in negotiating the status quo of male dominance.

Battering relationships in real life follow similar trends: women in battering situations often justify or ignore warning signs of violence in their male partners.

A woman often will accept her partner's building anger as legitimately directed at her. She internalizes what she perceives as her responsibility to keep the situation from exploding. In her mind, if she does her job well, he remains calm. (Marvin, 1997, p. 14)

Bella's willful refusal to heed the warnings given by both Edward and Sam mirrors the situations of girls and women drawn into battering relationships. More significantly, the mediated representations of this pattern in the series legitimate, even privilege, this type of relationship as ideal—the pinnacle of romance. Bella's danger is used to heighten the excitement of the relationships and add a thrilling edge to the lovers' passions. And the novels are written in the first person, almost exclusively from Bella Swan's point of view, thus strengthening the reader's sense of identification with these perspectives.

In the fictional texts of *Twilight*, Bella is never harmed by either Edward or Jacob. But in the real world, gender violence is rising among adolescents. Studies estimate that physical aggression occurs in one out of every three teen dating relationships in the United States (Avery-Leaf & Cascardi, 2002). Housel (2009) traces the parallels between Bella Swan's behavior in her relationship with Edward Cullen and the symptoms of real-world battering: they match. And the consequences for real girls in such relationships can be fatal.

In the signifying system of *Twilight*, masculinity is unproblematically represented as violent at its core, while femininity is construed in terms of vulnerability and blind loyalty to a male partner. For its enthralled girl audiences, these significations offer potent cues about how to think about heterosexual relationships. *Twilight* works rhetorically and visually to coax audiences to expect boys to be violent and girls to be compliant in regard to that violence. As Connell reminds us, "Femininity and masculinity are not essences: they are ways of living certain relationships" (p. 179).

Questions remain about the degree to which girls' sense of self and subjectivity are drawn from media messages. Pipher (1994) suggested that girls "model themselves after media stars" (p. 38). More recent findings indicate that adolescents exposed to sexual

content in media are more likely to enter into early sexual activity (Brown et al., 2006) and that media images are predictors of girls' low body image, depression and anxiety (Paxton & Durkin, 2002). Such findings indicate that the media do shape girls' real-world perspectives and behaviors.

Critics are divided on questions of Bella's feminist potential: Jeffers (2010) sees Bella as playing a pivotal role in the unfolding of a classic good-versus-evil moral tale, while Wolf (2010) sees Bella's ability to negotiate spatial boundaries as a precursor to the gift of shielding that allows her to triumph at the climax of the series. Yet the foregoing reading argues that these attributes may be undermined by the passivity she demonstrates in her romantic relationships. These complexities call for further investigation.

Recognizing these trends point to directions for future study. Given girls' enormous affinity for the *Twilight* franchise, in-depth audience work needs to be conducted—via interviews, ethnographic studies, or other field observations—to learn more about how girls are negotiating the issues of gender violence in these texts. In this area, the texts regress to rudimentary biological binarisms that reinforce the notion of physical danger, and even real physical pain, to girls and women as an essential element of heterosexual relationships. As Bordo (2003) observes, such findings illustrate “the continuing historical power and pervasiveness of certain cultural images and ideology to which not just men, but also women . . . are vulnerable” (p. 7). Through powerful rhetorical strategies deployed via characterization, plot, dialogue, and visual imagery, the world of *Twilight* plays out as a patriarchal paradise in which girls are in thrall to atavistic male compulsions.

NOTE

1. The fourth book, *Breaking Dawn*, had not been released as a feature film at the time of this analysis.

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