

1-1-2009

The Twilight series : as people see it

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University Honors Program**Capstone Approval Page**

Capstone Title (print or type)

The Twilight Series: As People See It

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Abstract

The Twilight series is the newest incarnation of the ever present teenage fantasy story. With its fan base growing every day, one must wonder how the story, and the themes it expresses, influences the readers in today's society. This paper seeks to explain how readers today interpret the story, how they feel about what age the series is appropriate for, and how they apply those themes to their lives. This paper presents both sides of the main Twilight series debate, that being: Is the Twilight series negatively influencing the lives of teenagers, or can it be viewed as purely entertainment? In other words, can they differentiate reality from fantasy at such a young age?

HONORS THESIS ABSTRACT**THESIS SUBMISSION FORM**

AUTHOR: Amanda Davis

THESIS TITLE: The Twilight Series: As People See it

ADVISOR: Dr. Rebecca Butler

ADVISOR'S DEPARTMENT: TLEE

DISCIPLINE: Psychology

YEAR: 2009

PAGE LENGTH: 40

BIBLIOGRAPHY: 2 pages, 17 references

ILLUSTRATED: No

PUBLISHED (YES OR NO): No

LIST PUBLICATION:

COPIES AVAILABLE (HARD COPY, MICROFILM, DISKETTE): Hard Copy

ABSTRACT (100-200 WORDS): Included

If you have not read the *Twilight* series by Stephanie Meyer you may not even be aware of this new pop-culture phenomenon. The four book series started with the teen fiction novel *Twilight* in 2005 and concluded with *Breaking Dawn*, published in 2008. The series centers on the romance between a vampire boy named Edward, a mortal girl named Bella, and the trials they face because of their love. What is interesting about this series is it is labeled as teen fiction, but appeals to an increasingly wide audience. The series is loved by teens and adults, and is now beginning to transform from what was a primarily female audience to a mixed male and female one. Stephanie Meyer has stated that the books are loosely based off some of her favorite works, and when reading the series a reader can see the resemblance if they know what they are looking for. Meyer said that "*Twilight* is loosely based on *Pride and Prejudice*; the second, *New Moon* was based on *Romeo and Juliet*; the third, *Eclipse*, was based on *Wuthering Heights*, and *Breaking Dawn* was a mix of many others including *Midsummer's Night Dream*" (Proctor). What is this series all about, and why does it appeal to so many readers? I intend to address these issues and the issues presented by critics of the series within this paper. People discuss this series regularly with debates ranging from the how the novels are bad influences on teenagers, to how the novels are just pure entertainment. Both critics and feminists have tackled the problematic gender and family roles presented in the series, with mixed results. I intend to discuss the viewpoints and reasoning on both sides of the *Twilight* debate: how the *Twilight* series is inappropriate for young girls versus how the *Twilight* series is solely entertainment.

As research I conducted a survey that was circulated online for readers of the series to respond to in an attempt to better understand how people feel about the series. The survey was provided on a Facebook forum for *Twilight* fans, and the majority of respondents were in fact

fans of the series, while only two or three of the responses came from readers who dislike the series. The survey asked respondents a variety of questions about who they relate to in the story, how the series relates to readers, and how they feel about the popularity of the series, please see the list of questions located in Appendix A. The majority of respondents were female (41 out of the 45 responses), and the ages ranged fairly evenly from ten through 26 and up. This variance in age allows me to pull opinions from all types of readers, from pre-teen readers through adult readers.

The Phenomenon

Before I discuss the books themselves, it is important to note what is meant when I refer to the Twilight pop-culture phenomenon. Twilight products can be seen all over stores, and the series has been, and is being, discussed in a variety of magazines from *GQ* to the weekly gossip magazines like *In Touch*. Each book in the Twilight series has made it to the best seller list for weeks straight, and the series is still in the top ten list with both Barnes and Noble and Borders, as seen on their websites. Stephanie Meyer received *Time's People Who Mattered 2008* tribute (Grossman), *USA today's Author of the Year 2008* (Schmacher), and *MSN Lifestyle's Most Influential Women 2008* honors (MSN Lifestyle). The series is recognized as a phenomenon by these companies to the point that Meyer needed to be mentioned on these influential lists.

The internet is the largest place the fans of this series have to express their devotion and love of the series. The amount of fan sites and blogs about this series is astounding. Stephanie Meyer's official web site has a fan sites link section that currently holds 347 separate sites. I typed in a couple related words into yahoo search on April 16, 2009 and came up with the following results: Twilight series - 79,200,000 hits, Edward Cullen - 13,100,000 hits, Bella

Swan -7,030,000 hits, Stephanie Meyer - 9,380,000 hits, and Twilight series fan sites - 917,000 hits.

To document just how popular this phenomenon is I took a walk around a variety of stores located in a suburb of Chicago and made a list of how much Twilight merchandise these stores displayed. Please see the complete list of products I found in Appendix B. In total I counted 168 individual items throughout five stores and their websites. Many of the items repeated throughout the stores, like the paperback *Twilight* novel. A couple of the stores boasted exclusive items only found within their store to encourage Twilight consumers. Hot Topic, a popular store for teens and young adults, had the most merchandise in total with 154 separate items. These items are mostly merchandise like t-shirts, jewelry, and tote bags. One of the most interesting items they provide for their customers is the Edward Body Shimmer, which allows fans to sparkle like Edward. Although not all these items were featured in the store itself, the most popular items were. I started a conversation with one of the managers of this Hot Topic store, Reilly, about the Twilight fans and merchandise. She expressed that the Twilight consumers are such passionate fans that they launch into squealing fits over new items, and check religiously for these new items every couple days. She then told me a story about a regular teenage customer who comes in and buys all the Twilight merchandise with the credit card the customer calls her "Twilight card." Reilly could only estimate the amount this girl has spent on Twilight merchandise to be in the thousands of dollars (Mucky).

Survey respondents provided a number of interesting answers regarding the popularity of this series. The majority of respondents expressed that they feel the popularity is a good thing, and are excited that they can discuss these books with so many different types of people. Survey respondent four said, "Like many book nerds, I love anything that gets people reading. But the

popularity is annoying at times because others just think: 'oh, you only like it because it's big right now.' While the popularity means I can talk about it with so many people, and that's enjoyable, it definitely takes away the very personal feeling of reading a book that you feel is all yours." The extensive amounts of merchandise clearly may be not enticing to all readers. This respondent likes the series, but dislikes the reputation resulting from the pop-culture phenomenon. She does not want people to misinterpret her enthusiasm as stemming from the popularity alone. Respondents did express a number of concerns with the popularity of the series as well that will be discussed later.

The Main Characters

What is this series about that allows it to create such a phenomenon? Many readers argue that the characters in the novels are extremely relatable and heart grabbing. In random discussions I have had with readers, they fairly consistently express that the writing is okay, but it is the character development and relations that really draw them into the story. So who are the main players in this twisted tale of love?

Isabella "Bella" Swan - Bella is the series protagonist and many readers find her the most relatable. Bellamoves from Phoenix, Arizona to Forks, Washington at the beginning of *Twilight*, and is described as a clumsy, average, teenage girl. She has dark brown hair and eyes and self expresses having low self esteem. She prefers to stay out of the spot light, and was relatively unpopular while at her old school in Arizona. Bella inevitably falls in love with Edward Cullen, which brings all sorts of dangers and burdens her way.

Edward Cullen - Edward is a vampire who lives an inconspicuous life with his vampire "family" in Forks, Washington. Edward became a vampire in the early 1900s when he was 17 years old. He was dying of Spanish Influenza when a doctor, who is now regarded as Edward's

"father," turned him into a vampire. Edward is described as the gorgeous, perfect, male heartthrob. He has the supernatural power to read minds, but finds that Bella's mind is the only mind he cannot read. Initially, Edward is enticed only by Bella's scent, but develops a strong connection to her before falling in love. An interesting note is that Stephanie Meyer made her vampires able to go out in the sunlight, with one condition; they sparkle like diamonds. The sparkling makes Edward avoid the sunlight and makes his family live in this particularly rainy region of the United States.

Jacob Black - Jacob is a childhood friend of Bella's, and a member of the Quileute Native American tribe. Jacob and Bella reunite their friendship in *Twilight* upon her move to Forks. Jacob plays a minor role in *Twilight*, later becoming a primary character in *New Moon*. It turns out that Jacob is a "werewolf?", the supernatural enemy of vampires. Jacob develops a love interest in Bella during Edward's absence in *New Moon*, although Bella does not entirely reciprocate. Jacob presents more of a bad boy image than the suave, sophisticated image of Edward. If Edward does not appeal to a reader, Jacob most likely will.

Twenty one of the 45 survey respondents expressed that they identified best with Bella, when asked who in the novels they identify with the best. This may be because she is the protagonist and the series is told mostly from her perspective. Bella might also appeal to the teenage girl inside female readers. Bella is clumsy and unsure of herself; the teenage years of life are spent in such a way by a lot of people. Survey respondent six replied, "Bella. I know what it's like to feel socially awkward, and I know the feeling of 'I could never get that guy' or 'What is it about me that this guy is so attracted to? I don't get it.' I don't think I would have identified with her as much had she not been the protagonist. It was really going through her inner monologues that gave me that connection." Survey respondent nine said, "Unfortunately

¹ Technically the Quileutes are shape shifters because they do not need the moon to transform.

Bella 'cause I'm a klutz, awkward with my age group socially, and really didn't want to get married either."

The Plot Line

Twilight - This is the first novel in the series and by far the most read. The novel starts with Bella moving from sunny Phoenix, Arizona to rainy Forks, Washington to live with her father.. She does this because her mother decided to travel the country with her new boyfriend who is a minor-league baseball player. Bella moves in with her father, whom she has not seen consistently for several years, and attends the small town high school in Forks. Since Forks is such a small town, Bella becomes instantly popular at her new high school solely for being the new student.. It is there that she becomes interested in the beautiful loners at the other end of the cafeteria,, the Cullen family. After a couple of awkward moments between Edward and Bella they develop a relationship, completely disregarding the wishes of Edward's family. For obvious reasons, a vampire dating a mortal girl would naturally cause some worry and upset among a vampire family. After a short time, Bella deduces Edward's true identity with the help of Jacob and the folktales of his tribe.

The trouble in the story comes from a group of traveling nomadic vampires who plague and threaten the security of the Cullen family after a chance meeting. The Cullen family and Bella head to the woods to play a game of superhuman baseball, and there they run into the nomadic vampires Laurent, Victoria, and James. James becomes interested in Bella as a tasty "snack" (Meyer, 379). Part of the Cullen family leads Bella out of the area in an attempt to get her away from James, and hopefully buy enough time for the rest of the family to destroy James. Though initially successful they are not able to immediately destroy James, and he is able to lure Bella out of the safety of the Cullen family by tricking her into believing he has her mother. He

draws her to her old ballet studio in Phoenix and makes a video of her torture, and what is to be death, in an attempt to further anger Edward into attempting to avenge Bella. The Cullens come to the rescue, and after a scuffle they do manage to kill James, but only after he has bitten Bella. Edward is forced to suck out the vampire venom to stop Bella from becoming a vampire, but there is a possibility that Edward will become overwhelmed by the taste and not be able to stop, and killing her regardless. Fortunately he is successful, and Bella is saved from vampirism, only sustaining a broken leg and some minor bodily damage. After a stint in the hospital, Edward and Bella return to Forks with enough time to attend the prom.

New Moon - Within the first couple chapters of *New Moon* readers are confronted with the devastating break up of Bella and Edward. Edward feels that he is a threat to her safety and decides it would be better if he left the area, painting quite a different picture than the "irrevocable" love seen in *Twilight*. Bella loses all enthusiasm for life, and is basically lost without her Edward. In Edward's absence, Bella becomes closer to her friend Jacob, and readers start to see a second romance emerge. Though this seems to be going better for her, Bella has lost quite a bit of her rationality from the breakup and starts to hear Edward's voice in her head and times when she puts herself in danger. Due to this, she starts to engage in behavior like reckless motor cycle riding and cliff diving, just to hear Edward's voice. Bella starts to believe that Edward has a connection to her mind and can transmit his thoughts to her mind no matter where he is. Unfortunately for her, this is not actually the case; Bella is disturbingly enough just hearing voices. While all this is happening, readers begin learn that Jacob is an emerging werewolf and is having difficulties coming to terms with this life adjustment.

While under the influence of her own desire to hear Edwards voice again, Bella jumps off a cliff into rough ocean waters to hear the voice of Edward. She is saved by Jacob, but Edward's

"sister," Alice², sees a vision of Bella jumping off the cliff and thinks she is trying to kill herself, prompting her to return to Forks. Edward, through a series of unfortunate coincidences, comes to believe that Bella has in fact killed herself. Because of this, he heads to Italy to encourage the vampire "government" group, the Volturi, to destroy him, rather than live without Bella. Alice sees this in a vision while at Bella's house, so she and Bella catch a plane to Italy to save Edward. Bella manages to stop Edward from exposing himself at the last minute, but he has already caught the attention of the Volturi. Edward then has to go about rescuing Bella from the Volturi's possible death sentence, because readers learn that it is illegal in the vampire world for a mortal to know about vampires without dying, or very soon becoming a vampire themselves. Bella, Edward, and Alice are allowed out of the Volturi lair, with the stipulation that Bella must become a vampire because of her knowledge. Edward and Bella return to Forks and essentially resume their relationship.

Eclipse - During *Eclipse*, Bella's high school graduation is rapidly approaching and she is forced to deal with her two conflicting relationships, Edward and Jacob. Jacob feels that Edward is too dangerous for her to be around as well as being less human than he is. Edward feels the same about Jacob, which results in a tug of war between them over Bella. Edward attempts to forbid Bella from seeing Jacob which results in several "kidnappings" by Jacob, to Edward's extreme irritation. Jacob continues with his desperation to the point he nearly forced himself on Bella after a strong conversation. All the while, Bella starts to pressure Edward for sex, and Edward decrees that they must be married for the possibility to even be considered. Bella also wants Edward to make an honest vampire out of her, and again he refuses despite the threat made by the Volturi during *New Moon*. The animosity grows between the three characters, but Victoria, the estranged lover of James, is back in town and causing trouble. She

² Alice has the ability to see the future based on people's decisions at the time.

is creating a vampire army of new vampires to destroy Bella and the Cullen family for killing James. The werewolves and the Cullen family vampires band together in an attempt to purge their territory of this mutual threat, and protect Bella. The pairing of the werewolf, vampire alliance proves successful and the budding vampire army is destroyed, shortly after which however, the Volturi come to the area to inquire about what is happening. Again, the agreement that Bella will become a vampire is brought to the family's attention, this time with more urgency. At the very end of the novel readers experience the official engagement of Edward and Bella, and the worry of having to break the news to Bella's father, Charlie.

Breaking Dawn - *Breaking Dawn*, the final installment of this series, takes on an entirely new dimension that many readers never see coming. Edward and Bella marry, while facing protests from Jacob and concerns from Bella's family. Edward and Bella do marry, and proceed to head out for their honeymoon on an island owned by Edward's "mother", and finally consummate their marriage. Bella wakes up on the beach covered in bruises and sore from the excursion, and proceeds to hide her discomfort from Edward in an attempt to please both of them. However, within a couple days, Bella soon starts feeling sick and eating oddly, which is then explained by the revelation that Bella is pregnant. Since the pregnancy occurs while Bella is mortal, Edward and Bella consummate a blood drinking hybrid baby that, among things, has the strength to crack Bella's ribs while inside her. The couple returns home and faces the challenge of what to do about the child that could potentially kill her. Bella wishes to continue the pregnancy despite the damage to her body, and the mental strain it causes the entire Cullen family. At the end of the pregnancy, which only lasts a couple weeks due to the child being "special", the child tears through Bella's body to get out, and Edward is forced to make Bella a vampire to save her life. When Jacob first sees Bella's baby, Renesmee, he immediately

imprints on her. According to werewolf legends, a werewolf will sometimes imprint on a specific person and be completely connected to that person forever. The werewolf is completely and utterly devoted to this person, will take on whatever role that person needs at the time and only lives to give this person what they want.. Renesmee needs a companion so Jacob becomes that, in the future Jacob may become her love interest as well.

As if things are not yet interesting enough, the Volturi learn of the hybrid baby and come to Forks to destroy the child. Vampire children are illegal in the vampire community, because they are uncontrollable, and are known to cause chaos and heartbreak. At first, the Volturi intend to not only destroy the baby, but all those who support the baby. Through a series of partnerships, determination, and a suspenseful confrontation with what is discovered to be a very corrupt Volturi, the day is saved. The novel comes to a fairly quiet climax when the Volturi learn of other hybrid babies who manage in society without being a problem. Afterwards, Edward and Bella return to their home with Renesmee and Jacob to live their life happily ever after.

So, who relates to vampires?

"Not that any of us are vampires/vampires' girlfriends, but I liked how the characters were real people, and you could understand what was going on with them. Bella wasn't a super star, homecoming queen or anything. She was a normal girl that had normal everyday issues," is what survey respondent 28 said about how the series identifies with readers. This respondent's comment is similar to many of the other responses about why so many people relate to a series about werewolves and vampires. When looking at any series one has to consider the audience the series appeals to and why. How does a story about vampire romance relate to readers? It is unlikely that the readers have their own vampire relationship they can relate to the story, let

alone have a werewolf best friend; yet so many readers identify with this series. Respondents of the survey said that it was the romanticism of the stories that drew them in and allowed them to become so emotionally connected to the characters. Survey respondent one, when asked how the series relates to readers, said "It latches on to the romanticism that lives in every girl's heart. It pulls at you with this hope that there really is someone out there just for you, and it can happen at the weirdest possible time with someone you never thought could exist.. Of course, it could be setting those girls up for disappointment, but why look at it that way?" Apparently, readers still like the images of women being swept off their feet by a knight in shining armor, as survey respondent eight states, "It's teenage love story - it's every teenagers and woman's fantasy to get swept off her feet by hot strong man that's never going to get old!!!"

The largest demographic of readers of this series by far are teen girls, although more demographics are becoming enthusiastic readers as well. Survey respondent three made a good note of this, saying "It clearly identifies with the main audience of these books which are teen girls. It relates to them on a level that many mainstream books today cannot.. A teen girl doesn't really feel that an orphan boy wizard accurately represents them. On the other hand a teen girl coming into her own without a real sense of her true sexuality and falling in love for the very first time are topics that many teenagers can relate to." I would have to agree that a socially awkward teenager with self esteem issues would relate much more effectively to teenage girls than an orphan wizard. The fact that Bella is the protagonist and the story is told from her perspective clearly makes a difference in how people relate to these books. Although it is currently unpublished, Meyer has rewritten *Twilight* from the perspective of Edward, entitled *Midnight Sun*, the first couple chapters of which can be seen on her official website. If readers first read this version of *Twilight*, their perspectives on how the series relates to readers and the

romanticism involved may be significantly different, just because it would be told from a perspective other than the relatable human. According to respondents, the series grabs a hold of teenage insecurities, worry about relationships, sex, acceptance, and self esteem issues. However, some of the respondents noted that the relationship issues and plot lines may be more complex than a simple love story.

Gender Roles

Many critics, like Leonard Sax and Caitlin Flanagan, have specifically criticized the gender roles and family structure presented in the series. The series expresses traditional gender roles in a modern time period, and because of the obsession many young girls have with the series this could, in my opinion, be potentially be problematic. Families and relationships are important in any person's life regardless of time period. However, family structures and gender roles have changed in the last couple centuries. Traditionally, families had an overarching importance in a person's life. To obtain and keep a stable family, in past generations, was seen as the main purpose of women. Many girls living in the 1950s were wed soon after high school and had their first child around the age of 20. The males in families were regarded solely as protectors and breadwinners, it was the female's job to maintain a happy household (Cancian).

A more modern view of families is the idea of individualism, in that each member of the family has the duty to fulfill his or her own passions. Basically saying that the family is important, but the individual is important as well. In this view we see the emergence of equal parenting and equal housework, rather than the more traditional viewpoint discussed above. Maybe it is because Edward was alive in the early 1900s that he keeps the traditional view of marriage and family. Edward and Bella are so wrapped up in each other, not in themselves, that

when they separate in *New Moon* it was like breaking a whole. Bella, right after Edward leaves her, thinks "Love, life, meaning ... over" (Meyer, 73). This may be seen as romantic, but considering just how lost Bella is without Edward (She was hearing voices!) there seems to be more to the relationship than just romance.

The gender roles between Edward and Bella are fairly traditional as well. Edward is the strong protector, and he appears more refined than Bella. He is graceful, can play the piano beautifully, and knows how to present himself to appeal to humans. He is seen by many readers as the "perfect" match. He is older than Bella and essentially smarter, although it is implied that that is because of his immortal life. However, Edward consistently provides the air of hidden danger and violence. He time and again states throughout the *Twilight* series that he cannot lose control around Bella for her safety, and that he is bad news for her. Bella, on the other hand, immediately jumps into the traditional family centered life. When she moves to Forks with her father, she starts to shop immediately, and starts cooking for her father to the point where the reader has to wonder how he ever got along without her. Next, Bella's life begins to revolve around Edward. She does not engage in previously stated hobbies, like reading, and chooses not to go to college because she would rather be with Edward. She gets married right out of high school and becomes a teenage mother, this picture has a rather striking resemblance to the 1950s women's role.

It is unusual to see such a pop culture phenomenon, with traditional gender roles, in modern culture. Leonard Sax discusses this in his article "Twilight Sinks Its Teeth Into Feminism," originally printed in the *Washington Post* in August 2008. He noted that although adolescent girls have been raised with the idea that gender does not matter, many of these girls still feel that "human nature is gendered at the core" (Sax, 1) He notes it is a possibility that the

feminist movement of the past gave rise to a generation that supports the traditional gender roles. Also, looking at this series during the recession of 2008 may influence reader's opinions of romance and gender. During economic downturns people often return to traditional gender and family roles as a way to keep their family together and functioning. Currently, girls are "dreaming about being saved by vampires and caring werewolves while boys play more violent video games, movies, and pornography" (Sax, 2). Caitlin Flanagan in her article "What Girls Want," published in *The Atlantic* in 2008, noted this same issue. She states that "The Twilight books are ostensibly set in the present, but - in terms of the mores, attitudes, and even the central elements of daily life - clearly evoke the culture of the author's adolescence" (Flanagan, 2). She notes that in this modern book there is very little use of cell phones, internet, ipods, or Facebook. These are items used regularly by teenagers, young adults, and adults. It is interesting that these are not included in the books very much at all when they appear to be the lifeline of many people (Flanagan).

Sexually-Speaking

Stephanie Meyer may have written the series to appeal to teen girls, since the main character is an awkward teenage girl. However, from my point of view, the issues these books tackle relate more to young adults, if not adult groups. The series presents issues of lifelong relationships, sex, marriage, and children. Older young adults, in their twenties to late twenties, would relate more to these issues than teen girls. It is more common for a woman in her late twenties to be getting married and concerned about having children, than a girl just graduating from high school, like Bella. Granted, teenage pregnancy and marriage does occur, but it is certainly not the norm in American culture. A popular discussion in American culture is that teens are growing up faster, or acting much older than teens of previous generations. One can

see this discussion on the evening news shows fairly consistently. It would be ignorant to say that teens do not engage in sexual activity, and I would argue it is more ignorant to believe that the majority of teens will follow abstinence. It is important to note that sex is a part of teen life and to attempt to completely protect teens from sexual acts is an unrealistic crusade. The first three books of the series seem to hold abstinence in very high regard. Bella repeatedly encourages Edward to have sex with her, and it is Edward that takes the chivalrous route and says no. *Breaking Dawn* is where many readers start to feel uncomfortable with Edward and Bella head out on their honeymoon and engaging in sexual activities. This seems like the proper thing to do after marriage, but the sex they engage in is violent.. The transition between abstinence to violent sex may be too much for some readers to understand. These books discuss sex, but the way sex is presented may be much more complicated than marriage and love.

Vampires have been the objects of desire for centuries, especially after Bella Lugosi played a rather suave version of Dracula. During any discussion about vampire stories, there is often a sexual undertone present.. The myth has transformed from demonic beings that destroy life, to envy for immortality, and seduction. Women have the same type of double standard mythology that Scott Mendelson notes in his article in the *Huffington Post* in November, 2008 entitled "Sure, Twilight May be Sexist, But It's Also Female Escapist Fantasy." He notes that:

There are two main cultural myths for females, two false assumptions that have been used as the definitive excuses to subjugate and disenfranchise women for centuries in all manner of societies. The first is that women are devious and reckless creatures who tempt men who can't control themselves. As a result of these fiendish seducers, the weak but noble men do all manner of vice and corruption, deeds that without the temptation of the women they would not have

even considered. But, wait, they are also weak-willed and emotional fragile creatures that cannot care for themselves and must be protected from peril and shielded from emotional complication (1).

This double standard holds true in the Twilight series in its characterization of Bella as a fragile being that must be protected, while all the while she is a seductress pressuring Edward into sex. This double standard is an issue that women deal with in our culture still, and as noted previously, survey respondents noted they related to Bella the most. This sexual double standard is a terrible problem for girls starting to emerge into their sexuality.

Many people feel that the relationship presented in the novels should not be geared toward children. Again, when one thinks of vampires in modern culture, ideas of forbidden relations and/or obtaining the least likely of companions comes up consistently. Survey respondent seven enthusiastically exclaims "I'm sorry, but even though it does not have actual sex or anything in them, the emotions run way too deep and are too influential for children. I had a seven year old in front of me at the *Breaking Dawn* release. SEVEN! Way too young for such a book.. To them, it tells them that a girl should about kill herself over losing a guy. An older girl knows better and just feels it with her." This respondent does present a valid issue, children are influenced by their environment as some level and this obsession with the series may be more problematic than originally thought. Since I work at Barnes and Noble I regularly see young girls express to their parents that they want to read the Twilight series. In a specific instance, one mother told her child "absolutely not," because, as she told me, she felt that her daughter would not fully understand Edward and Bella's relationship. A seven year old is too young to understand the complexities of relationships, but in my opinion even adolescents are too young to understand the complexities of an abusive relationship.

Throughout the series, Edward controls Bella's every move and this level of the control in the books would be considered abusive in society today. One blogger, K from Southinthewinter.blogspot.com, said "I've read the *Twilight* series and as much as they are mostly harmless fun, some things do trouble me about them, much as the sexism in most romance novels prevents me from enjoying an escape into fantasy-land. Meyer's retro attitudes towards sex and female independence are somewhat understandable in young adults, but Bella's utter dependence on Edward's good opinion is something else altogether.. It all seems too close to an abusive relationship to me" (K) If the reader strips away the enticing, exciting, supernatural part of the novels and just looks at the relationship between Bella and Edward, the relationship emerges as highly problematic.

In a Twilight Facebook forum many readers rant about so called "twilight-haters." They do not see how Edward and Bella's relationship can be considered abusive; one the forum, Valery exclaimed their relationship was "just intense love." These readers appear too young to understand the intricacies that abusive relationships are not limited to only physical abuse. Abusive relationships involve control, often to the point of alienating the partner from other relationships. Readers see this in the Twilight series, Bella loses consistent contact with her friends and towards the end even her mortal family. Edward protects and dictates Bella's every move, even getting Alice to essentially kidnap Bella during the weekends he is away to keep her safe. Some readers feel this way while other may feel that the relationship is at least not applicable to reality. Feather commented on Southinthewinter's blog with:

What terrified me about these books being used as potential romantic models for teenage girls was how utterly *helpless* Bella was, and how that was something that Edward found attractive. It's the classic problem of the "damsel in distress," and it

disturbed me. A friend (we all had to read the book for a class=another student wrote her thesis on it) commented on how from the outside, Bella's relationship with Edward would look like an abusive one to any rational and perceptive adult, which is a line of thought I didn't follow very far, but instinctively agreed with. There's something dodgy in their relationship, and it was quite troubling--but I didn't read beyond the first book (K).

On top of the issues with relationships, sex is problematic in the series. It may be encouraging to think that the series is creating a group of abstinence support in the adolescent community. In an article present in *Bitch*, the leading feminist magazine, Christine Seifert looks into this issue in the article "On Abstinence." She refers to the series as "abstinence porn," (Seifert, 23) and points out that the story still objectifies Bella. Bella is the bawdy, dangerous temptress who wants pre-marital sex. How many of these girls who fall in love with Edward and Bella's relationship will find a boy so virtuous as to keep her a virgin? Sex is viewed as a loss of innocence, but the dangers and excitement of sex are discussed throughout the series as something to be desired. It does relate to adolescence and young adults who are readily dealing with these same emotions and desires. Seifert also points out that self denial is considered "hot" in this series. How practical is that in modern society? Many girls face the rejection of boys who want sex when that girl does not. Boys accuse girls of "leading them on." Will the influence of this series lead to more of this rejection and hurt? The fan-fictions of the series show just how well adolescents understand how sex, marriage, and relationships work.. Seifert notes:

One piece of fan fiction was posted to TheTwilightSaga.com on June 22, 2008, before the release of the fourth book, by a particularly ardent fan (hardy'sgirl). In

the story, Edward and Bella have gotten married and are on their honeymoon.

Edward begins kissing Bella (on her neck, of course) and then begins removing her jeans. Bella, with a pounding heart, asks herself, "Would I really let him go all the way?" (Seifert, 25)

This little excerpt really speaks to just how well these adolescents understand marriage. In most marriages, the debate of whether or not to have sex during the honeymoon is not normal. Also, the writer uses the term "go all the way" instead of sex. If a person is not comfortable talking about sex as sex, they probably are not mature enough for sex. A couple of the survey respondents noted that some young readers may not fully understand the romantic relationship. The respondent mentioned previously that they felt some of the readers were way too young to fully understand relationships, and survey respondent 45 states, "the romance seems to catch a lot of girl's attention, especially those too young to really understand: I personally do not see it."

On an increasingly troubling note, the series goes from abstinence to violence sex. In my opinion, this is not appropriate for adolescents to understand as 'okay' for their first time. Violent sex may be understood as enticing to older adults who can break fantasy from reality, but can adolescents? Teens who are just starting to understand themselves and their sexual drives have a hard enough time with those issues alone. Understanding sexual drives is one level of maturing; understanding when violent sex is or is not appropriate is another level. Unfortunately, the innocence of a loving relationship seems to merge into a borderline abusive relationship when sex finally occurs in the series. The worst part about the violent sex in the series is that Bella attempts to keep her pain from Edward to encourage him. She hides her bruises and discomfort in an attempt to keep Edward happy. The way readers understand sex

and relationships comes to light in Twilight fan-fictions, as expressed previously. Christine Seifert notes that one explicit fan fiction writes:

Edward had become a monster, that dangerous vampire he held hidden away from me ... and I was the one about the pay for it... he held my arms above my head pinned onto the bead in iron clasps. I was panicking and my breathing was fast.. Edward sat up above me ... and the look in his eyes weren't ones I've ever seen before ... unless he was about to feed (Seifert, 25).

Seifert lays the issue out well when she says "The rape fantasy is apparent, of course, but even more salient is the fan writer's subconscious understanding of the theme Meyer has been establishing: that sex is dangerous and men must control themselves. It's a matter of life or death, and ultimately men are in charge" (Seifert, 25). However, this does come from a fan fiction, and not the series. Fan fictions are a good way to understand how readers feel about Edward and Bella's relationship and to better understand what they want to see the relationship evolve into.

The Other Side

Not all readers think there are problems with Edward and Bella's relationship; many think that the series is pure entertainment. . There is a fairly sharp divide between the readers who think the series can negatively influence readers, and the readers who think the series is just entertainment. These readers make the distinction between real and fantasy, and bring up heated debates about the possibilities of the series.

There is an ongoing deliberation on a popular debate site, Squidoo.com, about the series. This website boasts both sides of the issue and lays the comments side by side for comparison.

The first poll on the site asks "Is the Twilight book series appropriate for kids?" The results are similar to what I have found in my survey and in discussions with readers; 43.5% say Twilight is appropriate for ages 13 and up, 45% say it is okay for ages 10 and up, and 11.5% say it is okay for ages 8 and up. There is a fairly close split between those who feel the series deserves and older readership and those who support a younger readership. The same type of results are found when asked specifically about *Breaking Dawn*; which has caused the largest amount of debate regarding the appropriateness of the series for young teens. When asked "Is *Breaking Dawn* appropriate for younger readers (ages 12 and under), 52.4% said the novel was "not a big deal," whereas 47.6% exclaim that the "book should have a mature content warning." A more detailed question is presented about *Breaking Dawn* that has interesting results. When asked "How old should girls be before they are allowed to read *Breaking Dawn*" the breakdown looks like this: 22.3% of respondents said 12, 21.4% said 10, 19.4% said 13, 12.1% said 11, 8.7% said 14, 8.3% said 15, 3.9% said 16, 2.9% said 18 and 1% said 17. Ages 10, 12, and 13 are the popular responses, but there are significant numbers for the ages 14 through 16 as well (Is Twilight). The problem I find with this question is that it targets just girls. Even the questions regarding the series indicate that sexual relations are a female concern. Boys are equally likely to face the same type of sexual drives and problems as girls, in terms of this series, and targeting just girls in the questions is problematic.

The question/heading "What age group is *Twilight* appropriate for and why?" is a particularly interesting discussion on Squidoo. The two sides of this argument are *Twilight* is for 13 year olds and up, or *Twilight* is okay for kids younger than 13. In the *Twilight* is okay for kids younger than 13 side Glyss made a comment on April 22, 2009 that reads "Why not...it's not like they go into detail of the sex. The sex is not descriptive at all the author totally cuts it out,

and your daughters should know about sex and what happens when you have sex by the time they are 10. End result is a love story, they fall in love - get married - they have a baby ... I think it's fine Moms stop sheltering your kids so much, you're gonna wind up seeing them on *Girls Gone Wild*" (Is Twilight) This reader brings up an interesting point about the ages of maturity in America. Many children are exposed to sexual education courses in elementary school..

Regardless of the effectiveness these courses have, children are exposed to sex at a young age, likely before the age of 10. Not only are children exposed to sex in an education setting, they watch sexual jokes and stories on prime time television. Currently, one of the most popular shows on prime time television for teens and young adults is *Gossip Girl*. Many teen girls watch and love this show, and the show centers around a group of rich New York teenagers being naughty, even I find it wickedly entertaining. What does Stephanie Meyer have to say about the age debate?

In an interview for *Entertainment Weekly* Stephanie Meyer comments on writing young adult books and the age debate regarding *Breaking Dawn* specifically. When asked, "Given the more mature themes of this book, is it still a young adult book?" Meyer says, "I've never written a young adult book in my life. The books are set in high school, but I've never written them thinking I am writing this for a 16 year old, I always write for myself, and I'm in my 30s. So these books have never been a young adult project to me. I think it's awesome that the kids enjoy them ... but I was concerned with this last one. I didn't let my son read it, he's 11; he can read that when he's a little bit older...and I do feel that parents should be very involved in what their kids read. They should know what it is so they can talk about it and know if it's appropriate." She goes on to say that she would have been happy with a 15 and up label on *Breaking Dawn*, but the publishing company did not go that route (Meyer).

Marriage appears to be the key factor in what makes this love story appropriate. Edward and Bella do engage in all the behavior Americans consider appropriate before they have sex. Bella graduates from high school, they get married, and then they have a child. In my opinion, this can be considered okay behavior in America. Americans still place a huge emphasis on the importance of marriage, and one can argue that since Bella and Edward get married before they have sex, they technically do not engage in anything that is considered wrong. On the Squidoo forum Julia posted on April 7, 2009, "It simply says they 'sink into bliss' then the book fast forwards to the next morning, no penetration is involved. Also the act if on their wedding night and both characters are virgins, you really can't get an example to children today other than that ... kids today are having kids at 13 so if anything Twilight only gives a better example" (Is Twilight).

Referring back to the discussion about abuse relationships mentioned previously, naturally, all readers do not agree with this. One side argues that removing vampirism from the relationship would allow Edward to be portrayed as the borderline abusive, controlling person he is. The other side argues that one cannot remove vampirism from the equation, because that is what the books center around. Vampirism makes a difference when one considers Bella's safety. Referring again to Southinthewinter's blog, another commenter said:

"This book isn't entirely anti-feminism. I'm not a feminist, but I do understand their/your point of view. I agree that Bella is a damsel in distress, for she is only capable of fending for herself AFTER the change. However, I also see Bella as a strong, individual person - given the circumstances. She's smart, and it does take a lot of personal strength to give that part of you to someone else who could destroy you - given the circumstances. Edwards controlling nature goes

unnoticed because of his need for Bella's blood, and her willingness to be with him even after that.. He doesn't want her to give herself up to him, or to risk the dangers of being with him, yet she continues to insist she is capable of taking care of herself to an extent.. If it weren't for Edwards vampirism or his overwhelming desire for Bella's blood, he would be a stupid, controlling asshole. Given the circumstances (again) however, his overbearing attitude is admired because he's keeping the one he loves from danger" (K).

Vampirism is at the heart of the story and taking that supernatural aspect out of the story may be taking the criticisms of the series too far.

Many readers say that readership should be left up to an individual basis, rather than specific age groups. It is true that the maturity levels of young teens vary significantly, and readers feel that if a person is mature enough to understand sexual relations then they are mature enough to read the series. Julie also noted on April 7, 2009, "I feel that you all should know your children individually, my 11 year old sister is just as smart as any 13 year old and I know she can handle the content of these books, some children are different" (Is Twilight). Individual differences are important, but so are family differences as one poster noted. Just Saying posted on March 21,2009, "I personally think that 12+ would be decent for most IF the parents took the time to read the book before them and explain the differences between fantasy and reality" (Is Twilight). Individual maturity and upbringing are, in my opinion, the strongest indicators towards a strong understanding of sex and relationships. This poster says he/she would not trust the books with any of the 12 year old he/she knows, but does acknowledge the individual basis these books deserve.

Conclusion

Naturally, the debate concerning this series is highly individualized. The perspective of what age is appropriate for readership depends on the perspective of the reader. Many people find the series very problematic, and the negative critiques about the series outweigh the positive ones. There will not be an end to this debate any time soon, since each side holds such passionate opinions. I attempted to present both sides of the argument that can encourage further development on this topic. There are so many opinions I came across via conversation, the survey, or blogs that I tried to present the ones particularly salient, but naturally I could not present them all. I encourage readers to look through these blogs and forums to further their understanding of the series. If you dislike the series, or just want a good laugh, head to a ~~funny~~ discussion on bookstove.com.³ Even I do not understand why Stephanie Meyer's vampires sparkle.

My opinions regarding the series are that the series should be read by those who are 15 and up, but exceptions do occur. Teens are exposed to sex at a young age and probably have a better understanding of sex than many people give them credit for. It is not the sex in the series I see as a problem, but the way relationships are presented. Giving girls hope that their knight in shining armor exists is lovely in theory, but entirely unpractical. The knight in shining armor does not exist, sorry to put a pin in the proverbial bubble. No person, or vampire, is perfect and men have more feelings and concerns than Edward expresses. Although he has a reaction when Bella is pregnant, is not nearly as powerful as I have seen when young fathers learn of their parenthood. It is unlikely, to me, that a girl will find such a virtuous boy that will protect her virginity until marriage. It is not something that is common in our culture. I think older girls

³ <http://www.bookstove.com/Fantasy/Why-I-Hate-Twilight.62314> 7

may understand this and read the series as giddy entertainment. . I personally enjoyed reading the series, despite my conflicts with it. I love the debate this series has caused, that so many people are thinking critically about the series and expressing their opinions via blogs and forums. I want to note that as I was walking out of a building at Northern Illinois University I noticed a *Twilight* flier that I promptly snatched off the board. It gave times and dates for a *Twilight* discussion group, "The Gospel of *Twilight*." By the time I noticed this flier the dates had already passed, to my disappointment... This seems a particularly interesting discussion located on campus. I wished to express that although I missed this discussion, it notes just how many different directions this series debate can be taken. I cannot wait to see what other opinions people come up with and express to the world.

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Appendix A

Questions:

Male or Female?

Age Range

How does Twilight make you feel while reading the novel?

How does/did Twilight make you feel when you finished reading the novel?

Which character did you identify with the best in the novels?

Which character did you identify with the least in the novels?

How do you feel about the popularity of the series?

If you have seen the movie, how excited were you while waiting for the movie to start in the theater?

How do you feel Twilight identifies with its readers?

Did you attend a midnight release party for Breaking Dawn?

Appendix B

Items identified by title only

Books.

The Twilight Saga Collection Boxed Set

Breaking Dawn

Breaking Dawn Special Edition (August 2009)

Eclipse

New Moon

Twilight

Twilight - Collector's Edition

The Twilight Saga - Official Guide (September 2009)

Twilight - Director's Notebook

Twilight - Complete Illustrated Movie Companion

Twilight Companion - Unauthorized Guide

Robert Pattinson - Eternally Yours

Robert Pattinson - True Love Never Dies

The Robert Pattinson Album

Robert Pattinson - Fated for Fame

I (heart) Robert Pattinson (September 2009)

Robert Pattinson (October 2009)

Robert Pattinson Annual 2010: Beyond Twilight (October 2009)

Kristin Steward: Bella of the Ball

Twilight Audio Book

New Moon Audio Book

Eclipse Audio Book

Breaking Dawn Audio Book

Twilight: Music From the Motion Picture - Piano-Vocal-Guitar

Twilight: Music from the Motion Picture - Soundtrack Easy Piano

Twilight- The Score Easy Piano Solo

Twilight- The Score Music from the Motion Picture

Twilight - The Score: Big-Note Piano

Twilight Tours - An Illustrated Guide to the Real Forks (August 2009)

The Twilight Companion: Completely Updated - The Unauthorized Guide (October 2009)

Twilight Vocabulary Workbook for the SAT/ACT/GED/SSAT (July 2009)

Stephanie Meyer: Author of the Twilight Saga (May 2009)

Twilight and Philosophy: Vampires, Vegetarians, and the Pursuit of Immortality (September 2009)

Boys of Twilight Unauthorized Scrapbook (September 2009)

Stephanie Meyer CD Pack - The Twilight Saga

DVD

Twilight - Standard Edition

Twilight- Special Edition

Twilight - Delux Edition

Twilight - Borders Exclusive Special Edition

Twilight - Blu-ray

CD

Twilight Soundtrack

Twilight Soundtrack - Special Edition

Twilight Original Score

Merchandise

Twilight Perfume

Esme Costume Bracelet

Roseley Costume Necklace

Edward Action Figure

Cullen Crest Tote

Twilight Sweathearts

Twilight Umbrella

Edward Life Size Cardboard Cut Out

Twilight Lunch Pail

Twilight Bookbag

Twilight Board Game

Bookmarks (Cast, James, Edward, Bella, Bella & Edward)

Twilight Barnes and Noble Gift Cards

Twilight Godiva Milk Chocolate Bars

Twilight 2009 Calendar

Twilight 2009- 2010 Calendar

Twilight Journals

Edward and Bella Action Figures 2 Pack

Twilight Lion Logo Bandana

Edward and Bell Pin Set

Twilight Cast Crest Tote

Edward Fleece Throw

Twilight Crest Bandana

Twilight Team Edward Lapel Pin

Team Edward Sticker

Team Jacob Sticker

Twilight Logo Metal Pin

Twilight Live Forever Patch

Twilight Lion Love Lamb Patch

Twilight Crest Logo Wristband

Team Edward Rubber Bracelets

Team Jacob Rubber Bracelets

Edward Cullen Key Chain
Edward Pose Key Chain
Edward and Bella Vintage Carrying Case
Twilight Musical Jewelry Box
Twilight Heart Arrow Necklace
Twilight Logo Slap Bracelet
Twilight Heart Lock N Key Bracelet and Necklace Set
Edward and Bella Embrace Tote
Twilight Sparkle Tote
Twilight Charm Bracelet
Twilight Quote Heart Necklace
Edward and Bella Kiss Pin
Twilight Say It Pin
Twilight Fictional Character Rubber Bracelet
Twilight Edward Tote
Twilight Crest Locket Necklace
Twilight Forever Stretch Bracelet
Twilight Broken Heart Necklace Set
Twilight Edward Body Shimmer
Edward Sparkle Pin
Twilight Sparkle Boys Sticker
Twilight Sparkle Boys Pin
Edward Sparkle Key Chain
Twilight Bad Vamps Poster
Edward and Bella Embrace Poster
Twilight Alice Choker
Edward's Write Cuffs

Twilight Couple Tote

Lion-Lamb Key Chain

Twilight Waited Key Chain

Twilight I Want You Always Pin

Twilight Stupid Lamb Pin

Edward Sticker

Cast Sticker

Twilight Logo Pin

Edward and Bella Sticker

Cast Poster

Edward and Bella Close Up Poster

Twilight Photo-Button Set

Cast Key Chain

Edward and Bella Poster

Edward Poster

Bella and Edward Key Chain

Twilight Magnet Set

Edward Plastic Watch

Clothing

Twilight DVD Cover T-shirt

Twilight Forks High School T-shirt

Edward and Bella Filigree T-shirt

Cullen Crest Tank and Pants Pl Set

Edward Pale and Cold T-shirt

Twilight Don't Scare Me T-shirt

Lion and Lamb Hoodie

Cullen Crest T-shirt

Twilight Embrace V-neck T-shirt

Twilight Couture White Studded Cullen Crest T-shirt

Twilight Couture Flocked Burnout Crest T-shirt

Twilight Couture Raglan Baseball T-shirt

Twilight Couture Studded Cullen Crest T-shirt

Twilight Couture embroidered Logo With Crest Zip-up Hoodie

Twilight Edward Tree T-shirt

Twilight White Logo T-shirt

Twilight Jacob Werewolves T-shirt

Twilight Edward Vampires T-shirt

Twilight Bad Vamps T-shirt

Team Jacob T-shirt

Team Edward T-shirt

Twilight Logo T-shirt

Twilight Three Things T-shirt

Edward Glass T-shirt

Twilight Romantic Embrace T-shirt

Twilight Bad Vamps Slimfit T-shirt

Edward and Bella Dream T-shirt

Twilight Dream Hoodie

Jasper T-shirt

Emmett T-shirt

Edward T-shirt

Twilight Couple T-shirt

Twilight Not Hero T-shirt

Twilight Character T-shirt

Twilight Group T-shirt

Twilight Logo T-shirt

Twilight Men's Flash T-shirt

Twilight Men's Cast T-shirt