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**‘You only have to turn your back on nature...’:
valorising posthuman desire in Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight Saga***

ABSTRACT

What is exceptional about Stephenie Meyer’s Twilight Saga is not that the vampire appears as a figure of desire. The vampire has been eroticised in one form or another almost since its inception as a literary figure. Bella’s desire for Edward however, is not one that exists despite his inhumanity, but because of it. As a millennial xenophile, Bella desires not only the vampire, but to become a vampire herself. In this extension of romantic union into literal transformation, Meyer effectively inverts the predatory nature of vampirism even while maintaining a kernel of its monstrosity. While Twilight’s heroine is often read as marginalised and weak, what a close examination of the text reveals is that rather than disenfranchised by her gender, or socio-economic status, Bella is hindered by her species. This paper examines the mediation of monstrosity and posthuman desire through the vampiric body, and discusses how the traditional fears which the vampire courts are transformed by their contact with a domesticating and valorising impulse within the text into something fundamentally inhuman but desirable.

KEYWORDS

Twilight,
vampire
fiction,
Posthuman
studies,
paranormal
romance,
monstrosity

‘You don’t care if I’m a monster? If I’m not *human*?’ (Meyer, 2008c: 161).

Since Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* was published in 2005, it has proven a divisive text. While the novel, and the following three novels *New Moon*, *Eclipse* and *Breaking Dawn* which comprise *The Twilight Saga* have attracted both positive and negative attention, this attention has increased and intensified since the adaptation of the *Saga* to film. Among the common criticisms of the series is that it is conservative in its modelling of gender and relationships. This public perception of the text as conservative has also entered the academic discourse

surrounding the series. Lydia Kokkolamodells this perception writing that: ‘Meyer’s exploration of the ‘erotics of abstinence’ (Morris 2008; Grossman, 2008: 2) promotes the same values as the socially powerful, conservative Christian groups behind the TLW [True Love Waits] movement’ (Kokkola 2010: 166). While these criticisms are not unwarranted, and can be well supported by reference to the texts, they do not do justice to the full complexities of the novels. Whether or not the work can be interpreted in-line with the advocating of abstinence, and other conservative Christian ideologies it is also a text which models an aberrant desire which crosses species lines and which furthermore endorses that desire within its ideological framework.

What this paper contests, is that rather than a heterosexist fable anchored by defanged vampires, the *Saga* negotiates through the vampire body, and the desires of its protagonist Bella, a valorisation of posthuman, Other-centric desire. This claim rests on three interconnected arguments. Firstly, that Stephenie Meyer’s vampires break fundamentally with depictions of the classical vampire. Secondly, that the corporeal construction of these ‘new’ vampires allows for positive, socially acceptable and thus valorised engagement between the human and the vampire. The final argument is that these shifts do not induce a total conceptual break between Meyer’s vampires and their monstrous, classical forebears. That is, that Meyer’s vampires and their function are expressible within the same psychoanalytic terminology deployed by critics of the classical vampire and can be considered in continuity with other vampire texts and not as a misunderstanding or misappropriation of vampire iconography or mythology.

By the term ‘classical vampire’, I do not mean a singular or iconic understanding of the vampire, nor do I mean a definition of the vampire dependant on any singular medium. Rather, while aware of the difficulty in defining the vampire at all, I use the term to refer to the roughly cohesive image of the vampire, which emerges from a corpus of vampire texts from the eighteenth to twenty-first centuries and the wealth of criticism that has sprung up around these texts. Ken Gelder cautions in his book *Reading the Vampire* that ‘what we have with the many articles and books on Stoker’s novel [...] is not one *Dracula*, but many *Draculas*’ (Gelder 1994: 65). While sensitive to the fractious debates which undercut critical understandings of the vampire, I position the classical vampire image as dependent on a number of conceptual features gleaned from studies of the field of vampire and horror scholarship such as Gelder’s book, Christopher Frayling’s 1991 *Vampyres*, Joseph Gixti’s 1989 *Terrors of Uncertainty*, Noël Carroll’s 1990 *The Philosophy of Horror* and Barbara Creed’s 2005 *Phallic Panic*.

Rather than attempt to break the vampire down into separate traditions, or icons – to set, for instance Lestat against Dracula – the classical vampire will be expressed largely as a function of ideology: albeit an ideology physically concreted in their bodies and biological processes. To start broadly, the classical vampire, as with other monsters and monstrosities, is what Carroll would call a ‘category error’ (Carroll 1994). That is, it is commonly defined by its liminal or interstitial status. The classical vampire is between life and death, animal and human and so forth. This error is also not static, rather than stake out a third terrain the vampire continually crosses and troubles the existing category boundaries (Betterton, 2006). As Gelder writes: ‘the vampire’s function is to cross back and forth over boundaries that should otherwise be secure – the boundaries between humans and animals, humans and God, and, as an expression of its ‘polymorphous’ sexuality, man and woman’ (Gelder 1994: 70). In bodily terms the classical vampire then is defined by a corporeal excessiveness: a body which hesitates, or may literally transform between states. This definition appears in the work of Slavoj Žižek and Joan Copjec as an argument that positions: ‘the vampire, or Gothic monstrosities generally, as an excess, a surplus in an otherwise coherent system of identification’ (Gelder 1994 : 52).

In comparison to Copjec and Žižek’s overflowing and incoherent body which may transition and blur between categories, the vampires of Meyer’s *Saga* are comprised of static, rarefied matter. According to Meyer, Edward is not only an Adonis, but an alabaster statue (Meyer 2008d). Meyer does not allow the instability of the classical vampire to intrude on her depiction of Edward’s ageless vampire body. In place of the potential for rot, liquefaction and filth that comes along with the undeath of the classical vampire body, Edward’s corporeality is defined in mineral rather than fleshly terms:

His skin, white despite the faint flush from yesterday’s hunting trip, literally sparkled, like thousands of tiny diamonds were embedded in the surface. He lay perfectly still in the grass, his shirt open over his sculpted incandescent chest, his scintillating arms bare. His glistening, pale lavender lids were shut, though of course he didn’t sleep. A perfect statue, carved in some unknown stone, smooth like marble, glittering like crystal (Meyer 2008d: 148).

This shift does not bring human and vampire bodies closer together. Meyer’s depiction, while excluding the potential for necrophilic indulgence others have found in the vampire, does not erase corporeal difference. What this corporeal style does allow, however, is the evasion of what may be termed the vampire’s queer threat.

The queer threat I refer to is the ability, expressed by critics such as Sue-Ellen Case, of the vampire to function as a taboo breaker (Case, 1997). That is, not to merely inhabit a position of alterity or Otherness, but to actively dismantle the boundaries of the human. Of the queer potential of the classic vampire Gelder writes:

It is not the Other in this arrangement; it gains its effect by continually *collapsing* the conventional polarity of ‘life’ and ‘death’, normality and the unnatural, regeneration and sterility – what is familiar and unfamiliar – rather than positioning itself on the negative side of that polarity (Gelder, 1994: 61-62).

Meyer’s vampires, while, like other vampires, able to convert human beings with a bite, do not engage promiscuously with the collapse of polarities. As can be seen in the description of Edward, every effort is made to avoid the potentially murky ground between life and death and instead to position the vampire body as something radically, but stably other to the human, but also, in its own terms, natural.

Bella’s desire for Edward, while legitimated by Meyer’s transformed vampire bodies, at this point cannot be articulated within posthuman terms, at least not as Neil Badmington defines it: ‘a recognition that ‘Man’ is not the privileged and protected centre, because humans are no longer – and perhaps never were – utterly distinct from animals, machines and other forms of the ‘inhuman’” (Badmington 2010: 374). The vampire, in the *Saga*’s reality, while unquestionably Othered, does not challenge the distinction between the human and the inhuman. While Bella’s desire for the vampire does rely on a decentring of the human as the only category of value, it equally relies on the ultimate separation of the vampire from the human. That is, the positioning of the vampire as a distinct and bordered category rather than a free-floating and transformative creature as Case, Copjec and Žižek have imagined it. This establishment of a separate vampire ‘category’ is expressed in the language used by both Bella and Edward to define their status. Edward interprets their difference through ecological metaphors: ‘Is it so hard to believe the same force that created the delicate angelfish with the shark, the baby seal and the killer whale, could create both our kinds together?’ (Meyer 2008d: 269). There is no middle-ground between the ‘kinds’ of the human and the vampire in Meyer’s work: the liminal or queer position has been closed off. The completeness of this separation is necessary for the production of Bella’s desire. Bella displays xenophilia, or a love of difference in her description of Edward, which constantly emphasises his exceptional and exotic nature, rather than on his familiar ‘human’ characteristics.

Desire across species, or categories of being, has sympathy with the posthuman project, but is not in and of itself posthuman. Neil Badmington covers much of this ground in his 2004 book *Alien Chic*. *Alien Chic* maps what Neil Badmington describes as a cultural movement, primarily in America but also abroad, from ‘alien hatred’ to ‘alien love’. Comparing films like *Independence Day* (1996), *Mars Attacks* (1996), *E.T.* (1982) and other accounts of extra-terrestrial contact Badmington demonstrates how cultural attitudes towards the alien and the inhuman can shift (in the case of his study from antagonism to endorsement) without blurring the boundaries between the human and the alien. In Bella’s initial desire for Edward ‘alien love’ can be detected. Bella does not feel the need to destroy the vampire: a desire which can be found in much vampire fiction like Bram Stoker’s 1897 *Dracula* or Stephen King’s 1975 *Salem’s Lot*. Her love for Edward, however, does not erase or eclipse their fundamental and categorical difference. These differences continue to disrupt and challenge their attempts at consummating or completing their relationship, just as they challenge the engagement between human and vampire characters in other texts. Bella’s desire can be articulated in posthuman terms once she concludes that the consummation and completion of her and Edward’s relationship relies on her rejection of humanity and rebirth as a vampire.

Bella’s drive to ‘complete’ her relationship with Edward by gaining vampire status is not without its forebears in the vampire canon. Gelder points out the frequent sympathies between romance and vampire fiction when he discusses the novels of Anne Rice and her contemporaries. The series Gelder discusses include not only Anne Rice’s *Vampire Chronicles* (1976-2003) but also Chelsea Quinn Yarbro’s *St-Germain Cycle* (1978-2013) and P.N. Elrod’s series *Vampire Files* (1990-2009) and Jonathan Barrett, *Gentleman Vampire* (1993-1996). Of these series Gelder writes ‘their chronicles share a number of characteristics usually associated with women’s romance – notably the tracing out of the vampire’s search for fulfilment, for a ‘complete’ love relationship’ (Gelder 1994: 109).

Love fails in the *Saga* to ‘complete’ Bella and Edward’s relationship. Even though Bella’s desire for Edward is dependent on his difference from her, this difference also represents a fundamental barrier to the completion of their desire, in that it comes with an attendant power imbalance. Edward’s reason for restraining their sexual contact is his fear of harming her, and his discomfort with her comparative frailty is not one-sided. Bella is also frustrated by the imbalances caused by their bodily differences even when mediated by a romantic, loving relationship:

‘I’ll be the first to admit that I have no experience with relationships,’ I said. ‘But it just seems logical... a man and a woman have to be somewhat equal... as in, one of them can’t always be swooping in and saving the other one. They have to save each other *equally*’ (Meyer 2008d: 412).

Despite the common understanding of ‘romantic love’ as ‘trans historical, transcultural and terrifyingly omnipotent’ (Pearce 2007: 1) within the world of the *Saga* it is only in a return to the erotic body of the classical vampire that difference can be bridged and resolved. In this sense, Bella and Edward’s relationships ‘completion’, seen in the equalisation of their physical status, comes through a bodily-centred sexual practice rather than in the denial of the body that romance can court (Pearce & Wisker 1998; Kerns 1992).

The eroticism of the *Saga* is not an exact model of that imbued in classical vampire texts. Creed defines the classical vampire in terms of an essential eroticism, contending that: ‘the most distinctive feature of the vampire – central to all of the various sources – is that he is a consummate sexual initiator’ (Creed 2005: 72). Meyer’s vampires and Edward specifically, do not initiate sexual contact. For Bella at least, Edward is the object rather than the agent of sexual desire. It is Bella who pursues Edward and initiates sexual contact, rather than Edward who instead operates as a barrier to consummation. As can be seen in the following quotation, Bella pushes for continued erotic contact, while Edward polices limits and boundaries: ‘his fingers braided themselves into my hair, securing my face to his. My arms locked behind his neck, and I wished I was stronger – strong enough to keep him prisoner here’ (Meyer 2008c: 43-44). There is good reason in the classical vampire tale to resist consummation, not least of all the particular form of eroticism that the vampire tale embraces.

Responding to Ernest Jones’s 1929 *On the Nightmare* (which is also cited by both Grixti and Carroll) Gelder highlights the dangerous sexuality of the classical vampire: ‘the ‘vampire’s exhausting love embrace’ is complicated by forms of sexual perversity which return to the primitive world of infantilism. The chief form is ‘oral sadism’ – where sucking (love) turns into biting (hate)’ (Gelder 1994: 67). This dangerous oral eroticism is also key to the threat of the vampire in Creed’s work: ‘his monstrous oral sexuality threatens the very basis of phallic patriarchal civilisation. Vampires do not have sex – that is, genital penetration – yet they remain the most potent and sexual of all creatures’ (Creed 2005: 72). What can be seen in Meyer’s work is not only the continued presence and significance of oral eroticism to

desire, but its instrumentality in achieving the completion of that desire within posthuman terms.

The oral stage, according to Sigmund Freud's *Three Lectures on Sexuality* is the first of the pre-genital orders, and within it 'sexual activity has not yet been separated from the ingestion of food' (Freud 1977: 116). Also known as the 'cannibalistic stage', oral sexuality is literalised in the vampire, who experiences hunger and sexual desire in tandem. The oral stage is linked with literal consumption, but it is also figuratively linked with conceptual *incorporation*. The desire to incorporate the object of desire with the self is normally embodied within vampire texts as the literal ingestion of blood. Within the *Saga* it is Bella, rather than the vampires who pursue incorporation. Bella is in the grip of a cannibalistic sexuality throughout the novels where she sees her incorporation into the vampire body as essential to her continued happiness and the realisation of her desire. While in a more classically oriented vampire story, Bella's desires would be tempered by the death drive in *The Twilight Saga* consumption is not purely *destructive* but also an act of bodily re-creation or rebirth. While romantic love is credited with its own transformative powers, it is the body-centric eroticism of Georges Bataille's which best invokes the visceral transformation which Bella pursues. In *Eroticism* he writes:

The whole business of eroticism is to strike to the innermost core of the living being, so that the heart stands still. [...] The whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participants as they are in their normal lives (Bataille 1998: 101).

This rendering of eroticism is echoed very clearly in Meyer's rendering of the transformation process which vampires must undergo:

It takes a few days for the transformation to be complete, depending on how much venom is in the bloodstream, how close the venom enters to the heart. As long as the heart keeps beating, the poison spreads, healing, changing the body as it moves through it. Eventually the heart stops, and the conversion is finished. But all that time, every minute of it, a victim would be wishing for death (Meyer 2008d: 361).

In both cases the original individual is destroyed, and their heart stopped. The vampiric process, in this way, is Bataille's eroticism literalised. As the object of all eroticism is to effect change, and to 'destroy' the individual, Bella's pursuit of Edward is a more concrete

and corporeal but no less ‘normal’ expression of erotic desire as the realisation of ‘cannibalistic’ incorporation.

In Bella’s eventual admittance into the ranks of the Cullen family she inverts the common narrative of monstrous contagion. Bella is incorporated bodily into the vampire family, but is seemingly also able to incorporate the vampire into herself. The presence of vampires, rather than their absence, enables Bella to reform and embrace her own self. The vampires of *The Twilight Saga* function as the inverse of other ‘contagious’ monsters. Unlike contagious figures such as the zombie, the ‘Meyer vampire’ does not have his or her individual characteristics erased or overwhelmed by their new status. The vampires of Meyer’s world are divergent in their strengths and weaknesses, even to the point of manifesting unique supernatural abilities. Despite the Cullens, and all vampires, sharing many physical and psychological traits, such as their stone-like bodies and their blood lust they have a deeply seated individualism. The vampires possess an individualism coded even into their core carnality. The traits of the individual vampires, including their supernatural abilities are shown to be already present prior to their rebirth as a vampire. As Meyer explains through Edward: ‘we all bring something of our strongest human traits with us into the next life, where they are intensified – like our minds, and our senses’ (Meyer 2008d: 268).

Bella is allowed, within the context of Meyer’s vampiric bodies, to indulge her posthuman desire. It is, however, a particularly limited form of posthumanism. While Bella is allowed to desire the Other and even to transition bodily into the Other, she is not allowed to engage in the kind of promiscuous barrier eroding practices that inform radical, and queer forms of posthuman engagement modelled by other theorists (Pitts 2003; Kirby 2008; Scheurich 2009). This does not mean that the *Saga* is conservative. What is striking about the *Saga* is the continuity of its central logic with the logic of the classical vampire. While the biological and bodily structures of Meyer’s vampires are scrubbed of their transgressive resonance with necrophilia, bestiality and sadism they manage to preserve a state of Otherness, and a deep engagement with oral sexuality, and the transformative erotic potential of this sexuality.

Symbolically and psychologically the vampire functions as any lover. The difference is that the vampire offers a literal erosion of limits, now in a survivable and desirable way. The vampire is not entirely stripped of its Otherness or its threats in *The Twilight Saga*, but rather than being feared these threats are managed and balanced: continually weighed against the potentially transformative potential they contain. The endorsement and valorisation of this

realisation is no doubt eased by the specifics of Meyer's vampire bodies which are human-like, individual and beautiful. Rather than represent a gendered power structure, the *Saga* presents power as a consequence of species – a power imbalance that can be managed not through cultural practices of romantic love but through a corporeally engaged, and body centric eroticism. An eroticism that reveals itself as the idealised expression of a posthuman desire – a desire which pursues not only the Other, but the status of the Other itself.

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