

## ***Twilight* and the Half-Dead Infant Monster: American Teens Under the Spell of Supernatural Family Values**

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Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight Saga* and her fans, mostly young women in their teens, known as "Twihards" are caught up in a full-blown popular culture phenomenon. I will examine the "Twilight phenomenon" and the gendered relations that are made to order for its readership and the larger cultural context from which it arises.

The chapter titled 'There are No Words for This'<sup>i</sup> in *Breaking Dawn*, the final novel, functions, for me, much like Barthes' "punctum." It is the part of this extremely popular franchise which "pricks" me, which to use Barthes phrase, "while remaining a detail.....fills the whole picture."<sup>ii</sup>

Here Jacob, the shapeshifting wolf and the third side of the love triangle completed by Edward the vampire and Bella the human, attends the birth of Bella's beloved half-vampire/half human monster infant who is killing Bella from the inside.

In this chapter the author abruptly alters the tone and character of her novels. Like a symptom this chapter demands our critical attention. Suddenly it is as if the author switched genres and we, the readers, are transported from a soft-focus, overcast, forested romance populated with supernatural creatures into a different world entirely. Pregnancy is rendered a scene of horror and childbirth becomes slaughter. From Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* to *Twilight*, the half human infant monster is a recurrent site of anxiety about the maternal body made extreme, the child made, literally unbearable.

**Key Words:** *Twilight*, Stephenie Meyer, Vampire, Juno, Roland Barthes, *Breaking Dawn*, teen pregnancy, girls, patriarchal, materialism, Bram Stoker, *Dracula*.

### Introduction

What is behind the extraordinary popularity of the *Twilight Saga* novels by Stephenie Meyer which form the basis of a full blown phenomenon? Is it the monster or the melodrama that makes the series so popular and resonant with teenage girls, known as "Twihards," and, as well,

with so many of their mothers? Or is it the particular combination of monster with melodrama that is so combustible, so reactive in the culture?

The chapter aptly titled ‘There are No Words for This’<sup>iii</sup> in *Breaking Dawn* the fourth and last novel, functions, for me, much like Barthes’ “punctum.” It is the moment in this extremely popular franchise, now including 4 published novels, one film and a second film to be released in November and myriad other products such as companion books for the film including *The Men of Twilight*, which “pricks” me, which, to use Barthes phrase, “while remaining a detail.....fills the whole picture.”<sup>iv</sup>

By routing my inquiry into the “Twilight Phenomenon” and its iteration of the vampire myth through this detail, I hope to access (dislodge) a whole range of cultural associations, convergences and discrepancies concerning the monstrous, youth culture, girl culture and feminism. But like Deleuze and Guattari’s “rhizome”<sup>v</sup> the structure of this inquiry is as partial and shifting as its subject which as a cultural phenomenon refuses to be contained as a particular form, commodity or genre.

In this chapter, Jacob Black, the shapeshifting wolf and the third side of the love triangle completed by Edward Cullen the vampire, and Bella Swan the human, narrates and attends the birth of Bella’s beloved half-vampire/half human monster infant that is killing her from the inside. We learn that the pregnancy is making Bella ill; like Rosemary in the 1968 film *Rosemary’s Baby*, the fetus requires blood and not just bloody, raw meat but human blood. Dr. Carlisle Cullen, Edward’s “father” and patriarch of the Cullen family of “vegetarian” vampires (they only drink animal blood), has determined that “the fetus” Bella is carrying is “incompatible” with human life. Edward and Carlisle’s plan is to “turn” Bella into a vampire just before her human life and heart are extinguished, in effect leaving Bella no choice but to become a vampire. This plot turn effectively truncates Bella’s latest decision to stay human a little while longer, to enjoy “human” sex with Edward and to attend Dartmouth College. So, instead.....here are some highlights from that chapter, as described by Jacob, the shapeshifter.

.....Bella vomited a fountain of blood.

Bella’s body, streaming with red, started to twitch, jerking around in Rosalie’s arms like she was being electrocuted. All the while, her face was blank—unconscious. It was the wild thrashing from inside the center of her body that moved her. As she convulsed, sharp snaps and cracks kept time with the spasms.

The lights were brilliant and white. Bella was on a table under the glare, skin ghostly in the spotlight. Her body flopped, a fish on the sand. Rosalie pinned Bella down, yanking and ripping her clothes out of the way, while Edward stabbed a syringe into her arm.

How many times had I imagined her naked? Now I couldn't look. I was afraid to have these memories in my head.

In the bright light, Bella's skin seemed more purple and black than it was white. Deep red was seeping beneath the huge, shuddering bulge of her stomach.

Another shattering crack inside her body. The loudest yet, so loud that we both froze in shock waiting for her answering shriek. Nothing. Her legs, which had been curled up in agony, now went limp, sprawling out in an unnatural way. Her 'spine' he choked in horror.

I blew more air into her mouth....But there was nothing there, just me just him. Working on a corpse. Because that's all that was left of the girl we both loved. This broken, bled-out, mangled corpse.<sup>vi</sup>

By this point in the narrative, Edward has chewed through Bella's skin to remove the baby, Bella has awakened once to see the baby only to become unconscious again with a last gasp of pain when her daughter Renesmee bites her on the breast and finally Edward has initiated Bella's transformation into a vampire.

It is as if the author switched genres and we, the readers, are suddenly transported from a soft-focus, overcast, dreamy, forested romance populated with supernatural creatures into a different world entirely: a harshly lit, sterile place; a bloody episode of *ER*, a New York Times article about African teens and the problem of fistulas, a pre Roe v. Wade world of botched abortions (or for that matter the reality of maternal death in contemporary Tanzania), to the "octomom's" cracked ribs. Pregnancy is rendered a scene of horror and childbirth becomes slaughter. This is the culminating moment in the *Twilight Saga* which demands critique. From Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* to *Twilight*, the half human infant monster is a recurrent site of anxiety about the maternal body made extreme, the child made literally unbearable.

How did a teen romance end up like that?

#### Narrative Rupture

First and foremost the “Twilight phenomenon” and the unending flow of teen literature concerning vampires of which it is part, not originator, offers the most recent example of the “adaptability” of the figure of the vampire and the notion of immortality as discussed in a New York Times op ed article by Guillermo del Toro and Chuck Hogan, co-authors of yet another vampire novel entitled *The Strain*:

As a seductive figure, the vampire is as flexible and polyvalent as ever. Witness its slow mutation from the pansexual, decadent Anne Rice creatures to the current permutations—promising anything from chaste eternal love to wild nocturnal escapades—and there you will find the true essence of immortality: adaptability.<sup>vii</sup>

One could argue then that vampire fiction is the perfect vehicle for updating and tweaking genre conventions as Stephenie Meyer has done. But within such a carefully constructed fantasy universe as the *Twilight Saga* such rupture in the narrative flow offers the reader a site for reflection worthy of Brecht and his notion of distancing and as well a site for disagreement and protest among *Twilight*'s fans. Without ever mentioning Barthes or Brecht, *Twilight* fans across the internet collectively note a change in the author's tone, in Bella's character and collectively catalogue unexpected (and unwelcome plot twists) with the arrival of *Breaking Dawn*, the fourth and final novel in the saga. There exists a whole fandom universe devoted to re-writing Stephenie Meyer's novels.

In the excerpt I've cited, Stephenie Meyer not only breaks with the style and atmosphere of her own creation, but also breaks some of the rules and traditions of genres and sub-genres of which *Twilight* is undeniably a part, in particular the teen romance.

The first film in the series, released last year follows closely the conventions of teen film (as do the first three novels) while introducing a major innovation: a trans-species romance. These conventions generally include the following as outlined by Catherine Driscoll in *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory*.

- a) content centered on girls or young heterosexual couples.

- b) a romance plot.
- c) a makeover
- d) education
- e) parent and child resolution with adults often marginalized<sup>viii</sup>

Stephenie Meyer appears to be keenly aware of these conventions as she dutifully fulfills each one until we arrive at the fourth and final published novel.

By pairing the steamy repressed sexuality underlying all vampire stories with emergent teenage sexuality Stephenie Meyer really turned up the heat and hit a home run with the *Twilight Saga* even though she is an avowed Mormon who does not approve of premarital sex.

We are left to wonder why Meyer so decisively contained Bella's urges (Edward's too but it is most often Bella who initiates sexual contact) with such a heavy dose of patriarchal conventions so very suddenly..... marriage, honeymoon, sex, pregnancy and childbirth. Was it in part to publicly shore up her position on family values where marriage, sex, pregnancy and childbirth occur only in that order and within a highly popular and influential medium targeted at teenage girls who, like Bella, may be perceived to be at risk of going astray without an iron-willed teen vampire to help them curb their desires? After all it is a moment in America when the notion of family is being re-examined quite vigorously. Just this month yet another state, Vermont, legalized gay marriage.

#### Teen Pregnancy

One German fan states on a website for artists: "after reading *Breaking Dawn* I was so angry and disappointed. So I drew this yesterday evening. I took the movie poster of *Juno* and called it Bella."<sup>ix</sup>

It is interesting to note that *Breaking Dawn* went on sale on August 2<sup>nd</sup> 2008, less than 9 months after the film *Juno* was released on December 25<sup>th</sup>, 2007. Within nine months of one another two teen pregnancies were heroically and famously brought to term in American popular culture. *Juno's* star, Ellen Page was apparently even a top pick among fans to play the role of Bella in the first *Twilight* film.

*Twilight's* Renesmee and *Juno's* unnamed baby, both arriving on the scene around the same time and addressing uniquely similar audiences, recall media theorist Vivian Sobchak's declaration in 1987:

Two very special babies were born to the American cinema in 1968: Rosemary's and Stanley Kubrick's (seen at the end of *2001: A Space Odyssey*)<sup>x</sup>.....the privileged figure of the child condenses and initiates a contemporary and pressing cultural drama. That drama emerges from the crisis experienced by American bourgeois patriarchy since the late 1960's and is marked by the related disintegration and transfiguration of the traditional American bourgeois family-an ideological as well as interpersonal structure characterized by its cellular construction and institutionalization of capitalist and patriarchal relations and values (among them, monogamy, heterosexuality, and consumerism) and by its present state of disequilibrium and crisis.<sup>xi</sup>

These words are resonant even now although somewhat differently inflected.

Both Juno and Bella are the unluckiest of teenage girls; a first sexual encounter resulting in pregnancy. Both narratives read as cautionary tales but with radically divergent views regarding abstinence vs. birth control and motherhood. Both Juno and Bella are ill prepared for the role of motherhood. Bella muses:

I would balance this overwhelming, devastating desire so that I could be a good-It was hard to think the word. Though Renesmee was very real and vital in my life, it was still difficult to think of myself as a *mother*. I supposed anyone would feel the same, though, without nine months to get used to the idea. And with a child that changed by the hour.<sup>xii</sup>

#### Threshold

When Edward whisks Bella across the threshold of their new home, a tiny stone cottage full of priceless art works and antiques, nestled in the forest, worthy of a fairy tale, he says "Thresholds are part of my job description."<sup>xiii</sup> With this, the material reality of what comes with Bella's new life as a vampire wife and mother are unleashed and deserve some examination.

Off the stone hallway which Bella describes as having "tiny arches in the ceiling...like it was our own miniature castle."<sup>xiv</sup> is Renesmee's room

which Edward tells us “they didn’t have time to do much with it, what with the angry werewolves,”<sup>xv</sup> the master bedroom described in sensuous detail and inside that room an ornate door to the closet which Bella describes as bigger than the bedroom, perhaps even than the house; an outsized closet stocked with designer clothes, from Alice, Bella’s vampire sister-in-law, ignoring all the rules of “classic proportions.”<sup>xvi</sup>

Even at the beginning of the novel we learn that Edward has given Bella, now his fiancée, a very expensive and exotic car, a Mercedes Guardian “the ‘before’ car”<sup>xvii</sup> ostensibly to protect her from her fragile human self and insure that she makes it to the wedding. We also learn that this vehicle was “designed for Middle East diplomats, arms dealers and drug lords mostly”<sup>xviii</sup> that “you could roll a tank over this baby”<sup>xix</sup> and “that it has missile-proof glass and four thousand pounds of body armor.”<sup>xx</sup> It does turn heads in the modest town of Forks, Washington. “The ‘after’ car”<sup>xxi</sup> is of course a Ferrari.

So whether or not Bella truly appreciates these things (“her miniature castle,” extravagant wardrobe and fancy cars) since she often feigns disgust at Alice’s excesses and Edward’s overprotection, they are there for her use and for the adolescent reader’s edification and form a material portrait of what it means to be a vampire. This spoiling and pampering of Bella can’t help but read as some type of compensation. It is an extreme fantasy which reinforces an adolescent’s expectation of success and social display. Not all supernatural beings are so well appointed. Jacob and the, The Quileute tribe, for example live much more modestly.

#### Looking Back

While the notion of an aristocratic vampire like Count Dracula may seem old-fashioned and while he may seem to have been handily dispatched by Meyer and her cohorts, upon closer examination we still find many threads tying Edward and the Cullen family to the counts of old: material excess-supplies of cash, antiques, property (from the Cullen clan’s modernist house to Edward’s “miniature” castle). All are of the magnitude of an aristocrat, a businessman, an industrialist, in short of the ruling class whether aristocratic or not.

The supernatural qualities—superhuman strength, irresistibility, extra-sensory perception and finally the experience of having lived in a whole other time, of having lived in other centuries.

In Meyer’s attempt to tie her narrative up with a hyper nuclear family her values reach back to a pre-feminist era. In the novel, the character

of Edward was born in 1901 only four years after Bram Stoker's *Dracula* was published. His life brushed up against the Victorian era when it was incumbent upon society to contain women's sexual desires within the conventional framework of marriage and property.

He may be a "good" vampire but because he is a vampire he cannot ever be truly modern or of the present; his manhood is different; he remains an old-fashioned "gentleman" of means with all of the patriarchal connotations this conjures.

His "goodness" then is also old-fashioned, more like the men who fought against vampires throughout the century since Stoker "branded" the vampire genre.

Consider the following passage from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* as Mina Harker writes in her journal on the eve of the final and successful assault on the count:

Oh, it did me good to see the way that these brave men worked. How can women help loving men when they are so earnest, and so true, and so brave! And, too, it made me think of the wonderful power of money! What can it not do when it is properly applied; and what might it do when basely used. I felt so thankful that Lord Godalming is rich, and that both he and Mr. Morris, who also has plenty of money, are willing to spend it so freely. For if they did not, our little expedition could not start, either so promptly or so well equipped, as it will within another hour.<sup>xxii</sup>

When re-reading *Dracula* it struck me that Mina's feelings towards Jonathon were a distant echo of Bella's feelings toward Edward. Indeed both Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and the *Twilight Saga* end with a perfect romantic triangulation: a happily married couple with a young child. Even the names of the infants are composites of individuals important in each narrative.

In Jonathon Harker's notes on the last page of *Dracula* he writes of his child with Mina: "His bundle of names links all our little band of men together; but we call him Quincey."<sup>xxiii</sup> In *Twilight* the hybrid "monster" is called Renesmee a name which inelegantly combines her human grandmother's name Renee with that of her vampire grandmother Esme.

We learn also on the last page of *Dracula* that like Mina and Jonathan, Lord Godalming and Dr. Seward have also happily married in the



ensuing years since their adventure. At the end of *Breaking Dawn*, in addition to Bella and Edward, all the heterosexual ends are tied up too, everyone, including Bella's loner dad are dating, even Jacob manages to find his eternal love in the infant Renesmee through the Quileute tribe's strange custom of "imprinting."

The endings, over a century apart are like mirror images of one another, one supernatural and one human. Meyer's reinforcement of traditional values and hyper-heterosexual organization of relationships among vampires, shapeshifters and humans to me exhibits a degree of anxiety on her part. To quote from a text by the artist Jeff Wall concerning vampires, architecture and Dan Graham, Meyer's gesture in *Breaking Dawn* exhibits a "lack of confidence in the security of the boundary line: it is a gesture which indicates panic, panic that the boundary has been crossed by the 'other.'"<sup>xxiv</sup> Meyer's hyper- heterosexuality, materialism and traditional values is an attempt to wall off her world from contemporary America where these values are being hotly contested. But her boundary line is an ineffective gesture providing a sense of false security. This panic is most emphatically and abruptly evident in *Breaking Dawn* which is often a confusion of thresholds, property lines, boundaries and territories. That confusion is bundled together in the child Renesmee who is part human, part vampire, monster and goddess, mortal and immortal, an exception and impossibility within Meyer's own narrative as well as vampire fiction generally.

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<sup>i</sup> S Meyer, *Breaking Dawn*, Little, Brown and Company, New York, 2008, pp. 348-360.

<sup>ii</sup> R Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Hill and Wang, New York, 1982, p. 45.

<sup>iii</sup> S Meyer, *Breaking Dawn*, Little, Brown and Company, New York, 2008, pp. 348-360.

<sup>iv</sup> R Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Hill and Wang, New York, 1982, p. 45.

<sup>v</sup> See G Deleuze & F Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987, pp. 3-25.

<sup>vi</sup> S Meyer, *Breaking Dawn*, Little, Brown and Company, New York, 2008, pp. 349-355.

<sup>vii</sup> G del Toro & C Hogan, 'Why Vampires Never Die,' New York Times, New York, July 31, 2009, p. A23.

<sup>viii</sup> C Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2002, p.

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<sup>ix</sup> Anell84, *Breaking Dawn*, Deviant Art, August 10, 2008,  
<http://anell84.deviantart.com/art/breaking-dawn-94393014>

<sup>xv</sup> Sobchak, 'Bringing it all Back Home: Family Economy and Generic Exchange' in B Keith (ed), *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, University of Texas Press, Austin, p.143.

<sup>xi</sup> *ibid*, p.144.

<sup>xii</sup> S Meyer, *Breaking Dawn*, Little, Brown and Company, New York, 2008,  
p. 487.

<sup>xiii</sup> *ibid*, p. 478.

<sup>xiv</sup> *ibid*, p. 480.

<sup>xv</sup> *ibid*, p. 480.

<sup>xvi</sup> *ibid*, p. 487.

<sup>xvii</sup> *ibid*, p. 8.

<sup>xviii</sup> *ibid*, p. 7.

<sup>xix</sup> *ibid*, p. 7.

<sup>xx</sup> *ibid*, p. 7.

<sup>xxi</sup> *ibid*, p. 8.

<sup>xxii</sup> B Stoker, *Dracula*, Bantam Books, New York, 1989, p. 376.

<sup>xxiii</sup> *ibid*, p. 400.

<sup>xxiv</sup> J Wall, *Jeff Wall: Selected Essays and Interviews*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2007, p.64.