

The Twilight Saga: Shimmering vampires who drive Volvos

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The entertainment media in the US is in the process of fattening up its new golden goose: *New Moon*, the next installment of *The Twilight Saga* series about vampires living in small-town America, set for a November 2009 release.

The response to the release of a trailer for the upcoming film demonstrates the series' popularity. According to PR Newswire, the trailer had 7.8 million views on the MySpace site in the first seven days, setting a new record. MTV broadcast the trailer during its awards show to 5.3 million views. Clearly, *Twilight* is a cultural phenomenon.

Twilight, directed by Catherine Hardwicke, was the commercial success the market expected it to be. But can its success be attributed in any serious sense to its quality as a work of art?

The movie itself doesn't stray far from the popular novel by Stephenie Meyer. Meyer's creation centers on a young girl who becomes romantically involved with a vampire in a small town, Forks, near Seattle, Washington. Bella, the story's protagonist, has moved there to live with her father when her mother decides to remarry. In Forks, Bella's experience in school proves to be difficult.

Soon enough, Bella finds out about "The Cullen Family." The Cullens (revealed to be vampires) are perfect in physique and voice. Bella soon meets Edward Cullen, and their unlikely romance begins to bloom. "'Hello' said a quiet musical voice. I looked up stunned that he was speaking to me.... His dazzling face was friendly open, a slight smile on his flawless lips." Similarly breathless descriptions are repeated throughout the work.

Bella's character, played by Kristen Stewart in the movie, is plagued with the clichés of the so-called "outsider" character, popular in a good many films and

books for young people. One is reminded of Ellen Page's character in the film *Juno*: a "rebel" who bears an MTV stamp of approval and stays firmly within the bounds of mainstream society.

Bella finds something wrong with everything, derives no pleasure in people's company and is estranged from her father. "He [her father] wished me good luck at school. I thanked him knowing his hope was wasted. Good luck tended to avoid me." At one point her vampire boyfriend tells her that to be with a creature like him, "You only have to turn your back on nature, humanity...what's that worth?" She answers, "Very little—I don't feel deprived of anything."

The beginning of the book reminds one of the television show *Dawson's Creek* (1998-2003). The latter took place in the small (fictional) town of Capeside, Massachusetts. The story's protagonists alienate themselves from the rest of the student body. They don't feel they fit in.

This formula was also used in the television series *Blossom* (1991-1995) and *My So-Called Life* (1994-95). The displacement of these "outsider" characters was supposed to offer us a new vantage point from which to view society. Often, however, their assessments were tame and not very revealing. The "jocks" acted like "jocks" and the "nerds" acted like "nerds." The programs' punches were too easily delivered and thus lacked any real power.

The vampire Edward (Robert Pattinson in the film) is organized around a series of fantasies. Although in physical form an adolescent, the character is 90 years old (after all, vampires live forever) and thus, presumably, sophisticated. However, at no point in either the book or the film does Edward display any particular wisdom. His persona is more reminiscent of a self-consciously enigmatic football player with sharp teeth.

In *Twilight*, vampires consistently stare off into the distance, speak incoherently, and pout annoyingly.

Edward's character doesn't change throughout the film version. He seems like a tourist lost at an airport every time he speaks with Bella. The performers (and hence the characters) lack chemistry between them.

The vampire theme has been done and redone. Whatever psychological or social shock-value it may once have had has largely been worn away. Among the various literary and film vampire treatments, this is one of the weakest.

The appeal to preteen and young teenage girls seems clear enough: a fantasy world where your problems are only elements of a romantic plot, a handsome vampire who shimmers in the sunlight (these vampires are sun-resistant), in fact, a sensitive, gorgeous hero. But why are certain members of other generations embracing this as a remarkable book?

Here are a few sample passages: "Of the three boys, one was big—muscled like a serious weight lifter, with dark curly hair." Of the girls: "The tall one was statuesque. She had a beautiful figure, the kind you saw on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue.... The short girl was pixie like, thin in the extreme, with small features."

The book isn't serious in a literary sense: "I made the Cowardly Lion look like the Terminator," and, "I tried to keep my eyes away from his perfection as much as possible, but I slipped often. Each time, his beauty pierced me with sadness."

The *Twilight* novels are not challenging. The dialogue is simple and trite. The story in its entirety really has very little to say: a lovesick girl in peril and a hero coming to the rescue. In part, *Twilight* is popular because...it's popular. There is a kind of cultural conformism at present that is not especially healthy.

The Harry Potter books, *The Da Vinci Code*, *Eragon*...what's next? Important business interests are waiting to invest (and earn profits) and speculate on something new. Anything that's colorful and immediately pleasing seems the best bet. Movies such as *300*, *Ironman* and *Twilight* share a mind-numbing mediocrity. The makers provide the viewer with what they think (or decide!) he or she wants: big explosions, perfect romances, pure escapism. This bombast and glitter (the final scene in *Twilight* is a good example), however, lacks the element of real creativity.

Can *Twilight* be judged a genuine work of art? A work of art is a difficult thing to describe, but at its core, it should have some impact on the reader or spectator.

An artist expresses something important through his or her medium. A painting can make one feel happy, or sad,

or elevated. A movie can make you laugh, or cry, inspire you, make you think. When watching *Twilight*, it feels like a formula being sold to you. Do we feel any differently about true love because of the film? Do we learn anything about human behavior?

One is left with very little. The movie and book largely substitute pop culture and clichés for genuine creative work. The existence of vampires capable of thriving in sunlight seems merely a pretext to allow Edward the opportunity to go to school during the day. Whatever there was in legend or literature that made vampires exciting or dangerous has been taken away. The "vampire" in this story, represents a different lifestyle, a sort of play on identity politics.

These vampires offer little insight and certainly no challenge, for better or worse, to the existing order. They are just like Bella, in fact. They even have "vampire" baseball games and weddings! The novel centers on the theme of love overcoming all odds. Bella's life is suddenly interesting and worth living with Edward. But why? The story has characters on automatic pilot. Pop culture already has an ending for them that we can all predict. Is making clear how a story will unfold an ingredient of a creative work?

Viewers and readers beware, for there is a large pool of pop culture out there, waiting for swimmers. It is tempting, as it has all the drugs of escapism, impossibilities and hopeless (in the literal sense) romantic plotlines. It's fun and exciting while the ride lasts, but when it's over, you're left empty-handed. And after the ride (let's say, watching *Spider-man 3*), did you feel like the movie was geared toward encouraging new ideas or feelings, or taking money from your wallet?



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