Master's thesis

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The Kiss of Eternity

Revisiting *Twilight* as a staple of girl culture

Master's thesis in Film Studies
Supervisor: Christer Bakke Andresen
May 2024

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Abstract

The thesis discusses the film *Twilight* (Catherine Hardwicke, 2008) as guilty pleasure and bad object. The cause of its appeal in popular culture is traced in the film's creation of particular moods and through the construction of characters that have Gothic roots but modern sensibilities.

Twilight became a global phenomenon on its release in 2008 and sparked strong reactions, both favourable and critical. A big part of the criticism of the film, as well as its audience, concerned its perceived message to a young, female audience, and also its ostensible lack of a classic plot and conventional horror genre tropes.

While the film uses the lore and conventions established in vampire films, a common critique of *Twilight* is its apparent subversion of the vampire mythology, and the filmmakers' choice to not make it a horror film but rather a Gothic romance. Despite these seemingly unconventional and controversial choices, the film resonated with a big and mostly female audience.

With the aid of Murray Smith's model of character engagement, and Greg M. Smith's approach to analysis of mood cues, the thesis aims to explain the undeniable (and undead) appeal of *Twilight*. Catherine Driscoll's work on teen, youth and girl culture is also essential to the thesis' exploration of why cultural products made by and for girls and women are often seen as lesser objects, and not worthy of academic analysis.

Sammendrag

Oppgaven diskuterer filmen *Twilight* (Catherine Hardwicke, 2008) som en 'guilty pleasure' og 'bad object'. Årsaken til dens appell i populærkultur bunner i filmens stemning og karakterer som har gotiske røtter, men moderne presentasjon.

Twilight ble et globalt fenomen ved utgivelsen i 2008 og utløste sterke reaksjoner, både positive og kritiske. En stor del av kritikken av filmen, og dens publikum, gjaldt et oppfattet budskap til et ungt, kvinnelig publikum, samt dens tilsynelatende mangel på et klassisk plot og konvensjonelle skrekksjangertroper.

Mens filmen bruker konvensjonene som er etablert i vampyrfilmer, er en vanlig kritikk av *Twilight* dens tilsynelatende undergraving av vampyrmytologien, og filmskapernes valg om å ikke lage en skrekkfilm, men heller en gotisk romanse. Til tross for disse tilsynelatende ukonvensjonelle og kontroversielle valgene, resonerte filmen hos et stort og, for det meste, kvinnelig publikum.

Ved hjelp av Murray Smiths modell for karakterengasjement, og Greg M. Smiths tilnærming til analyse av stemningssignaler, skal oppgaven forklare den ubestridelige (og udødelige) appellen til *Twilight*. Catherine Driscolls arbeid om tenårings-, ungdoms- og jentekultur er også essensielt for oppgavens utforskning av hvorfor kulturelle produkter laget av og for jenter og kvinner ofte blir sett på som mindreverdige objekter, og ikke verdig akademisk analyse.

Preface

I am both happy and lucky to be surrounded by people who have helped me through this process. Know that I appreciate every shared meal, party, and cabin trip I was allowed to be the one rambling about films.

First and foremost, I want to thank my tutor Christer Bakke Andresen, the victim of a cruel genre prank. As a professor of horror films and a beacon of knowledge in genre fiction known colloquially as Doctor Doom, I am sorry you were assigned a student focusing on the least scary vampire film in existence. Your patience, warmth, humour, and knowledge are endlessly inspiring, and I am very grateful for your guidance, and willingness to laugh at my stupid jokes.

A big thank you to Catherine Prowse for her unwavering encouragement and proofreading, and for listen to my opinions on literally any film.

I want to thank my parents, who are unconditionally loving, caring, and pedagogical, but nevertheless failed to regulate my screentime. I also want to thank my sister for joining in all that screentime and challenging me with her taste in film.

Lastly, I want to thank Magnus Jensen, whose love and patience, and several failed screenings eventually opened my eyes to the world of horror films.

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1. GIRLS JUST WANT TO HAVE FUN

For the past year, as I have told friends and family about my thesis on the film *Twilight* (2008), the reactions have varied from confusion to bafflement and concern. After the initial shock, though, the overwhelming response from fellow millennial women was usually a rising excitement, especially as they heard that I needed to rewatch the film few times. 'Can I join?' became such a common response that a group of us isolated ourselves for a weekend cabin trip to watch the entire saga. Professor of gender and cultural studies, Catherine Driscoll, describes adolescence as a 'universal trauma', a distance between childhood and maturity that is a 'transformative passage' (2002, 6), and that weekend, it seemed like we were all processing our formative years.

Cinema is, occasionally, gendered. According to vastly different worlds, from feminist film theory to marketing, there is an idea that certain films are for different genders. When looking at genre, some are more obviously targeted and marketed towards a gendered audience, like the comedy subgenre 'chick flick'. A survey from 2018 supports this, showing that female audiences favour musicals, romance, and crime more than male audiences (Statista 2023). Men outnumber women in preference for genres like Sci-Fi, but genres like comedy, thriller and fantasy are quite equal in preference, showing that not all film genres can be gendered. The production and reception of *Twilight* made it very clear that this was a film for girls. Is there an argument for 'girl film' as its own subgenre or mode? In her 2002 book *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory,* Driscoll presents the term 'girl culture', and film seems like a natural extension of this.

As youth and teen film is based on cultural studies, it is relevant to go all the way back to the Birmingham School and their work. When the Birmingham School researched and wrote about youth and youth cultures, they referred to boys and young men (Driscoll 2002, 210). This was questioned in 1975 by Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber, who critiqued the exclusion of girls and women from subcultural theories (Driscoll 2002, 210). McRobbie and Garber introduced the notion of private resistance, stating that male rebellion is often public and noticeable. Girls are often kept 'on the margins of subcultural studies (if not subcultures themselves) when they are present at all' (Driscoll 2002, 210). Mike Brake suggests girls are excluded from subcultures because femininity 'must be subordinate within such cultures', furthering the notion that the very idea of subculture is inherently masculine and male dominated. Brake describes feminine subcultural life further. 'Girls are present in male subcultures, but are contained within them, rather than using them to explore actively forms of female identity. The subculture may be a special focus, something to dress up for, and an escape from the restraints of home, school and work' (Brake in Driscoll 2002, 211).

An interesting realm of girl culture and the feminine audience is the domestic sphere, explored in the notion of bedroom culture. Bedroom culture dates back to the aforementioned critique by McRobbie and Garber, presented in their essay *Girls and Subcultures* (1975). They suggest that young girls, contrary to the belief at the time, did partake in subcultures, but in different and less public domains to that of their male peers, namely the girl's bedroom. In this essay, they ask 'Do girls have alternative ways of organizing their cultural lives?' (McRobbie and Garber 2006, 219). Over time, with the addition of the internet, a shared community and subculture is no longer dependent on public gatherings. The bedroom, the realm of girl culture, was suddenly a shared culture connected digitally. The internet also offers insight that was lacking in 1975, as McRobbie herself admitted in concluding her essay; '- girl culture, from our preliminary investigations, is so well insulated as to operate to effectively exclude not only other 'undesirable' girls – but also boys, adults, teachers, and researchers.' (McRobbie and Garber 2006, 222). As a hypothesis, it rings true that girl's subcultural activities would happen behind closed doors, being restricted to the domestic safety of the home, and still not be any less interesting in the development of a youth culture or identity. With such activities extending to online activity and joining fan communities, the activity is not only more visible for research, but also means the groups could grow in strength and numbers. What might have been a socially secret and potentially shameful obsession shared by a small group watching films at a slumber party was now a vast online community containing thousands of peers. There is strength in numbers, and as the predominantly young and female audience dared move from reading alone in their bedrooms to showing up in great numbers at the cinema, we see a bedroom culture being 'revealed' to the public, like a vampire emerging from its coffin, braving the judgement of the mainstream. They were promptly met with torches and pitchforks.

In 2009, mere months after the film's release, *Twilight* and its fans were firmly branded as a nuisance at the one place you would think engaged fans would feel welcome: Comic-Con. T-shirts, posters and tweets stating variations of '*Twilight* ruined Comic-Con' (Sheffield & Merlo 2010) were visible throughout San Diego's convention. My personal favourite is a photograph of a young man holding a cardboard sign with marker writing saying '*Twilight* ruined Comic-Con! Nosferatu didn't sparkle!'. I hope my chapter on vampires will argue sufficiently for why vampire rules are both inaccurate and pointless, as no iteration of vampires in fiction follows the same lore.

The tide has turned somewhat. Whether the #MeToo movement made male audiences and filmmakers aware that women are, in fact, real people with stories worth telling, or whether we have simply grown as a species, there seems to be more room for girl culture in the mainstream. Las year

in particular had films with both themes and visuals of girl culture exploring female adolescence. With *Priscilla*, and her overall filmography, Coppola has brought the secrecy, intimacy and femininity of the bedroom sphere to the big screen. Girlhood also intersected with mass culture as Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* became a phenomenon far beyond the cinema's screens. Groups of girls and women dressed in hot pink, making their intended cultural engagement public. This display of femininity in fandom shows a big step forward, as Driscoll wrote in 2002 that 'girls are predominantly understood as less likely to occupy public space' (2002, 259).

In a recent essay, Meg Walters explores the paradoxical culture where more female voices and stories have emerged after the #MeToo movement, while right-wing political waves in the Western world have impacted women's rights significantly.

> This turbulent cultural landscape – one that sees us embracing heightened girlhood aesthetics previously dismissed as frivolous while simultaneously confronting deeply unsettling cultural waves of misogyny – is the context in which a new batch of girlhood films reaches our screens. (Walters 2023)

The portrayal of girlhood can walk a somewhat upsetting line of empathy and infantilization. In acknowledging and depicting the transition from child to adult, the Lolita phenomenon looms, as images of young women are sexualised and exploited. *Twilight* resonated with young girls, and the message of abstinence and saving oneself for marriage might seem conservative and dated. But is it not also a relief for young girls to experience a PG romance? To see a fellow girl be admired, adored, and complimented without being pressured and sexualized? This can be an escapist and romantic fantasy when, as Walters puts it, '- the implicit danger of being a girl in a world where being objectified, dismissed and hypersexualised by men is the norm' (Walters 2023)?

In an interview last October, Coppola discussed her past potential involvement with the *Twilight* franchise. Coppola said she met with producers because she loved the idea of doing a vampire teen romance. The fantastical elements and plot do spiral out of control, and she deemed the fourth and fifth films in question 'too weird' (Parkel 2023). She also reveals exiting another film about the transformative nature of female adolescence, *The Little Mermaid*, after a boardroom of male producers asked how she intended to pique the interest of men in their 30s (Parkel 2023). "There was [a breaking point]. I was in a boardroom and some development guy said, 'What's gonna get the 35-year-old man in the audience?' And I just didn't know what to say," (Parkel 2023).

No wonder girls and their interests have been secluded to the bedroom for so long. Once

you bring a book out from under the covers, or a film outside the confidence of a slumber party, the ridicule and reaction from a mainstream used to cater to male audiences can be demeaning and disheartening. If culture needs to appeal to men in their 30s to be deemed both good and valuable, it is no wonder adolescent girls and their films must either conform and change, or hide. *Twilight* did neither, and subsequently engaged a largely young, female audience immensely, and few to no men in their 30s.

Twilight is an American film from 2008 directed by Catherine Hardwicke, adapted from the 2005 novel of the same name by Stephanie Meyer. It is the first instalment in what would become *The Twilight Saga*. The film is not highly regarded, despite being a box office success and pop cultural phenomenon. It could be called a guilty pleasure.

17-year-old Bella Swan moves to live with her father in rainy Forks, Washington. In one very intense biology class she meets the mysterious and handsome Edward Cullen, whose mixed signals only intrigue her. As her cop father investigates a wave of brutal murders in the community, Bella does some investigation of her own and discovers that her classmate and his family are vampires. Despite this reveal, the two have fallen in love, and experience a romance filled with threats from both internal and external forces.

To explain the guilty pleasure appeal of the bad object *Twilight*, I will consider the film in terms of genre traditions and gendered appreciation, highlighting the significance of character engagement and experiences of mood. Chapter 3 is an exploration of the genres usually attributed to or affiliated with *Twilight*, to see whether the film fits, wholly or partially, or is a rejection or subversion of these genre's conventions and tropes. Chapters 4 and 5 analyze the film and its undeniable appeal using the two Smiths, namely Murray Smith and his theories on character engagement in chapter 4, and Greg M. Smith and his approach to mood in chapter 5. The appeal of the film is evident in the response and following fan activity, and chapter 6 explores *Twilight* the phenomenon beyond the film, and how it's unashamed status as feminine inspired such a harsh backlash, and ultimately what value the film offers its young, female audience.

2. GUILTY PLEASURES & BAD OBJECTS

I came across a listicle from Norwegian pop culture website 730.no, which was published in the middle of summer when people might have too much spare time on their hands in a notoriously un-summery country. The headline read *Guilty pleasure series: 730.no readers reveal their favourites* (Halvorsen 2023). This title exposes the absurdity and contradiction inherent to the term 'guilty pleasure'; it is both a shameful revelation, yet something to share and publish. Unlike most academic texts I have read, 730 actually defined how they understand the term before revealing the list. 730 writes 'Guilty pleasure: something you think is good, while acknowledging that it is not necessarily highly regarded by most people' (Halvorsen 2023). This isn't a sordid exposé of some dark secret or past sin, but rather a marketing strategy, acknowledging that we as an audience enjoy watching things despite its reputation and perceived quality. If you can recommend TV series while simultaneously referring to them as guilty pleasures, the term is harmless, and rather a cheeky way of acknowledging different viewer habits. I cannot speak for every cinephile or film student, but most people do not watch exclusively arthouse or 'good' films and TV. The implication of guilty pleasure is in its very name. You as a viewer should feel guilty for finding pleasure in something bad. However, the everyday use of the term paired with its evident marketability hints to this becoming more of a genre or category of entertainment. Sometimes you just want to turn off your brain and watch something trashy.

Conversationally, particularly when discussing film, the term 'guilty pleasure' is used frequently and inconsistently. The term is seemingly an excuse when confessing to enjoying or even loving a film, TV series, or any other piece of art or media that is perceived by the general public as 'bad'. 'Bad' and 'good' are, of course, not objective definitions, and what constitutes a guilty pleasure will therefore vary based on several factors, such as age, gender, culture, ethnicity, friend group, political views etc. Equally unpredictable is the use of the term in academic writing and research, as multiple fields of study apply it with varying degrees of severity. It is a term that is often used, but seldom defined, assumed to be universally understood. It can mean so many things that it ultimately means nothing.

A term that might be more helpful and useful, and indeed less conversational, is 'bad object'. A bad object is anything subject to critical analysis that is also understood to commit 'perceived violations of "good" taste' (The Editors 2020, 1). These violations can be both visual, narrative, and thematic, depending on the audience and time period. The term's dependence on context makes it, says the editors of *the Velvet Light Trap Journal*, particularly interesting for revisiting material. A film that was deemed to have bad representation, themes, or be in an unpopular genre can be

investigated and re-examined as times and sensibilities change. This thesis aims to reexamine one such object; The teen vampire romance, global phenomenon, and popular guilty pleasure, *Twilight* (2008). I once approached Danish professor and horror expert Rikke Schubart about my plans on writing this thesis. She told me about fellow feminist horror scholars, even some who specialize in vampire films, who refuse to write about the film. I left the conversation feeling assured. A film that even vampire academics will not touch is not just a guilty pleasure. It is a bad object.

Much like 'guilty pleasure' in everyday conversation, media and journalism, 'bad object' appears to be applicable in many different contexts, and is used differently by academics. It is therefore helpful to establish how I interpret this term before I continue to use it with such frequency. An early and comprehensive exploration of the phenomenon is Naomi Schor's *Bad Objects: Essays Popular and Unpopular,* published in 1995. Schor, a self-proclaimed 'contrarian feminist theorist' (1995, ix) uses the term as a means to explain her own experience in academia. Says Schor; 'At any given time, within the carefully policed precincts of the academy, some critical objects are promoted to the status of good […], while others are tabooed […] (1995, xv). Ever the rebel, Schor explains how she aims to go beyond certain impasses, 'to read at an angle, to be an intellectual bad girl' (1995, xv). I am reminded of the Danish feminist vampire academics who would not touch *Twilight* with a ten-foot pole, and my desire to be an intellectual bad girl surges. To acknowledge and analyse objects deemed 'bad', and outside the academic canon seems as valuable as writing yet another thesis on more acknowledged 'good' objects. We can then understand Schor's use of 'bad object' as objects deemed unworthy of the academic canon, and the value in examining bad objects then becomes an act of questioning the canon itself, and its criteria.

In an issue of *Cinema Journal* from 2005, Michele Hilmes explores, similarly to Schor, how academia has both established and perceived hierarchies of importance. Rather than a hierarchy of objects of study inside and outside a given canon, Hilmes discusses the hierarchy of fields of study. Whilst communication programs are popular among American undergraduates, television studies is subject to increased prejudice at higher academic levels. Hilmes proposes that this prejudice is not implemented institutionally by the dean, but rather a rivalry as more traditional subjects like English, history and fine arts resist the legitimacy of studying television (2005, 113). Interestingly, and contrastingly, film studies is often integrated in all these departments, and should therefore strategically, says Hilmes, aim to distance itself from television and mass communication even further. Hilmes shares that most senior film scholars they know have 'little desire to incorporate television into their research or teaching' (2005, 113). This is also motivated by exterior factors,

namely funding, as many grant-giving institutions in the humanities view film as a part of their mission, but not television (Hilmes 2005, 113). This points to a historic hierarchical rivalry where television is integrated into cultural studies and feminist studies, and therefore not art. On the other hand, then, film being integrated into English, history and fine arts means it is not regarded as being what television is, namely entertainment for the masses and shaped by culture and trends. Is it, therefore, safe to assume that films with more 'television-like' qualities like being entertaining, a product of its time, and aimed at a female audience (like early television was, as both the television and the housewife were trapped in the home), are deemed less worthy in film studies to further the distinction? Perhaps, but I would argue this is less true today than a few decades ago. Hilmes points to efforts being made, particularly by feminist studies and cultural studies, to integrate television into film studies. However, this text is almost 20 years old, and in addition to these efforts, a cultural shift has happened. More creators, directors and actors make television as well as film, and it seems the hierarchy between film and television is an ever-closing gap. The debate and hierarchy distinguishing art and entertainment appear to be an everchanging, almost living beast in academia. Anecdotally, a friend told me her 'ancient' English tutor at Cambridge had a similar observation. When he started studying English in the 1950s, his professors were shocked at the idea of studying novels. Novels, apparently, were just mass entertainment and true academics studied the classics, meaning plays and poetry.

One theory as to why film studies have a sordid past of distancing itself from television studies is, perhaps, because film studies itself can be seen as a bad object in academia. The eagerness described by Hilmes for film studies to keep 'more credible' companies such as literature and fine art speaks to the history of the subjects, and the attempts at achieving academic credibility and acknowledgement. In the introduction to a 2001 book, Danish professor Rikke Schubart explains a personal experience with this academic hierarchy. Originally a student of literature, Schubart was reassigned a tutor from film and media studies when she decided to write about horror literature (Schubart 2001). This was because, in her own words, horror literature was not considered a worthy subject for an intellectual. These anecdotes are just examples of a decade-long power struggle between film studies and literature studies, and the credibility of 'entertainment'. Compared to other art forms like theatre, fine art and literature, the film is a relatively new and modern medium, and as it is usually used to tell stories, it is most frequently compared to literature. To reference Robert Stam, literature has been regarded as a more distinguished and noble medium than film, partially because of its superiority in size (200, 12). Historically, millennia of literary production have been

compared to a mere century of film, and literature is proclaimed superior. This tradition for close comparison also resulted in theoretical overlaps, and film theory has inherited ideas from literary theory, such as the habit of 'arranging artwork into types' (Stam 2000, 14), leading to genre theory. Auteur theory can also be traced back to literary theory as the question of true authorship was up for discussion in the early days of film theory. Auteur theory also points to an endeavour to separate film from literature, pointing out the unique qualities of visual storytelling, and finally establishing independent theoretical frameworks with the introduction of film academies and writing. In a later text by Noel Caroll, he points out that film is good at doing certain things like depicting movement, and not good at other things, like presenting static objects which the spectator can observe for a self-determined amount of time. The aim for film, says Caroll, is to explore and excel at the things it can do well, harnessing the power of film as an independent form (Stam 2000, 12). Despite some concern regarding credibility, film and television studies have grown closer, perhaps at the expense of the credibility of both. Unlike the literary professors akin to Schubart's tutors who deemed genre fiction as unworthy of scholarly attention, film studies has opened its gates to a much broader selection of work. In a 2010 piece, Jodi Brooks writes 'Over the last decade, forms of 'bad cinema' have increasingly been recognized as 'legitimate' areas of study in film studies.' (2010, 791). 'Bad cinema' in this text refers to cult films, exploitation cinema, and the more ambiguous 'B-grade film'. As previously established, genre film was already included in the field, and more populist and mainstream cinema genres like superhero films have also carved out a bigger spot for themselves in film studies. As more 'types' of films gain legitimacy, the very field of film studies itself is suffering. Says Brooks 'film studies itself seems to be losing ground in the universities in which many of us work. This is not to say that there is a lack of student interest in the field (at least if 'interest' is measured by enrolments).' (2010, 792). Despite this increased enrolment at universities in Australia, the UK and the US, film studies has not gained recognition or been acknowledged as important. This example not only echoes but dramatically resembles the experiences shared by Hilmes only 5 years prior to Brook's text. In acknowledging more genres and types of film, and not duplicating the gatekeeping practised by 'more noble' fields of study like literature, film studies run the risk of being demoted in the academic hierarchy to the level of television studies, which it apparently strived to get away from.

If it looks bad, and it feels bad, it is bad. Thus concludes Dana Polan's introduction to the two types of 'bad' a film can be (2004, 202). In her chapter in the 2004 book *Bad: Infamy, Darkness, Evil, and Slime on Screen,* edited by Murray Pomerance, Polan explores what she considers to be 'bad

goodness'. Polan identifies two core ideas of badness. First, there is moral badness, where films receive critique for the potential effect they could have on an audience, based on the themes, ideas, characters, and situations depicted. The condemnation of these films focuses on the effects they could have on an audience, particularly certain groups of spectators, such as children and teenagers (2004, 202). Wife of Reverend Lovejoy on the animated sitcom *The Simpsons* (1989 -), Helen Lovejoy's catchphrase 'Won't somebody please think of the children!?' comes to mind, as an exaggerated and literally cartoonish embodiment of this tired sentiment. This idea is also often purely theoretical, as films are censored, banned or unavailable in case they inspire an impressionable audience. The actual effect is then hard to pinpoint or measure, and puritanical sensibilities and fearmongering usually dominate such debates.

Polan's second idea of badness is aesthetic badness, where a film is judged by its artistic quality (2004, 202). Films lacking beauty and style look, feel and are bad. However, that very feeling of badness, and indeed, ideas of aesthetics and beauty, is both individual, cultural and relative. The feeling one is left with after watching a film will also be affected by the perceived moral messages, and Polan points to a tradition of claiming immoral films also lack artistry or aesthetic value (2004, 202). Polan uses an example to highlight the ever-changing and historical relativity of such values and interpretations. As someone who is rather green in academia, *Bonnie & Clyde* (1967) has been a frequent example used in film history to explore the French new wave and how it was interpreted and applied in the subsequent New Hollywood movement, as well as being a frequent staple of canons and less formal watchlists and books on films one must see before you die. I also remember enjoying the film as a young teenager, and the film's style and aesthetics are usually cited as what makes it a valuable piece of analysis for rookie film students. It was therefore a surprise that this film is a case relevant to Polan's argument, as the film was heavily criticized for its favourable and sympathetic portrayal of criminals and murderers (2004, 202). It was assumed, says Polan, that the actions and morals portrayed intimately affected the film artistically, and it was deemed by critics as an aesthetic failure because of its moral failure. As the film was later reevaluated from 'sleazy exploitation to a classic of cinema' (Polan 2004, 202), we understand that values, morals, aesthetics and style, are always historical and undergo constant revision. Bad objects, meaning bad films, is therefore a category that is everchanging, and as is the case with Penn's *Bonnie & Clyde,* yesterday's immoral and exploitative trash can be tomorrow's cinematic masterpiece.

A more recent example of critics confusing moral badness with aesthetic badness can be found in a Norwegian review of Lars von Trier's 2009 film *Antichrist.* Von Trier is undoubtedly a

controversial filmmaker and mixed reviews are to be expected. The film holds a 54% rating on Rotten Tomatoes (Rotten Tomatoes), and 49% on Metacritic (Metacritic), perfectly summarising the mixed reception. The journalist Jon Selås' response to the film after its premiere in Cannes points to the contradictory statements that arise when morality and aesthetics are treated as interchangeable, as he, quite solitarily, occupies one of the extreme ends of the scale, and gave the film a 1 out of 6.

> The film is extremely explicit in all its essence. The sex is the least problematic. [...] Worse are the horribly explicit scenes of violence and torture, of - one might say - the worst kind. Of course, the film is skilfully made and interesting in many respects; we are talking about Lars von Trier after all! (Selås 2009)

Surely, if a film is skilfully made and interesting, it has some value or quality? Is the torture and, god forbid, explicit sex a sufficient marker of badness to a point where visual qualities should be ignored? Selås seems to think so, and according to Polard, he is not alone. The question remains, if a film is made with explicit sex and torture, and is made unskilfully and uninterestingly, where can the critic go? And if/when he is forced to give this hypothetical film a 1 as well, the conclusion must be that making a visually interesting film has an equal lack of value as one that is visually bland.

Polan's conclusion emphasizes the paradox of bad films. I agree with her idea that the worst films are not, in fact, those who fit the description of bad objects, that lack moral or artistic value within a given time's definition and standard, but rather films that are nauseatingly average. Say what you want of *Twilight's* quality, it's bad acting and questionable messages to a young audience; It is not boring. It is, to paraphrase Polan, a less bad experience for its striking badness, than the experience of watching a film that is mediocre (2004, 201). To understand the film as a bad object, then, two things are important moving forward. Firstly, I want to avoid the mistakes of previous critics and equate moral badness to aesthetic badness, and rather explore the moral and aesthetic badness of the film separately. Secondly, as badness is relative, it is important to see what criterion by which *Twilight* was deemed bad, and whether they still apply to this day.

Based on Schor, bad objects are films outside the canon. Based on Hilmes, television and potentially film studies as a whole risk being bad objects in academia. Perhaps the feminine affiliations with television studies are to blame. Polan acknowledges how liquid the term is, as both moral and aesthetic badness will change with time. *Twilight* was accused of being bad in both senses, as both misogynistic and anti-feminist, and badly acted with weird visuals. This dissertation seems to be a bad object about a bad object. However, I believe it is valuable to analyse objects we do not consider to be 'good'. This is especially true when bad objects become extremely popular, and more

so when the audience it resonates with is the same group the object violates. As Perkins and Verevis states, the measure of a good or bad film is found in its representation (2014, 8). It might feel immoral to examine something you object to. However, the field of film studies (or television studies, media studies, art studies, literature studies etc.) will suffer if the only objects worthy of analysis are those deemed 'good'. *The Velvet Light Trap* highlights how pornography is an example of a bad object having merit as an analytical tool for other purposes, like gender dynamics and sexual norms in a given culture and time period (The Editors 2020, 1). However, there is still both merit and necessity in studying bad objects for the object's sake. For one, although a bad object might be more precisely defined than a guilty pleasure, the ever-changing nature of 'bad' means no film should be except from analysis or value to the field. Additionally, challenging and exploring why certain objects are deemed good or bad will hopefully further the field and broaden our understanding. Repeatedly studying and publishing research on the same types of films because they are deemed 'good' by preexisting research closes academia off to new potential regarding film and genre. Do we need more research on David Lynch, Alfred Hitchcock and Ingmar Bergman? Furthering Schor's sentiment, academia's canons need to be questioned as well as examined. It is necessary to study bad objects to validate the very use of the words 'good' and 'bad' in the first place.

The connotation of the word 'bad' in these applications is not a matter of subjective taste or preference like 'guilty pleasure' is. A bad object, and bad cinema, are inferred to be bad 'for you', and be morally objectionable. Compared to a good or bad meal, the food is not bad because it is too spicy for your liking. It is bad because it is a panda steak. *Twilight* can be seen as a bad object in both measures described by Polan, as well as the definitions by Schor and Hilmes. Part of the response and critique was aimed at the unusual and arguably 'bad' acting and cliché, absurd dialogue. The film has also received criticism for its depiction of gender norms, teen sexuality and Mormon morals of abstinence. It is not part of any canon, and as mentioned, even scholars specialising in overlapping themes refuse to publish writing on the film. It is also, unarguably, by and for women, which perhaps likens it more to feminist studies which embraced television, and therefore became an enemy to film studies, if Hilmes is to be believed. The strong reaction to the film is in part, I believe, a reaction to the film being undefinable and confusing. It uses tropes and themes that would not be seen as immoral or bad in certain genres or traditions, but present it in a new context which ultimately opens it up for debate. *Twilight* is possibly a bad object by many measures, but it might also just be a confusing object.

3. GENRES & GREAT EXPECTATIONS

3.1. HISTORY OF THE VAMPIRE

In the complicated tapestry that is genre and influence in *Twilight,* the most obvious is of course the vampire film. This film both refers to, plays with, and subverts well-established genre norms, and the very core of the film is questioning what a vampire is. Before exploring how *Twilight* uses and abuses the vampire, we must understand the status quo of the genre before its sparkling arrival.

The vampire has existed, in some form, for more than 5000 years, spanning Europe, Asia and Africa (Schubart 1993, 105). The vampire has many forms and characteristics depending on the time and culture of any given myth, folklore, or story, but some key aspects are crucial and universal in our definition. Rikke Schubart describes the essential definition of the mythological creature as a being that maintains its undead existence by consuming the blood of the living (1993, 106). Another definition is offered by Anthony Masters in his comprehensive book *The Natural History of the Vampire* (1972), drawn from various encyclopaedias and dictionaries. Although Masters concludes that no definition of the word 'vampire' can cover all examples of the monster, his generalisation is this; 'The vampire throughout the world can be divided into two basic manifestations. The spirit of a dead person [or demon] is the first and the second is a corpse, reanimated by his own spirit or alternatively by a demon, who returns to suck at the life of the living, depriving them of blood or some vital organ is order to maintain its own vitality (Masters 1972).'

The prevalence of this monster across time and cultures points to its core being universally applicable. Evidenced by the prevalence of blood sacrifice through different ancient cultures, Silver and Ursini argue that humanity made an early connection, equating blood to life (1975, 20). Along with this link follows the instinctive fear of disease and death, and the vampire is believed to be just another attempt to explain death from unperceived or misunderstood natural causes (Silver & Ursini 1975, 20).

The first recorded use of the word 'vampire' in English dates back to 1732, in a translated report regarding the conviction of Arnold Paole. Paole, a soldier recently returned from Turkey, reportedly died and rose again, and was blamed for the death and subsequent return of thirteen villagers (Jones 2002, 75). This case of mass vampirism was investigated by a team of doctors, jurists, and high-ranking military officers, who concluded that this was indeed caused by Paole's vampirism, and the monsters were to be beheaded and burned, and their ashes scattered in a river (Jones 2002, 75).

A knowledge and subsequent fear of death is, according to Slochower, 'the most continuous,

most persistent and inevitable, perhaps the most fateful trauma for man' (Slochower 1969, in Silver & Ursisni 1975, 21). Some common visual traits of vampires can be traced back to devastating diseases. Most commonly linked to vampirism is tuberculosis. The disease is also known as consumption, as the highly contagious disease would spread quickly within a household, and it was believed that the infected person's life force was consumed or sucked out of their body by the most recently deceased family member in the form of a vampire returned from the grave (Ponti 2019). This led to recently buried corpses being dug up and examined for traces of 'fresh blood' or signs of not decomposing. If any suspicion was placed, one of the solutions was to decapitate the body before reburying it (Ponti 2019). Dating back to the Middle Ages, premature burials of unconscious people were not uncommon. The error was not discovered and documented until much later, and statistics from as recent as the early 20th century show that victims of being buried alive were discovered in America as frequently as once a week (Silver & Ursisni 1975, 21). Masters believes unearthing corpses in surprisingly good condition, and in contorted, unnatural positions led to the belief that the corpses looked to be alive in the coffins, allowing the myth of the vampire to continue. A lack of medical knowledge also led to a belief that some corpses were still alive because their hair, nails and teeth had grown well after death, which we now know is because the body loses fluids causing the skin and gums to contract and expose more of the corpse's hair, teeth and nails. A universal, primal fear of disease and death, coupled with humanity linking blood to the life force in most early civilizations, has resulted in fertile ground for the prevalence of the vampire across time and cultures, and it is perhaps still the most famous and recognizable monster.

Metaphorical readings of the vampire in fiction have existed from the very beginning of the Western canon. Through time, we see an ever-changing and evolving monster in literature and on film, reflecting different times and different anxieties. The origin of the vampire in European literature stems from the infamous summer of 1816, which resulted in multiple groundbreaking works of literature (Schubart 1993, 106). Lord Byron invited a group of friends to holiday in the lake house Villa Diodati in Switzerland (Schubart 1993). The weather was stormy, with heavy rain and lightning for days on end, and the group discarded more summery activities in favour of a writing competition. The group included Byron's fellow romantic poet, Percy Shelley, and his wife Mary Shelley. These writers, along with Lord Byron's doctor and friend, John Polidori, decided to compete in writing the scariest ghost story. The most famous entry in this competition is arguably Mary Shelley's groundbreaking novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus.* Another piece of writing in the competition was Polidori's submission, a vampire novel simply called *The Vampyre* (1819). This

short story precedes Bram Stoker's *Dracula* by 78 years and tells the story of the evil Lord Ruthven, a murderous aristocratic gentleman who drinks blood and seduces young women (Schubart 1993, 106). This text lends itself to some of the thematic readings that are still rife in vampire media; class consumption and the aristocracy feeding of/exploiting the working class, seduction and, most importantly, sexual desire. What is perhaps more interesting, is the fact that these readings were also contemporary to the novel. The similarity between the seductive yet cold aristocratic vampire was so clearly based on Polidori's friend and notorious bisexual, Lord Byron, that the novel was seen as a sore jilted lover's confessions (Schubart 1993, 106). Based on this, we can assume that the vampire as a sophisticated and charming but soulless aristocrat with omnisexual tendencies precedes any film adaptation, and has indeed been a part of the romantic and gothic vampire from the genre's very onset.

In 1897, the British writer Bram Stoker published *Dracula*. Despite being preceded by other literary works about vampires, *Dracula* is arguably the most successful and widely known (Schubart 1993). The novel's opening is usually included in most film adaptations, as it introduces both the character and the audience to a vampire for the first time. Solicitor Jonathan Harker journeys to meet his new client in his Transylvanian castle. Harker is hired by the mysterious Count Dracula to help him acquire a house in London. At night, Jonathan is seduced and attacked by three vampire women and left to fend for himself as Count Dracula sets sail for the UK. Count Dracula is revealed to be a vampire who shapeshifts, sleeps in a coffin in the daytime, and lives on human blood. He is pursued and ultimately killed by a group of characters including Mina, who is Jonathan's fiancée, and Professor Van Helsing, who has a vast knowledge of vampiric mythology.

The Eastern European-Balkans vampire is the source of what we associate with vampires today. These myths were the inspiration for Stoker when writing *Dracula,* and he researched them thoroughly when crafting his own tale (Silver & Ursini 1975, 23). Like the legends surrounding consumption, the Eastern European-Balkan vampire returns to the world of the living to feed, and often preys on its own relatives and loved ones (Silver & Ursini 1975, 23). This would occasionally be a simultaneous act of feeding and sexual intercourse, attesting to the prevalence of ambiguity surrounding this monster. The feeling of love-dread is present in the majority of modern vampire stories and can be traced back to these myths where it was uncertain whether the dead would return to loved ones out of affection, revenge, lust, hunger, or a combination of these seemingly contrary motives (Silver & Ursini 1975, 23). Ambiguity and contrast are key themes in the heyday of the vampire; the gothic.

3.1.1. The Gothic

Like Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Polidori's *The Vampyr,* Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is an example of gothic literature. Gothic fiction derives its name from gothic architecture, as gothic castles were often the settings for early stories in the genre, such as *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) (Hogle 2002, 126), and indeed, *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. Other characteristics of the genre include elements of horror and the supernatural, the past intruding on or haunting the present, and horrible acts like imprisonment, revenge, and/or murder (Hogle 2002). These acts point to a main feature of gothic literature; transgression. By including transgressive acts, writers of gothic literature interrogated the limiting norms and anxieties of society, and examine the lengths to which people will go, or transgress. The outcome often shows character's personal choices push against societal norms and expectations (Hogle 2002). The theme of transgression is crucial in understanding the appeal of the vampire. The vampire's very existence is transgressive, as an animated corpse cheating death, and living off of human blood.

When *The Castle of Otranto* was re-released in 1765, a year after its original publication, it already pointed to the new era of literature it was at the genesis of. Most obviously, it added *A gothic story* to the novel's title, cementing it firmly in this new genre. The novel's author, Horace Walpole, also included a new preface. Here, Walpole advocated for a blend [of] the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern' (Hogle 2002, i). Preceding the full exploration and popularity of the genre by decades, Walpole manages to point to what will be the thematic core of the gothic: contrast and tension. Not only in romance, where Walpole describes ancient romance as 'all imagination and improbability', and the modern as governed by 'rules of probability' (Hogle 2002, i). The gothic mode is, according to Hogle, pliable and everchanging. Yet, he points to some relatively constant features that can identify a piece as 'substantially Gothic' (Hogle 2002, 2). Firstly, although not always as obvious as a gothic castle, the story is set (wholly or partially) somewhere antiquated. Hidden in these places are secrets of the (sometimes recent) past, that haunt the characters 'psychologically, physically, or otherwise' (Hogle 2002, 2). Here we see another key contrast of the gothic, the past and the present. Characters are prevented from moving on, as the past haunts and interferes with their lives. These hauntings are often supernatural in the form of ghosts or ghouls, and the line between rationality and the supernatural can be crossed several times in a gothic story, where one side is 'victorious' at the end. The Gothic became very popular and widespread much later in the 18th and into the 19th century. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein,* despite being published more than 50 years after Walpole's initiation, is clearly also inspired by the changing of the times. The Age

of enlightenment preached the value of science, rationality and modernity, and the conflict arises when this is not sufficient when dealing with forces of nature and desires of the heart. 'Where Enlightenment valued reason, order, and modernity, the Gothic acted as a negative image, imaging forth the irrational, chaos, and the past (Jones 2002, 77).

The tension in gothic fiction is defined by David Punter as a set of oppositions, like tradition and modernity, and the sophisticated and barbaric (Punter 1980, 5). Says Punter 'Gothic stood for the old fashioned as opposed to the modern; the barbaric as opposed to the civilised; crudity as opposed elegance' (1980, 5). Sets of oppositions and contradictory themes creating thematic tension are embedded in vampire mythology; they are literally of the past but infringe on modern life. They are abominations of science and modern ideas and harken back to mythological and unexplainable mysticism. As well as Punter's example of the old-fashioned and modernity, they represent the cultural tension of science and mythology, as a vampire's existence is impossible to explain logically.

3.1.2. Gender in the Gothic

The duality and contrast explored thematically in gothic fiction were also reflected in the genre's status in society. Although gothic literature explored complex and varied issues like socio-cultural anxieties surrounding sexuality, class, laws, otherness, and the dark side of an individual's psychology, and despite being popular and financially successful, the genre was gendered as female (Davison 2012, 124). The genre, says Davison, was consequently vilified as vulgar as a result of early production and consumption by women (2012, 124). However, the genre was popular with both male and female writers and a division in the genre was later identified by pioneering gothic writer Ann Radcliffe (Davison 2012, 124). Radcliffe's critical essay *On the Supernatural in Poetry* proposed a gendered division of the genre, where 'terror Gothic' was classified as female, and 'horror Gothic' as male. While 'horror Gothic' was considered more gruesome in its depiction of mortal encounters, 'terror Gothic' aimed to 'expand the soul by bringing it into contact with the terror-inducing sublime' (Davison 2012, 124). The less subtle term 'Female Gothic' was later used to describe a subgenre focused on female protagonists and issues like family history, social and institutional pressures, sexuality and gender roles (Davison). Women writers, suggests Diana Wallace, used Gothic fiction as a 'mode of historiography which can simultaneously reinsert them into history and symbolise their exclusion' (2012, 1).

Despite the prevalence of female writers and the adaptability of the Gothic, a less favourable pattern emerged regarding gender roles. The gothic castles that afforded the genre its name often had a damsel in distress trapped within them. This archetype of a virtuous, innocent and defenceless female in need of rescue by a strong, rational man is present in both the original gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto,* and the aforementioned Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). In her critical essay on the gendered divide in gothic literature, Radcliffe's own literature was used as an example of the female 'horror gothic', while she named peer Matthew G. Lewis as an example of the more sensationalist and masculine 'terror gothic' (Davison 2012). He too placed damsels in distress in his 1796 novel *The Monk*.

Stoker's *Dracula,* in addition to the oppositional themes inherent in a vampire discussed above, has another interesting pair of oppositions regarding gender. The two female characters, Mina Harker and Lucy Westenra, are treated very differently in the novel. Mina is a traditional gothic heroine whose faith lies in the hands of a hoard of brave men, who ultimately hunt Dracula in his Transylvanian castle to save Mina's life. Lucy, by comparison, is the personification of Victorian society's fear of women's liberation and sexuality. She asks why she must pick one of her suitors, and not just marry all three. At the time, women were considered a serious threat to the status quo (Davison 2012, 138). Says Davison 'The New Woman called into question the established idea of an essential female nature, women's limited professional and employment opportunities, and their right of choice in relation to marriage, maternity and sexuality (Davison 2012, 138).' Lucy is a New Woman and is ultimately punished for this.

3.1.3. Eat the Rich (before they eat you)

To understand the extent of Lucy Westenra's transgressive behaviour and ultimate punishment, we must first establish a crucial aspect of vampire fiction. The vampire can and should be read metaphorically. In addition to anxieties regarding the human condition already discussed, like disease, death, and consumption, there is also a tradition for considering the vampire as a metaphor for a myriad of social anxieties.

In her book *The Naked and the Undead: Evil and the Appeal of horror* (2000), Cynthia Freeland suggests reading the attack of the vampire as a sexual act, as it is both intimate and an exchange of bodily fluids. Extending this reading suggests the vampire be polymorphously perverse, a Freudian term explaining sexual urges not limited to socially accepted practices. The victim of a vampire's

desire can be of any age, race, gender, or class, which is in opposition against norms established by patriarchal institutions of law, science and religion (Freeland 2000, 124). The vampire further mocks the notions of gender and gender roles by refusing patriarchally traditional life choices, like marriage and procreation (Freeland 2000).

With this in mind, let us return to poor Lucy. After daring to suggest a woman can desire more than one man, she is hypnotized and attacked by Count Dracula, who has shape-shifted into a wolf. This sexual interaction is elevated from subtextual to explicit text in Francis Ford Coppola's 1992 adaptation. The film depicts a beastly sex scene where Lucy's moans of pleasure transcend to ambiguous groans of pain as biting is introduced into the act. Coppola, rather than letting the bite from a vampire be a metaphorical sexual penetration, rather combines both the sexual and the violent in one combined attack. For her promiscuous acts of premarital and nonconsensual sex, Lucy must be punished. The New Woman ultimately becomes a vampire who performs the ultimate rebellion towards a woman's role in the family. Rather than getting married and mothering children, Lucy is an undead and infertile being who drinks the blood of babies, arguably the furthest thing from a loving mother there is.

Before her transformation is complete and the consumption of babies can begin, however, there is an attempt to save Lucy. Dr Van Helsing suggests giving her a blood transfusion. In this dramatic and invasive procedure, Lucy's skin is once again penetrated, this time with needles to transfer blood from not one, but four different men. These men treat Lucy less chivalrously than Mina. In the novel, one of the donors, Lucy's fiancé Arthur, says that he felt they were married now that they had exchanged blood. Later, due to blood transfusions from two further suitors and Dr. Van Helsing himself, he refers to Lucy as a 'polyandrist', i.e. a woman with several husbands. Evidently, neither Freeland nor other scholars were the first to suggest we read the exchange of blood as something sexual.

As we read the vampire's attack as sexual, another metaphorical reading presents itself. The theme of sexuality, specifically homosexuality, is embedded in the fictional vampire. This is perhaps not surprising, as the first Western fictional vampire was based on Lord Byron, and even contemporary readers saw the book as the work of a jilted lover in Polodori. Richard Dyer explores the homosexual reading of the vampire in his *text Children of the Night: Vampirism as Homosexuality, Homosexuality as Vampirism* (1988). The descriptions of vampires in Stoker's book are similar to stereotypical ideas of 'homosexuality and/or decadent sexuality' of the time, says Dyer. The vampire as an aristocrat aligns itself with the flamboyant or dandy poets of the time, such as Lord Byron and

Oscar Wilde. Beyond these images and visual associations, Dyer argues that it is the wider metaphorical possibilities that account for the vampire's long hold in gay/lesbian readings. While the vampire, as previously stated, lends itself to a number of metaphorical readings, I agree with Dyer that the sexual symbolism of the vampire seems the most obvious. 'The vampire characteristically sinks his/her teeth into the neck of his/her victim and sucks the blood out. You don't have to read this as a sexual image, but an awful lot suggests that you should.' (Dyer 1988). Dyer elaborates on why the reading of a vampiric attack should be read as a sexual act; not only does the event take place at night, but in the secluded privacy of the bedroom. On film, no monster favours a bedroom encounter more than a vampire. Most other monsters live in the wild and attack in the woods. The vampire comes to call, says Dyer, in 'the realm of the private', at night in the bedroom, where we are most ourselves. There is, of course, nothing inherently homosexual about privacy. Yet, Dyer argues, homosexual and other forbidden sexual desires find expression in privacy, as a matter of necessity. Vampirism is not merely private, like all our sexual lives. It is also secret, something to be hidden, and throughout a vampire narrative, discovered and exposed.

The moral, if you will, of the vampire on film is somewhat of a paradox, but a paradox fitting with ideas of prejudice, says Dyer. It is suggested that a vampire poses a threat because they can blend into society undetected, whilst also being sufficiently different from everyone else, which evokes curiosity and attraction. With Dracula, it is his eastern European accent and stilted behaviour that sets him apart from the rest and adds to both his appeal and his otherness simultaneously. Similarly, there is an idea, says Dyer, that someone can 'look' or 'behave gay', and be 'found out' through a series of cues and clues. Similarly, the vampire is discovered not immediately and obviously, but slowly by piecing together how he is different. Vampires also often subscribe to the queer notion of found family. By necessity, of course, as their biological family are long dead, but also metaphorically as othered individuals find and form their own communities and families. This is especially revealing in *Interview with the Vampire* (1994), where two male vampires not only live domestically together, but also adopt a child who refers to them as parents.

The queer connotations and readings of vampires are not a modern idea derived from cinema. More than 50 years after the Byron inspired *the Vampire*, and still predating Stoker's *Dracula* by more than 20 years, Sheridan Le Fanu's novella *Carmilla* was published. Homosexuality is not explicitly described, understandably so as it was published in 1871 – 1872, but rather subtextual and ambiguous. The story is narrated by the teenage girl Laura, living in an isolated castle with her widowed father. She is seduced by the beautiful Carmilla, whom she had dreams about as a child.

Laura's dreams have a lot of suggestive imagery, such as the beautiful visitor entering her bedchamber. Carmilla also makes romantic advances towards Laura during her stay, and they grow very close. (Hogle 2002). As evident by *Carmilla*, the lesbian vampire has existed in gothic fiction since 1871. She also appeared on film remarkably early, if one is open to reading these texts subtextually. In 1936, a few years after the success of *Dracula*, Universal released a sequel called *Dracula's Daughter*, inspired by both *Carmilla* and a previously unpublished chapter from Stoker's original novel (Hogle 2002). Countess Marya Zaleska is the daughter of Count Dracula, and a vampire herself. The film continues immediately after the conclusion of *Dracula*, where Marya is in England to burn her father's corpse in hopes that this will revert her own vampirism. When this is not the case, she enters British high society and asks a psychiatrist for help.

Unlike *Dracula,* the sequel was produced after the Hay's code, a self-imposed moral code that meant American films censored several things deemed unsuitable (Thompson and Bordwell 2019, 192-193). From its introduction in 1933 until the mid-1960s, scenes of nudity, 'deviant' sexual behaviour and glorification of violence were considered too risky to include in cinema (Thompson and Bordwell 2019, 192 – 193). It is therefore almost shocking by today's standard how much more suggestive the film is in regards to Marya's sexuality than the pre-code predecessor. Like her father, the countess seduces her victims into a false sense of security in order to isolate them and drink their blood. Marya is an artist, and one of her victims is brought to her studio on the pretence of modelling for a painting. The young girl, Lili, is asked to remove her blouse, as the countess is doing 'a study of heads and shoulders' (Hanson 1999, 198). Both based on the more subtextual filmmaking of *Dracula* where the count merely leads his victims behind a wall and the camera cuts, and because this film was made under the Hay's code, I personally expected this scene to merely have some suggestive dialogue, then cut away. But the film shows Lili's naked back, as both we and the countess observe her. 'Won't I do?', asks Lili. 'You'll do very well indeed', Marya replies before hypnotizing her (Hanson 1999, 198)(Fig. 3.1.). Later in the film, Marya kidnaps the psychiatrist's secretary Janet, and brings her to the castle in Transylvania. In a scene which Ellis Hanson describes as 'the longest kiss never filmed' (1999, 198), the countess hovers over Janet's lifeless body. She slowly descends for a kiss but is interrupted (Hanson 1999, 199). Films made during the Hay's code are known for scenes of 'possible deniability', where double meanings and suggestive language both allow for a sexual undertone without risking censoring (Thompson and Bordwell 2019). *Dracula's Daughter* still feels like a rather risqué piece of lesbian cinema, and surprisingly effectively sensual to this day.

Figure 3.1. Marya observes Lili before hypnotizing and consuming her. (Screenshot from *Dracula's Daughter)*

Polidori's *the Vampyre* was believed to have not only been about Lord Byron. It was initially believed that Lord Byron had in fact written it himself, and it was republished in collections of his work well into the nineteenth century (Jones 2002, 78). Goethe even hailed it as Byron's finest work. This is a fitting example of the vampire as a symbol of power imbalances. The aristocracy and the rich have a position in society only made possible through exploitation. The consuming, draining, involuntary extraction of resources and life force is a strong image for how the rich exploit the working class to generate more wealth for themselves. In a humorous remark by video essayist Mariana Colin, she combines the common metaphorical readings of vampires symbolising an exploitative upper class, and vampires as a dangerous foreign fiend personifying societal xenophobia. Colin remarks on the absurdity of the plot revolving around Dracula's real threat being real estate investments (Colin 2021, 08:02).

From the private to the political, vampires can symbolize sexuality and gender identity, foreign threats, disease, and class exploitation. Even Karl Marx evokes the vampire in his writing, stating in Das Kapital 'Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour,

and lives the more, the more it sucks. […] the prolongation of the working day … only slightly quenches the vampire's thirst for living blood and labour' (Marx in Jones 2002, 72).

3.1.4. The Byronic Hero

Considering the vampire is a product of the gothic, it is somewhat of a full circle moment that Edward Cullen, the vampire character of *Twilight*, can be defined as a Byronic hero. Lord Byron served as the inspiration for the first vampire in Western literature, lord Ruthfeld in Polidori's *The Vampyre*, but his influence on literature is not limited to this example. Lord Byron, says Michael Jones, had such an impact that his name has become an adjective; Byronic (Jones 2017, 5). As Byron can be defined as an early example of a celebrity, and was known and admired as an individual beyond what he produced and published, both his works and his individuality are the basis for the term 'Byronic hero' (Jones 2017, 9). Byron's narrative poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812) presents, says Jones, a fully formed example of the Byronic hero. The hero, Childe Harold, was immediately connected to Byron by the poem's readers, and assumptions were made of Byron's character based on his superficially similar characteristics. Childe Harold has a lust for sensual pleasures, something Lord Byron was also known for. They are also both aristocrats of long lineage (2017, 9). However, as the poem progresses, the Byronic hero is defined by his rejection of libertinism. This makes him rebellious to the pleasures of the aristocracy, and in turn both more endearing to middle-class readers, and a 'wanderer outside of his class' (Jones 2017, 9). He is, however, not rejecting a libertine lifestyle because of his Christian morals, but rather heartache. He is also defined by the unchristian trait of pride, making him fall out of favour with the middle class, furthering his lonely, classless existence. He is therefore always searching for wholeness, which he cannot find in class nor domesticity.

Considering the Byronic hero originated both from Lord Byron himself, and his own poetry, it is interesting that some of the most famous examples of Byronic heroes come from the female gothic, written by women; Heathcliff in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Mr Rochester in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), and Mr. Darcy in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) to name a few. The latter of these writers was one of the first, says Susan Allan Ford, to rework the Byronic hero (Jones 2017, 17). The popularity of the trope in the 'literary landscape of the regency' was dramatic and influential, and in her book *Persuasion* (published posthumously in 1817), Austen wrote what Jones calls 'the first domesticated Byronic hero' (2017, 19). Captain Wentworth, the love

interest of Anne Elliot in the novel, is a naval captain who recently returned from battle. Susan Allan Ford writes to this appeal in a romantic lead, as men of action, who are not defined by their social standing, inheritance or power (Jones 2017, 20). This is the classless hero still fitting the original definition. However, what Austen adds, and is later explored further in gothic romance novels, is a female protagonist asserting her power in domesticity, the arena a Byronic hero was previously avoidant of or rejected from. The greatest difference then says Jones, is Wentworth discovering his need to be valued by Anne, whereas Byron's romance explores the possibility of a masculine value without women at all (2017, 26).

This branching of the Byronic hero is perfectly exemplified in the year 1847. The very coordinated Brontës published what has become the quintessence of the two sides to the archetype. *Wuthering Heights*' Heathcliff is Emily Bronte's case of the Byronic hero's downsides and failings. The novel is the love child of the Gothic and romanticism, and the whirlwind and turbulent romance between Catherine and Heathcliff contain a clear inheritance from both the Gothic and the Byronic. This complex rewriting of the trope says Jones, turns Byronic liberation from individual opposition into inevitable tragedy, and the successful romance and happy ending are reserved for the following generation who are the domesticated versions of themselves (2017, 32). Heathcliff's brooding and rebellion against established norms is his ultimate failing, and he is not granted the Austenian grace of being included in the domestic sphere.

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* was published later in the same year, and her Byronic love interest is the mysterious and secretive Mr. Rochester. Where Heathcliff was without class or property, and characterised as something wild and unruly, Rochester is a wealthy nobleman, albeit with a gothic estate haunted by the presence of his imprisoned, mad wife. Both characters bear Byronic character traits like stoicism, a cynical outlook, a brooding nature and disregard for their contemporary customs and morals. Mr Rochester is physically described as 'dark, strong, and stern', and Heathcliff is 'a dark-skinned gypsy in aspect, in dress and manners a gentleman' (Brontë 1847). Through the course of *Wuthering Heights,* Heathcliff's character develops from romantic lead to antihero, as he is overcome with heartbreak and madness after Catherine's death, resorting to kidnapping, grave digging, domestic abuse and possibly murder (Jones 2017, 46). A bittersweet gothic ending is offered, as a character claims to see the ghosts of Catherine and Heathcliff roam the Yorkshire moors together, but their moral, sexual and social transgressions were ultimately punished in life. *Jane Eyre's* Mr Rochester, on the other hand, is allowed to keep his status as romantic lead despite his transgressions. Throughout the novel, Jane discovers an array of closeted skeletons

objectionable to the morals and values of the time; he has an illegitimate child by a French mistress. On their wedding day, Jane discovers that there is already a Mrs. Rochester, to whom he has been married for fifteen years, but kept hidden and chained in the attic because she is 'violently insane'. Being legally married still, he proposes Jane go with him to France and pretend to be married. After all this transgression, Mr Rochester is still awarded a happy ending, as Jane returns to nurse him back to health and eventually marries him after his first wife commits suicide. They adopt his illegitimate child, and although he was blinded in the fire set by his first wife before she died, his eyesight returns after two years. Not only are his transgressions forgiven, they are reversed and fixed retroactively, erased from his character.

Mr. Rochester is described as intelligent, sardonic and sophisticated, whereas Heathcliff's nature is less refined and more 'wild'. The resolution to these two characters, both examples of Byronic heroes, show the duality of the archetype, as characteristic of the duality of the gothic. The emotional versus the rational, the past versus the future, nature versus society. This development over time is affected by the pressures of Victorian norms and expectations of respectability, and the Byronic hero was ultimately seen as a direct challenge to masculinity (Jones 2017, 33). This is because, says Jones, at the heart of the Byronic hero is an open antagonism to the domestic values of family and home (2017, 33). As evident by Austen and the Brontës, women have the power in the domestic sphere, and although the Byronic hero might feel in opposition to or excluded from the domestic sphere, the choice offered to him by his female counterpart is ultimately his own choice; become domesticated and live, or rebel against it and die (and haunt the moors of Yorkshire).

Lord Byron died at the age of 36, lending him iconographic status akin to the 27 Club, solidifying his eternal youth in history. This also lends itself to the vampire mythology, as youth frozen in time. In an interview with Shannon Hale, *Twilight* author Stephanie Meyer cites both Mr. Darcy and Mr. Rochester as inspirations for the character of Edward Cullen, and even gives him the same first name as the latter (Meyer 2011). As his namesake, Edward is a Byronic hero, specifically of the domesticated kind. Superficially, Edward and the Cullens are modern and American versions of what would be considered aristocrats in 19th century Europe, namely self-made millionaires (or billionaires if Forbes is to be believed). Their wealth is evident in everything they own, as they wear expensive clothing, and have many cars and a modern home. The family also evokes associations with aristocracy by having old-fashioned names and artistic pursuits like playing the piano and enjoying classical music. Edward still expresses the Byronic rebellion as he seems unfaced with this wealth or privilege.

As Bella gathers clues and follows the typical arc for a vampire story, Edward repeatedly tells her to stop. After she sees him use his speed and strength to save her from a car accident, he first attempts to gaslight her, saying he was standing right next to her. As she refuses his attempts to change her mind, he tells her 'no one is going to believe you. Can't you just thank me and get over it?' (Hardwicke, 2008). As he realizes her insistence on solving this mystery of his identity, rather than keep his distance, he repeatedly approaches her, almost threateningly, and tells her to leave him alone. These mixed signals are very reminiscent of the Byronic heroes of literature, who express the agony of wanting a woman but also being filled with doubt and self-hatred. His stubbornness is expressed in possessive behaviour like stalking Bella from a distance and watching her sleep at night without her knowledge. Like Heathcliff, he also has a wild, almost animalistic side, and will sometimes perch or growl (fig. 3.2.). His sensual transgression is interesting and a modern subversion of the original Byronic trope. Sexual transgression at the time of lord Byron was premarital, excessive, bisexual and hedonistic, and this explicit sensuality is a part of the trope. How else would Mr. Rochester have a premarital love child and a wife in the attic with a second wife on the way? However, premarital sex is no longer transgressive and if modern examples of teen fiction are to be believed, it is more common than ever to have a vast and experimental sex life. Edward's

Figure 3.2. Pattinson's body language is strange and resembles animals. (Screenshot from *Twilight)*

rebellion to the norms of his time, then, is to stick to the morals and norms of his past. Beyond the longing, yearning and intense eye-gazing and handholding, Bella and Edward do nothing more than kiss. Is this the explicit moral messaging of a Mormon author, or a subversion of the sensual Byronic hero for a modern time? Perhaps both, as the Byronic hero, and *Twilight*, are very much influenced by both the Gothic and the Romantic. The animalistic and wild, yet piano-playing, well-

mannered and old-fashioned Edward contains this gothic duality, of modernity and tradition, sophistication and wildness.

3.2. THE HORROR OF GIRLHOOD

The Vampire film and monster films are a subgenre of the unruly, broad and flexible genre 'horror'. Much like the vampire, it is hard to give a clear and all-encompassing definition of the horror genre, but one key characteristic is to be expected. The horror film should elicit a sense of dread, fear or discomfort. How these feelings are evoked, however, varies from sub-genre to sub-genre, and film to film. The monster film might, as the name suggests, show us something monstrous, and elicit a fear of the unknown and uncontrollable. Psychological horror can make us question our sanity and be fearful of the complexity of the human mind, while gore's graphic imagery evokes a visceral and instinctive reaction. In addition to a number of sub-genres, there are also merged genres. One such love child particularly relevant here is the teen horror, or teen slasher. Driscoll suggests the horror genre has a lot to offer to a teen audience. Like the vampire, the horror genre overall is ripe for metaphorical readings and can resonate with an audience on a deeper level. The analogy between teens and monsters is that of the uncontrollable. The sudden changes and 'the inhabitability of a body with a mind of its own' (Driscoll 2011, 32) are themes and imagery prevalent in both horror films and teen films and resonate with the audience as an uncomfortable feeling.

3.2.1. The Final Girl

An overlap of teenagers and horror is the slasher film. The subgenre dates back to the 1970s, with many citing John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) as the first example. This is debatable, but one argument favouring this case is that Halloween is the first film to use tropes that would retroactively be defined as essential to the slasher genre. The convention expected of a slasher film is a group of characters stalked and killed by a murderer (Andresen 2022, 36). The word 'retroactively' is deliberately telling, as the structure of *Halloween* can be said to be a 'misleading convenience' (Andresen 2022, 47) standardised by *Scream* (1996) and later, self-referential slashers. The expectation that the murderer is always a man, and the sole survivor is always a girl gives little credit to how versatile the slashers of the 70s and 80s were. These tropes do exist, as there is no shortage of male murderers and female survivors, but the genre has more surprising conclusions than one is led to

believe post-1990s. One trope associated with the slasher is the final girl.

Carol Clover developed the theory of the final girl in her book *Men, women, and Chain Saws: gender in the modern horror film* (1992). Challenging the status of *Halloween*, Clover cites *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) as an early slasher and the proto-example of her final girl trope. Says Clover of the slasher genre '(it is) the immensely generative story of a psycho killer who slashes to death a string of mostly female victims, one by one, until he is subdued or killed, usually by the one girl who has survived' (1992, 21). The slasher is perceived as a genre where female transgression is punished. These genre conventions were presented as unavoidable genre tropes in self-referential slashers *Scream* and *Cabin in the Woods* (2011), where the rules of how to survive a horror film are clear. You can not have sex, drink, do drugs, or present any 'bad' behaviour, or the narrative will punish you. The trope of the final girl needing to be a virtuous virgin is usually traced back to Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis), the responsible babysitter in *Halloween.*

The portrayal of the final girl as worthy of survival because of her virginity and virtuous nature is worthy of criticism. Carpenter said of the character that he needed to signal her as responsible. Not because she deserved to survive more than the other characters, but because she needed to be clear-headed and alert, and take care of the children. Carpenter and co-writer Debra Hill have repeatedly stated that making the virgin a survival trope was never their intention, but rather to show how most teenagers are hormonal and too distracted to notice the danger around them (Heinitz 2021).

The resilience of the Final Girl, from *Halloween* to *Alien* (1979)*, A Nightmare on Elm Street*(1984) and *It Follows* (2014) shows horror as a genre with potential for feminist messages. Firstly, both at the time of release in the 70s and 80s, but also to this day, most films have a male protagonist. Allowing the audience, particularly a gender-mixed audience, to root for, feel for and relate to a female heroine is, sadly, not the norm. Additionally, having her survive through resilience and alertness can be a refreshing power dynamic and antidote for action films favouring conflicts resolved with brute force. The trope of the final girl is more flexible than what is presented in *Scream*. There have always been examples of groups of survivors or final boys, and the killer can be male or female (Andresen 2022, 48).

Whether we use the limited definition from *Scream,* or a more nuanced take considering the entirety of the slasher genre, Bella is not a final girl. *Twilight* is, clearly, a vampire film, but it is not a horror film. Whilst the film uses tropes and imagery from the horror genre, the film ultimately does not elicit much fear in its audience. I also believe, based on the final girl and the horror genre as a

whole, that many audiences see horror as a feminist genre. This in turn is perhaps why horror audiences found the film disappointing. Not just because they expected a horror film that turned out to not be scary, but also because the female protagonist is awkward, anxious, and ultimately needs to be saved. Bella is not a courageous final girl, despite being a virgin.

3.3. YOUTHS, TEENS, AND YOUNG ADULTS

An interest in youth culture can be traced back to the origins of cultural studies. However, youth culture studies were initially interested in studying subcultures and music, which have become expected ingredients in youth film, but do not sufficiently explore the medium of film independently (Driscoll 2002, 205). By expanding this view of youth culture and focusing on the mainstream and film, Driscoll suggests we can raise more questions about gender, youth, and mass culture (2002, 205). Driscoll also offers a definition of youth as we recognize it in culture; Youth enters society as a group of 'new social subjects', and resists the needs and standards in that very culture. Therefore, rebellion is to be expected, but expected to be temporary, and aligned with subcultural activity (Driscoll 2002, 205). We see this behaviour in early examples of the youth film genre like Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), where the film deals with class, gender and generational friction, youth violence and resistance to social conformity. *A Clockwork Orange,* says Driscoll, marks 'alienation and rebellion as intrinsic to youth as a group. […] – alienation is not a matter of individual circumstance but of a structural social position of youth' (2002, 206).

Similar to the example of *A Clockwork Orange,* youth film is often both *about* a subculture and creates its own subculture or cult following. With *A Clockwork Orange,* shared signs and subcultural activities could be learning the invented language Nadsat or copying the film's distinct, futuristic fashion. Other films, like Danny Boyle's *Trainspotting* (1996) sold its cult aura through a hit soundtrack, solidifying it as a film directed at the youth audience. Driscoll suggests the inclusion of *A Clockwork Orange* as an example is controversial in certain circles, as some perceive it to be a film about youth, but not for youth (2002, 205). Driscoll therefore suggests a wider definition, saying 'Youth culture […] mostly means culture directed to, about, and for youth' (2002, 214), highlighting how it rarely, if ever, means 'by youth'.

Youth film and teen film were used fairly interchangeably in the 1950s and 60s as the concept of teenagers in the US emerged as a new, post-war concept. What can be called the teen flick has been a staple of cinema since the '60s, and reemerged as a very successful genre in the

1980s, with films like *The Breakfast Club, Pretty in Pink,* and *Ferris Bueller's day off* to name a surface-scratching handful (Driscoll 2002, 216). Driscoll's distinction between youth films and teen films points to a division that is both hierarchical and gendered. Unlike the aforementioned examples by Kubrick and Boyle, it is unusual to talk about the style of direction in teen films, as the genre's commercial success has been read as 'a statement that the directing and the script are unremarkable' (Driscoll 2002, 216). Driscoll further highlights how there are few critical or academic readings of teen films and little to no acknowledgement of the presence of deeper themes or remarkable styles.

The implied gender divide between youth film and teen film is not necessarily only visible in the gender of the protagonist. Driscoll suggests a key element of teen film, and the reason it is both marketed and received as girl films, is a romantic narrative, and of transformation mediated by commodification. Driscoll also emphasises the change from girlhood to womanhood in most teen films, making them examples of girl culture. The make-over scene is a prime example of this, and an expected genre trope. In stark contrast, we have the 'chose life' monologue at the opening of *Trainspotting,* which satirises the obsession with materialistic consumption in capitalism. Another distinction is that youth films depict youth subcultures in eternal rebellion ostracized and physically separated from society, whereas teen films depict more mainstream and conformist worlds, as they are often set in schools and/or the home. Teen films therefore also offer minimal rebellion to keep a happy ending (Driscoll 2002, 217). These distinctions also present very different narratives, which are evident in the visual language. For example, youth films tend to be more sombre dramas, and cast more age-appropriate actors and strive for realism, whereas teen films present an idealised world where the norm has been to cast older, physically fit and acne-free actors. Film critic Adrian Martin argues that 'the teen in a teen movie is itself a very elastic, bill-of-fare word; it refers not to biological age, but a type, a mode of behaviour, a way of being' (Martin in Driscoll 2002, 217). Paired with aspirational qualities like a designer wardrobe, a happy ending and a formulaic and predictable story structure, the teen film is more of a teen fantasy. *Clueless* (1995) opens with the wealthy, white and beautiful Cher Horowitz (Alicia Silverstone), who has her own car, a massive and apparently sentient wardrobe of designer clothing, and is the most popular girl at her high school. Paradoxically, the song scoring the opening scene is No Doubt's *I'm Just a Girl,* and Cher's voice-over narrates 'But seriously, I actually have a way normal life for a teenage girl. I mean I get up, I brush my teeth, and I pick out my school clothes.' The teen film is aspirational, idealised and glossy, whereas the youth film is a cautionary tale. The end is rarely a happy one for the youth film protagonist, and if it is, the happiness is found on the outside of society and fringes of acceptance. Teen films reinforce or even

help instil conformity in their audience. According to Driscoll, the teen film shows some rebellion, but never beyond what is redeemable, and we see *Clueless*' Cher end the film as a less individualistic character, having learnt to be a nurturing, responsive and heterosexual partner as a step towards adulthood (2002, 221).

Which of these, then, is a genre or mode where *Twilight* fits? As with both teen- and youth films, the film is undoubtedly both about and for a youth and teen audience. The most obvious conclusion would be to call this a teen film: it is primarily targeted towards a female audience and has a female protagonist. It is a romance, and Driscoll states how this is the key indicator of a teen film, and often depicts one girl's 'educational romance' (2002, 220). Visually, the teen film focuses on full body shots to convey power and beauty, or close-up shots. *Twilight* is an educational romance in that it is the protagonist Bella's first serious relationship. And it is, literally, deadly serious. Bella is not a powerful character and is offered few full body shots to convey her style and beauty. She wears practical, androgynous clothing like jeans and plaid shirts, which would prompt a makeover in a more conventional teen film. Bella joins her friends in shopping for prom dresses, but in this setting ripe for a make-over montage, she instead sits and reads a book while occasionally answering her friend's questions regarding their dresses. She even leaves the shopping early to seek out a bookshop. The film uses close-ups to a dizzyingly claustrophobic degree, showing Bella's social discomfort and self-consciousness both as someone perceived and someone who cannot stop looking at Edward. The film's framing is so enclosed and intimate it feels invasive. This discomfort also points to Driscoll's point that teen films always dramatize 'incorporation and exclusion among peer groups and focus on the struggle to learn how to conform in the right way' (2002, 221). Driscoll further explains that the female teen heroine resists social conventions and hierarchies, which also rings true with Bella. She repeatedly explains how out of place she feels and has always felt, to the point where she has stopped seeking acceptance. In PE, after hitting someone accidentally with a volleyball, her defence is 'I told them not to let me play' (Hardwicke, 2008). When her perky new school friend Jessica (Anna Kendrick) remarks on Bella's paleness by saying 'you're from Arizona, right? Aren't people from Arizona supposed to be like really tan?', Bella replies 'yeah, maybe that's why they kicked me out' (Hardwicke, 2008). This is all played off as jokes, but Stewart's performance and the framing conveys a sadness and awkwardness that speaks to a character who is uncomfortable in most groups and social situations.

Clueless is a perfect example of a teen film, and is both thematically, narratively and visually very different from *Twilight*, leading me to conclude that *Twilight* is not a teen film. Conveniently, we

do have an example of what the merging of teen film and the vampire genre would look like. Joss Whedon's vastly popular TV show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997 – 2003) based on his own film of the same title from 1992, sits comfortably in the middle of the teen film and vampire Venn diagram. The protagonist Buffy Summers (Sarah Michelle Gellar) is similar to *Clueless*' Cher in many ways; white, blonde, beautiful and skinny, with an interest in fashion and dating. The pilot of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is very quick to establish this merge, as it opens with Buffy having a prophetic nightmare of an impending mass vampire attack, before waking up and going to her new high school. Attempting to make friends, her first interaction is with a popular girl in class who decides to quiz her to determine her 'coolness factor' with questions regarding nail polish, handsome actors and trendy coffee. Buffy passes and proves to both the cool girl Cordelia and the audience that she is, in fact, cool. Bella would not only have failed Cordelia's quiz but failed to qualify as a worthy contestant altogether. Throughout the show, Buffy remarks on clothing and dating, and her styling is persistently girly with make-up, jewellery, short skirts and impressively heeled shoes for so much martial arts (fig.3.3.). Buffy and Cher share visual similarities and interests, but Buffy is not considered a popular girl in her high school. This is both because of her openness in befriending the 'nerds', disregarding social hierarchies like Driscoll suggests a teen film heroine should, but also because she is preoccupied with slaying. A permanent tension in the show is Buffy's inability to

Figure 3.3. Compared to teen film heroines Buffy (left) and Cher (middle), Bella (right) dresses more androgynously and less feminine and fashionable. (Screenshots from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* season 1, episode 9, *Clueless* and *Twilight)*

balance a normal teen life with socializing, dating and even basic schoolwork with her destined slayer duties. We also learn that Buffy has changed schools because she was kicked out of the previous one. This might lead us to believe that she is in fact rebellious, perhaps even antagonistic to norms and society, making her a youth film heroine. However, this also leads back to her vampire slaying activity, as she would often miss class and appear violent while fighting vampires. I am unsure if 'vampire slayer' can be deemed a subculture.

If *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* can be seen as an example of what the teen vampire film is, it is then relevant to prove how it differs from *Twilight* to further state why *Twilight* is not a teen film. Visually, *Buffy* uses the characteristic full-body shots of the teen film, to both show the power and status of Buffy, and her aspirational wardrobe and body. It also has a much lighter tone, both in the visual colour grading and generally summery, warm tint, but also in its humour. Even in dire situations of danger and action sequences with fighting to the death, Buffy has time for quippy one-liners reminiscent of the male action heroes of the 80s. Bella stutters her way through the majority of her lines, is framed in intimate close-ups and, despite having all the time in the world as she is not a slayer, has no desire for a social life or popularity in her high school. Buffy, obviously, slays vampires, whereas Bella is drawn to, relates to and ultimately falls in love with vampires, to a point where her main wish by the end of the film is to one day become one. As previously established, there are as many variations of vampire lore as there are pieces of vampire media. In *Buffy,* a vampire is a dead person whose body has been taken over by a demon which result in a Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde situation where the vampire is sometimes human-looking and human-behaving, with memories of their human life, and sometimes dramatically shifts, both in appearance and personality, as a demon takes control. In *Twilight,* the vampires have all their personality traits, memories and appearance from when they were human, just a more 'perfect' version. They are essentially just humans whose appearance is frozen in time*,* but otherwise 'themselves'. The soullessness and evil side of Buffy's vampires make it easier for us to watch her kill so many of them. It is harder to feel sympathy for a monstrous, unnatural face than a human one, and we do not feel remorse for these murders but rather admire Buffy's grit, tenacity and fighting skills. The exception to all these demonic vampires is the character Angel, who is presented as an exception to the rule. He is a vampire, but he has kept his human soul, making him remorseful, empathetic, brooding and, dare I say, Byronic. Angel is introduced in the pilot episode and is an early example of the Byronic romantic vampire lead that Edward would later become the quintessential example of. This makes it sound like Buffy and *Twilight* have very similar stories. However, the major difference

is the focus. Where *Twilight* presents almost exclusively nice vampires for Bella and us to fall in love with or yearn to be in social groups with, Buffy's main focus is the bad vampires and the action-filled fight scenes where they are eliminated. Angel is not even present in all of the episodes, and the focus is therefore not on the love story between Buffy and Angel like the focus of *Twilight* is exclusively that of the love story between Bella and Edward.

Despite this difference, it is hard to imagine there would ever be a *Twilight* without a *Buffy*. The defanging of the previously brooding, gothic and melodramatic genre that *Buffy* manages by incorporating humour and teen film influences was a breath of fresh air to the genre that is also enjoyed by *Twilight*. Genre shifts in *Buffy* highlighted by Driscoll are also present in *Twilight*, like teen gothic as a genre distinct from horror. This is not only characterised by humour, which *Twilight* has little of (at least intentionally) but also by its avoidance of showing death and bodily gore (2002, 232). '*Buffy's* displays of the horrific are not very horrible. Death and hell are reversible, temporary and amusing rather than alarming. The teen gothic is also tinged with irony' (Driscoll 2002, 232). While this description only rings partially true for *Twilight,* as the film is not very funny or ironic, and depicts a lot of angst and anxiety surrounding death and hell, it is noticeable that both these works are so clearly inspired by both vampires and the gothic. In our search for a genre where *Twilight* fits, horror is certainly not one of them. Based on the above quote from Driscoll, neither is teen gothic, sadly.

If *Twilight* is not a teen film, it is perhaps, then, a youth film. Much like *Trainspotting, Twilight* had a noticeably distinct soundtrack of credible artists not necessarily associated with a teen fanbase. Unlike *Clueless'* poppy and contemporary soundtrack, *Twilight* leaned into folk music and more alternative artists. The soundtrack was such a success that it became a goal for many indie and folk artists to get their music on the soundtrack for the second film. The sequel, *The Twilight Saga: New Moon's* soundtrack had artists like Lykke Li, Bon Iver, and Thom Yorke to name a few.
It also leaned into realism and away from idealized characters with its casting. Not to say that any of these actors are unattractive, but at least they are both age-appropriate and not overly glamorous (Kirsten Steward was 17 at the time of filming, making her an actual teenager portraying a teenager). The designer clothing, make-up, and, for the lack of a better word, inappropriate age casting were reserved for the Cullen family, making the vampires visually distinct from the normal high school student body to an almost comical degree. This distinction also points to the major reason why I believe *Twilight* is not a youth film either. Despite its commitment to realism in casting, costumes, and awkward dialogue any teenager might recognize, the very presence of vampires makes it hard to

consider this a gritty cautionary tale. *A Clockwork Orange* is, arguably, also unrealistic in that it is dystopian and futuristic, but the specific youth behaviour like gang violence, promiscuity, sexual violence and disregard for one's parents is sufficiently similar to real-life concerns of youth culture at the time that the setting is a thin enough veil.

Is it possible to be both a youth film and a teen film? Driscoll suggests yes and no. She cites Baz Luhrman's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) as an example but also argues that the genres are both represented but not merged. It is a teen film, as it deals with young love and is set to pop music, and a youth film because of its depictions of gangs, violence, angst, anger, and action (2002, 223). It is both a romantic comedy and a youth rebel tragedy. However, these seemingly juxtaposed genres never overlap, and the gendered nature of the genres is present in the filmmaking. Scenes with Juliet (Claire Danes) never overlap with the gang scenes, both narratively and visually. The only character allowed to travel between teen film and youth film is Romeo (Leonardo DiCaprio), who is shown in both romantic close-ups and slow motion, and action-filled fast paced scenes. Romeo and Juliet only appear together in 'enclosed, otherworldly spaces: the fish tank, the pool, the church, the bed (under the sheets)' (Driscoll 2002, 223). Edward and Bella do enjoy enclosed, otherworldly spaces, most famously the meadow where they first admit their love for each other before lying down in damp grass to stare into each other's eyes for what seems like an eternity. Unlike *Romeo + Juliet*, *Twilight* never offers scenes of Edward without Bella, and rarely scenes without Bella at all. With the focus and narration being presented from one character's perspective, it is hard to merge genres, and I don't believe *Twilight* does. To conclude this comparison, *Twilight* is too unglamorous, unpolished and sombre like a youth film to be a teen film, but too fantastical to be a youth film. The teenage experience is what sets *Twilight* apart from most teen and youth films, as it is not glamorous and idealized, nor subcultural or rebellious. It is, paradoxically, very realistic and relatable, despite the presence of vampires.

3.3.1. Young Adult

Because of *Twilight's* popularity, one could say that it propelled its own genre. There was a noticeable increase in teen-targeted vampire stories, and interestingly prime examples like *True Blood* and *the Vampire Diaries* are TV series based on books published before *Twilight,* indicating a desire to strike while the vampire-shaped iron is hot by finding existing material ripe for adaptation. Another noticeable genre development is the increase in young adult fiction. Young adult book series became

vastly popular like the *Twilight* books, and the *Twilight* film proved to major studios that adapting these books would be profitable. Young adult is a genre with, like most genres, a fluid and everchanging definition. The demographic of teenagers did not exist prior to the 1940s, so this is as far back as one can track media and art made specifically for this consumer group. In literature, it can apply to coming-of-age novels, serialized teen stories like *The Babysitter's Club*, or fantasy and adventure books aimed at teens rather than younger children. 17-year-old Maureen Daly's *The Seventeenth Summer,* published in 1942, is regarded as the first example of a young adult novel (Ellis 2018, 01:17). The novel contains plot points and themes that are associated with the genre to this day, like underage drinking and other forms of youth rebellion, dating, and of course, angst. After libraries pioneered the new classification of young adult, publishers later caught on and started marketing certain books that did not resonate with an adult audience towards teens instead. Examples of this are S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967), Judy Blume's *Are You There God? It's me, Margaret (*1970), and Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* (1974) (Ellis 2018, 02:37). In the 80s and 90s, the genre was marked by serialisation and more experimentation with genre, like the hugely successful horror series *Goosebumps* by R.L. Stine, and supernatural series *Animorphs* by K.A. Applegate. This was a financially successful publication but considered low art for kids. The shift in the genre of literature came with *Harry Potter* in the late 90s, which opened young adult fiction to an older audience as parents became as invested as their children, and introduced a darker tone to the genres, later evident in books like *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, *the Hunger Games* and, indeed, *Twilight.* Young adult, then, is not a separate genre, but an audience, as the umbrella of a young adult contains both coming-of-age realism, dark fantasy, fantasy romance, dystopian science fiction and, as is most popular right now, political fiction exploring contemporary phenomenon like *The Hate You Give* (2017) by Angie Thomas, which deals with young activism, systematic racism in America and the black lives matter movement.

Unlike literature, when we talk of young adult film, it is in reference to films, usually series, adapted from popular book series, and usually a genre series like fantasy or science fiction. This means popular film franchises like *Harry Potter* would fit into this genre, but were not consciously marketed as such at the time of production as it predates *Twilight*. The examples that predate *Twilight* are closer to children's literature and films, like *Harry Potter, Narnia* and *The Golden Compass* (which failed to launch any sequels). With *Twilight*, the darker young adult fiction proved profitable, as evident in later film series like The *Maze Runner, Divergent,* and *The Hunger Games*. In a piece for the Guardian, Anna Leszkiewicz writes 'The wild success of both *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games* ensured

even more YA franchises followed' (Leszkiewicz 2018). It is less common to use the term young adult when describing films outside of science fiction or fantasy genres, even if the characters are teenagers, and even if the films are based on books that would be classified as young adult. Despite being released in the concentrated YA film boom of the 2010s, teen comedies like *Easy A* (2010)*, Superbad* (2007)*, and Booksmart* (2019) were not labelled or marketed as 'young adult'.

Young adult in literature is a very broad genre, and while that makes it harder to pinpoint, it is noticeable that this is a literary phenomenon popularized by women, both as it was female librarians who pioneered the categorization, and some of the most noticeable books and series are written by women, like JK Rowling for *Harry Potter*, Stephanie Meyer for *Twilight*, Suzanne Collins for *the Hunger Games*, and of course, Maureen Daly who started it all in 1942.

3.4. ROMANCING THE STONE COLD

In March of 2024, I attended the Kosmorama International Film Festival. Their horror program included the French-Canadian film *Humanist Vampire Seeking Consenting Suicidal Person* (Ariane Louis-Seize). The screening was introduced by a young girl saying 'I am eager to see this with you all today, as I have been told that this is the best vampire film since *Twilight*!'. The comedy and irony of both her statement and the audience's laughing response felt reassuring for two reasons. Firstly, it confirmed that *Twilight* is still a relevant reference in most people's consciousness, and even though it might be remembered as a joke, it is, all the same, remembered. Secondly, it was a fitting comparison, and I was pleased to see the teen vampire romance is alive and well.

Romance can be difficult to distil as a genre, as it is often a feature in other genres. Just in this dissertation, both vampire-, teen,- and youth narratives often have a romantic subplot or elements of romantic tension in them. The vampire genre in particular, and perhaps surprisingly, has a long and interwoven relationship with the romance genre. When the 1931 *Dracula* was released and advertised, the vampire or monster genre was not yet distilled and established as a recognizable, independent film genre. Interestingly, particularly for this dissertation, it was advertised as something more ambiguously romantic, with a tagline reading 'The story of the strangest passion the world has ever known'. Universal studios further stressed this angle, in fear that women would not watch a vampire film, but could not resist a romance, by releasing the film on Valentine's Day (Gray 2018).

The romance genre and its audience have been criticized, ridiculed, and mocked for decades, by both men and women. In 1856, female writer Mary Ann Evans, under her male pseudonym

George Eliot, wrote the essay *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists*. This essay shows that the arguments for why romance is an inferior genre have remained largely the same. Proving a poor ally to her gender, Eliot writes that women of 'mediocre faculties' should be recommended to abstain from writing (1856, 19). The ridicule continues 'It is clear that they write in elegant boudoirs, with violet-colored ink and a ruby pen; that they must be entirely indifferent to publishers' accounts, and inexperienced in every form of poverty except poverty of brains' (Eliot 1856, 3). Painting female romance authors as superficial and unintelligent, and further arguing that romance is a genre where such women selfishly write their own wish fulfilment and fantasies, is interchangeable with the critique aimed at Meyer.

Prior to the defined genre of romance, there are narratives that would retroactively be labelled as such, namely from mythology, folklore, and from drama. These early examples of romance narratives are more clear examples of a tradition carried on by *Twilight*, where love is equated with death. Like Romeo and Juliet, Tristan and Isolde, Hades and Persephone, and almost every opera, Bella and Edward's romance both implicitly and explicitly confronts Bella's mortality as she enters what Edward tells her is a dangerous relationship, forcing her to contemplate death in what should be a joyous experience. Perhaps romance stories are not so frivolous after all, once they are not labelled 'a romance'.

Samuel Richardson wrote what is both considered one of the first English novels and therefore, one of the first romance novels, in 1740. *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* tells the story of Pamela, a virtuous female teen being seduced, kidnapped, and (much like Bella) surprise visited in her bedroom. The virtue being rewarded is Pamela's refusal of her seducer, who is also her employer, and the reward is him abandoning his promiscuous lifestyle and marrying her. Richardson wrote the book in order to 'cultivate the principles of virtue and religion in the minds of the youth of both sexes' (1740, 953). This educational purpose of fiction is nothing new. Fairytales and fables come to mind as stories meant to impart wisdom and moral lessons to their audience, and most fairytales are romances. Many romance heroes can be described as a prince charming, a beast, or, as is the case in most examples discussed in this chapter, both.

It is interesting to note that the genre was intended to apply to men as well as women. This introduction also points to a core conflict in the romance genre, and its later reception and discourse. Is romance, and indeed, fiction and art at large, meant to entertain or educate? *Pamela* became a bestseller, and regardless of Richardson's intentions, it was an early example of what became very common romance tropes. A young, inexperienced girl becomes the object of

fascination or obsession for a rich, powerful man with an edge. This describes vastly different works, such as *Pride & Prejudice* (1813), *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *50 Shades of Grey* (2011). In her discussion of the romance genre, video essayist and philosopher Natalie Wynn compares the criticism of *Twilight* in the 2000s to later reactions to *50 Shades of Grey* in the 2010s and currently the novels of Colleen Hoover. Sais Wynn of the discourse 'I promise that in whatever year you are watching this video, there is currently some lady novelist who's caused an outrage writing stories about a dangerous, wealthy, controlling alpha male' (Wynn 2024, 00:07:13).

Later romance novels, most notably initiated by Jane Austen, moved the genre from moralizing propaganda to more entertaining prose. Austen's witty and engaging dialogue set a new standard present to this day of how a romance is structured, focusing on the character's chemistry as a driving force (Percec 2012, 5). Austen, like Richardson, inferred morals and politics in her writing, but the presentation was more subtle. As discussed, Austen can be credited for domesticating the Byronic hero, infusing the threatening aristocratic men of early romance with some much-needed charm and tameability.

In the 20th century, the 'romance novel' became an interchangeable term for mass-produced paperback novels, also derogatorily called 'bodice rippers', as they often had a period setting and more explicit sexual content. When the Netflix show *Bridgerton*, adapted from a romance book series of the same name, became a success, I read several reviews referring to the show as a bodice ripper, and a welcome re-introduction of the romance genre in the mainstream. Indie Wire's critic called it a 'sexy, joyous, colourful update of the classic will-they-or-won't-they Regency-era courting tale' (Donahue 2020). Season 2 was less raunchy and graphic, but was all the same complimented for a successful build of tension and suspense, an example of a 'slow burn' romance.

In film, the romance has had a more prominent position, historically. James Cameron's 1997 epic period romance *Titanic* had it all. Action, adventure, drama, and boatloads of romance. The epic romance genre has been a staple of Hollywood since the early days of film. The success of *Titanic* as the sole romance drama on the top 10 of most profitable films ever is impressive, as it is nestled between Cameron's later, more action-focused films *Avatar* and *Avatar: The Way of Water*, Marvel's global superhero franchise, and the well-established franchise and film series *Star Wars*. However, adjusted for inflation, the top 10 hints at a past where epic romance was both hugely successful, profitable and, statistically, ungendered considering how vast the audience must have been. Adjusted for inflation, the top 10 contains *Gone With the Wind* (Undisputed nr.1), *The Sound of Music* (nr. 3), *Titanic* (nr. 5) and *Doctor Zhivago* (nr. 8). Despite building on a long and successful tradition, *Titanic*

was the last hurrah of the epic movie romance. The genre had already died in popularity in the late 1960s, as the new Hollywood movement favoured grittier and smaller productions. After new life was granted to the genre in the wake of Titanic's global success, many attempts were made to keep the genre alive, with films like *Pearl Harbour* (2001)*, Cold Mountain* (2003) and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008). These films, although somewhat profitable, still didn't meet the frankly unrealistic expectations set by Cameron, and the epic part of the epic romance proved too costly to be worth the investment. This happened parallel to the rise of more action films and franchises, and of course the enormous popularity of the superhero film.

Dana Percec, editor of the 2012 book *Romance; The History of a Genre* lists certain criteria for recognising this elusive and everchanging genre today. Say Percec 'nowadays, romance is the modern, consumerist equivalent of the fairy tale. Despite this loose pattern, romantic fiction survives because of the strictness with which authors and publishers (and readers) follow a given set of criteria' (2012, 6). These criteria are that the story, naturally, must focus on the relationship between two people. Percec explicitly writes that it is the relationship between a man and a woman, but this book is more than 10 years old, and queer representation is more present in romance films, television and literature now. Precec continues that the story must have a happy ending, wherein the paradox lies. The audience knows this, and the challenge for the writer is to maintain tension and the audience's engagement through a narrative despite them knowing how it will end (Percec 2012, 6). This is where additional characters and subplots are introduced, and the nature of these determines what subgenre the story fits into. It is also possible, says Percec, to discuss darker themes and story arcs in a romance, as a happy ending does not equal a happy narrative. Quite contrary, to create friction and tension, the course of love should not run smoothly. The most popular subgenres of romance are chic lit and historical (Pecec 2012, 8). The former is an urban and humorous look at being a young woman in a modern world, like the *Bridget Jones* books (Helen Fielding, 1996, 1999), and the latter, perhaps self-explanatory, is stories set in the past. The cut-off point for choosing a historic period in which to set your romance is anywhere before 1945. Notably, the Regency period seems to be the most popular, as the influence of Austen on the romance genre is inescapable. These two subgenres say Percec, seem to be on opposing sides of the romance spectrum, as one is more realistic and relatable, and one is pure escapism.

Romance narratives, like all genres, need conflict, as conflict drives the narrative. A common criticism of *Twilight*, and romance stories generally, is that it lacks plot. This might be a misunderstanding where plot is confused with action. If one were to retell everything that 'happens'

in a romance, it might not sound like much. 'Girl meets boy, they fall in love, and after some yearning and anxiety, they become a couple'. However, this bare-bones retelling or summary is not indicative of a story or genre's quality. There are equally 'thin' genres where a retelling serves little justice to the original text. 'Tom Cruise accomplishes a mission believed to be impossible'. 'James Bond does his job'. A story needs a conflict or a problem, and in the romance genre, this problem is more likely to be internal rather than external. The driving force of a romance narrative is emotions, like longing and yearning. In her 2003 book *A Natural History of the Romance Novel,* English professor Pamela Regis describes the plot of a romance as 'desire deferred'. Regis describes the plot device of 'the barrier', which is anything that 'keeps the union of heroine and hero from taking place' (2003). The romance genre, like all genres, has a narrative structure around a conflict, but the conflict is more likely to be a character flaw than an external force. The barrier is what the couple must overcome to be with each other. It can be external forces, like Romeo and Juliet's families, geographical distance etc, but it is equally common that the issues are internal. For Elizabeth and Darcy, it is their pride and prejudice. For Jane Eyre and Mr. Rochester, it is polygamy, and for Edward and Bella, it is vampirism. The struggle to break this barrier is the narrative tension of a romance. The barrier, or the ruse (Wynn 2024, 00:26:00), is the creator of tension, as desire is derived from lack, a longing for what you do not have. Says Wynn: 'The narrative is sustained by desire, and desire is sustained by separation' (Wynn 2024, 00:26:29).

3.4.1. Escapism and Danger

One of the main reasons why *Twilight* was criticised was because it was seen as dangerous to combine romance and violence. A fear prevailed that this would inspire young, impressionable girls to fantasise and romanticise a violent or abusive relationship. In 1973, amid the sexual revolution, American author Nancy Friday published a book titled *My Secret Garden: Women's Sexual Fantasies.* Friday's book was an anthology, a series of responses collected from women who had answered Friday's open call in a newspaper ad. The ad read 'FEMALE SEXUAL FANTASIES wanted by a serious female researcher. Anonymity guaranteed.' (Friday 1973). Reflecting on the collection and its findings, Friday concluded that 'the single greatest theme that emerged was that of 'weak' women being sexually dominated, 'forced' by male strength to do this deliciously awful thing' (Friday 1973). The ravishment and power imbalance between genders seems to repeatedly prove to be a very common and appealing fantasy for women. Wish fulfilment is an essential part of the romance

genre. It is, however, not necessarily literal. Threats and violence are effective for creating stakes and tension in a narrative, and to single this out as something people dream of seems unlikely. I personally do not think (all) men dream of starving or dying in trenches just because they enjoy war films or have violent tendencies because they enjoy action and superhero films with long fight sequences. Similarly, having sexual fantasies or enjoying romance stories that explore transgressive or dangerous scenarios and themes is not an indicator that women harbour secret wishes to be violated. Rather, Friday suggests this stems from how women are socialized, and taught to feel shameful of their own sexual desires. To be active rather than passive in the pursuit of passion might lead to scrutiny and negative reactions, and this internalized self-image is so ingrained we might feel protective of it, even in fantasy. The appeal of ravishment, then, is also the removal of blame, because it removes the choice.

> Ravishment is a *deus ex machina* we roll in to catapult us past a lifetime of women's rules against sex… The women whom I have interviewed don't really want to be hurt or humiliated. His male presence, that effective battering ram, neatly 'makes' her relax sufficiently to enjoy… and then allows her to return to earth, her Nice Girl, Good Daughter self intact. (Friday 1973)

Another aspect of *Twilight* that was mocked and criticised and can be traced back to the romance genre is Edward and the Cullen's wealth. Online, memes and tweets were joking that Edward would not be seen as a romantic hero but rather a creepy stalker if he did everything he does in the film, but lived in a trailer park rather than a designer villa. Wealth is another common trope of the romantic hero, as we see the prevalence of the aristocracy in classical romance literature. Because of women's position in society throughout history, there is a power imbalance where they have been dependent on men for financial security. The tropes of the romance genre set by writers like Jane Austen and Emily Brontë did not exclude attraction to men who were not wealthy, but the fact of the day was that a story of a woman marrying a poor man would not be received by a female audience as a romance, but as a tragedy. This trope has prevailed as shorthand for power and security, and much like the ravishment fantasy, it does not necessitate any real-life implication for the audience. Just like dreaming of ravishment does not equate to a real wish for abuse, swooning over a wealthy fictional character does not mean women are not ambitious, career-oriented or desire financial independence and wealth. Money, says Wynn, is an efficient symbol of worth in fiction (2024, 01:11:31).

3.4.2. Melodrama

A close relative of the romance genre is the melodrama, which can be equally hard to pinpoint. Melodramas, as defined by Friedman et al. in *An Introduction to Film Genres* (2014), were associated with sentimentality and femininity. These links account for a prevailing disdain from scholars and critics (2014, 81). Says Friedman et al. 'at their best, melodramas strive for the sublime (in the sense that the Romantic poets and painters used the word, as connecter to the highest realms of human feelings or exaltation), and when they succeed, they provide an unparalleled experience of emotional plentitude' (2014, 81). This successful use is not unique to the melodrama, as indeed all genres have examples of less successful, formulaic and boring films, and more successful, creative and effective films.

Indeed, many classic romances like *The Notebook, the Bodyguard, Titanic* and *Casablanca* to name a few can be labelled as both romances and tear-jerkers. Is the goal of film and art not to evoke emotion? Do audiences who use melodrama derogatorily prefer the enlightening and preaching literature of Samuel Richardson? Is *Pamela* a more noble piece of work than *Pride and Prejudice?* Romance is associated with strong emotions in all its subgenres. The melodrama aims to make us cry, the romantic comedy wants to make us laugh, and period romances make us feel remorse for being born at the wrong time.

History repeats itself, and as discussed in the chapter on the gothic, once art focuses too heavily on emotions and relationships, it is demoted to being 'for women'. Carrying on traditions from the stage where melodrama originated, all film genres in early cinema were considered melodramas. Silent films were described in trade journals as 'western melodramas', 'crime melodramas', 'war melodramas', or, perhaps a tautology to modern ears, 'romance-melodramas' (Friedman et al. 2014, 84). As genres developed, the melodrama label was dropped, and as 'wester', 'gangster', and later 'horror' we recognized genres, and what was 'left' were adaptations from literature and stage, with female leads. These films were referred to as 'women's films' in the studio system, designed to lure female audiences in (Friedman et al. 2014, 85). Friedman et al. suggest melodrama should be recognized as a genre, despite its fluid history. Says Friedman et al. 'melodrama (…) remains preferable to alternative designations such as 'women's films', 'tearjerkers', and 'weeping', all of which are too narrow and belittling, or 'dramas' or 'romances', which are too broad, and fail to capture the films' emotional tenor.

4. BITTEN AND SMITTEN

It is impossible to argue for the appeal of *Twilight* without discussing its characters. Try as I may to speak of the filmmaking, unique visuals, and engaging storytelling, the undeniable popularity of this film and later franchise relied heavily on the appeal of the characters, and how the audience engaged with them. To understand the appeal of characters in fiction, I rely on the work of cognitive film scholar Murray Smith, who has been a pioneer in the field since the 1990s.

4.1. Character Engagement

To better understand the different ways in which a spectator engages with characters, Smith developed the structure of sympathy. This aims to specify and distinguish terms which conversationally all exist under the umbrella of 'identification' (Smith 2022, 75). Smith presents three levels of imaginative engagement with characters; recognition, alignment, and allegiance.

'Recognition describes the spectator's construction of character: the perception of a set of textual elements, in film typically cohering around the image of the body, as an individuated and continuous human agent' (Smith 2022, 82). Smith underlines that our opinions and ideas about a character, as we recognize them analogously to people in the real world, can change during a narrative as new information is revealed. Characters, like human beings, are complex and can harbour conflicting beliefs. Learning this, in both fiction and real life, is a crucial lesson, and a character that is complex and layered is often considered to be better-written and engaging. One of the most common critiques of films is finding characters to be 'flat' or 'one dimensional', meaning they do not reveal new qualities or beliefs during the narrative. It is important then to note that Smith says our opinions and interpretation of a character's traits and morals can change throughout a narrative, and that 'we may respond differently to the same character at different points in the film' (Smith 2022, 92).

'Alignment describes the process by which spectators are placed in relation to characters in terms of access to their actions, and to what they know and feel' (Smith 2022, 82). The narrative can feed story information to the spectator through the lens of a particular character, placing us closer to their position in the overall story. Smith further divides alignment into two interlocking functions called spatio-temporal attachment and subjective access (Smith 2022, 83). The first concerns how the narration is restricted to the actions of a single character, or if it moves more freely on the 'spatio-temporal paths' of two or more characters. The latter term concerns the degree of access we

have to the subjectivity of characters. These are the two factors in the structure of alignment, which is the systematic regulation of narrative knowledge among the characters and the audience (Smith 2022, 83).

'Allegiance pertains to the moral evaluation of characters by the spectator. Here we are perhaps closest to what is meant by 'identification' in everyday usage, where we talk of 'identifying with' both persons and characters based on a wide range of factors, such as attitudes related to class, nationality, age, ethnicity, and gender' (Smith 2022, 83). Allegiance, says Smith, is also dependent on the audience trusting that they have reliable access to the character's state of mind, to understand the character's actions, and morally evaluate the character based on this (2022, 84).

Smith's theories of character engagement might help shed some light on the hypothesis that one of *Twilight's* main appeals is its characters. In order to understand the characters, and the film overall, Smith will here be applied to a few key scenes. I believe these are both the most memorable, and representative of the developing narrative in *Twilight* and the arc of its characters.

4.2. 'Say it. Out loud'

After a series of unexplainable incidents and clues, and a riveting research montage, Bella has concluded the impossible; the boy in biology she has a crush on, must be a vampire. She arrives at school, locks eyes with him in the car park, and they silently walk away from the school, into the foggy woods. The ensuing confrontation is perhaps the most parodied and recognizable scene from both this film and the *Twilight* Saga overall. Facing the same direction, he lurks behind her, as she refuses to make eye contact (Fig. 4.1.). While she lists her arguments, he slowly approaches her from behind, hunched like a very still animal. Bella lists her findings, stating facts about Edward as if showing her workings in an impossible equation. In addition to being 'impossibly fast and strong' and a list of other traits she has observed, Edward offered some information freely the night before. Over dinner, he admitted to being able to read minds. He further explains that one of the reasons he finds Bella fascinating and attractive is because her mind is the only one he cannot read, making her a mystery. After listing her accusations, and Edward admitting that he has been seventeen for 'a while', the altering of Bella's perception and sense of reality is so severe that a Dutch angle simply is not crazy enough. The camera does a Michael Bay 360° spin around them, as Bella's impossible hypothesis might prove correct, and her entire worldview is altered. This impossible realization is, however, not enough to change her feelings towards him, stating that despite his bloodlust, she

knows he will not hurt her. After this, perhaps in a state of panic and desperation, Edward seems eager to scare Bella away. After hints, warnings and gaslighting, the bat is finally out of the coffin, and he can be honest. He grabs her with his superhuman strength and runs with superhuman speed to get high above the seemingly permanent Forks fog. As they reach a clearing with sunlight, he drops her on the ground and continues to walk into direct sunlight.

Figure 4.1. Bella confronts Edward about his potential vampire status. (Screenshot from *Twilight)*

Edward has an open shirt, and the skin on his face and torso sparkles when exposed to the sunlight. Bellas's response is mesmerized awe, as she compares his skin to diamonds, and calls him beautiful. His already pained face reaches new contortions of despair. As he desperately tries to scare her, demonstrating his strength and speed, she doubles down on her trust in him. No display of strength and speed scares Bella, or indeed, us. Throughout this confrontation, Edward repeatedly moves away, perches on branches and creates distance between them. When Bella contradicts him, she moves in closer, pressing for an answer. When he finally admits his love for her as well, the film decides it is time to both show and tell us that the power dynamic is unbalanced and potentially predatory. Edward, having surrendered to this new relationship admits 'and so the lion fell in love with the lamb'. Bella replies 'what a stupid lamb', and Edward concludes the confrontation with 'what a sick, masochistic lion'. If this dramatic and perhaps flowery line is the main inspiration for EL James' *Twilight* fan fiction in which Edward is a businessman who loves BDSM, is unclear.

This scene is a shift in the narrative and starts tying up some impossible strings. What we as an audience know and think we know leading up to this point is revealed, changing and specifying

the character's alignment. Alignment, as Smith explains, describes how a story feeds the audience information for them to understand the character's actions, knowledge and feelings (2022, 82). To build tension and suspense in a narrative, the information available to the different characters, and indeed to the audience, is fed very strategically. A story's tension depends on whether we, the audience, have access to more or less information than the characters. Revealing new information about a character late in the narrative, if done well, will surprise the audience and feel like a clever twist. This is probably why Smith uses Hitchcock films, detective narratives and horror to explain alignment.

The two functions relevant for analysing alignment, says Smith, are spatio-temporal attachment and subjective access (Smith 2022, 83). Spatio-temporal attachment is whether the information fed in narration restricts itself to the actions of a single character, or moves more freely between two or more characters. *Twilight* follows Bella almost exclusively. There are few scenes she is not in, and we follow her perspective, as well as hearing her thoughts in voice-over. The few exceptions are when the antagonistic vampires kill background characters, and herein lies the potential for a mystery. Subjective access concerns the degree of access we have to the subjectivity of characters (Smith 2022, 83). We know that Bella thinks about Edward almost obsessively, culminating in the aforementioned research montage. However, we are unsure if her obsession is a romantic crush or a suspicion of something monstrous. Her father is the local chief of police and investigates the murders committed by the nomadic vampires. The descriptions of these attacks and the following debate over who or what could have committed them are mirrored in the abilities Bella notices in Edward. If you went into this film not knowing it is a romance, the film prior to this scene could be read as a daughter trying to solve her father's murder investigation and bringing her classmate into the forest to accuse him of the recent, local crime wave.

The two factors of alignment control both the information available between characters, but also to the audience (Smith 2022, 83). Edward repeatedly tells Bella to forget him, stay away from him, and not to research any further. Although the audience knows which characters committed some of the murders, the behaviour of the Cullen family is suspicious enough that we might doubt Edward's character before this scene. In this confrontation, all the information is finally available to our exclusive Bella attachment, and she learns of Edward's mixed feelings. She, and we, also learn about a supernatural plane of existence, emphasised by the spinning camera.

Through her narration of her thoughts, we also have access to Bella's subjectivity. This produces what Smith calls filtering (2022, 141), where a continuous and exclusive attachment and

subjective transparency leads to pure alignment, where the audience is granted full access to what the character knows, thinks, feels and perceives (Smith 2022, 143). Smith further argues that such alignment is quite rare, and even evokes the detective genre as an example. Despite feeling like we are discovering clues and solving a mystery along with the detective, in order for crime narratives to remain suspenseful the audience usually knows more or less than the investigator. Moving on from the mystery thriller of my dreams, Smith generously offers a more compelling argument relevant to the film as is. Interestingly, rather than the detective genre, Smith suggests the type of film narrative that conforms to this pattern is the female gothic (2022, 143). Here, says Smith, we are aligned with female protagonists who are suspicious of their husbands and the potential danger they pose to their safety and lives. In such narratives, our alignment must be singular, as the suspense is derived from interpreting and guessing what the man's intentions might be. Is he an innocent victim of female paranoia, or an evil, scheming monster? Or both? If the inclusion of fog and literal vampires were not enough, the female alignment and filtering is another clue to the genre of *Twilight* being a modern female gothic.

A nod to more traditional gothic imagery might also lead to an implied information surplus. As her research montage into 'the cold ones' leads her to different vampire mythology, we see an image forming in Bella's mind. Images of her, in a black lace dress, reclined on a red velvet sofa. Approaching her, with a black, high-collared cape, is Edward, and he leans down towards her neck and later looks right at us with blood dripping from his mouth (Fig. 4.2.). This more established visualization of the vampire on film is a shorthand to understand what the solution might be. Bella has realized that Edward could be a vampire. However, evoking such imagery in the audience is also an implied information surplus that might ultimately be part of why some audiences found the film

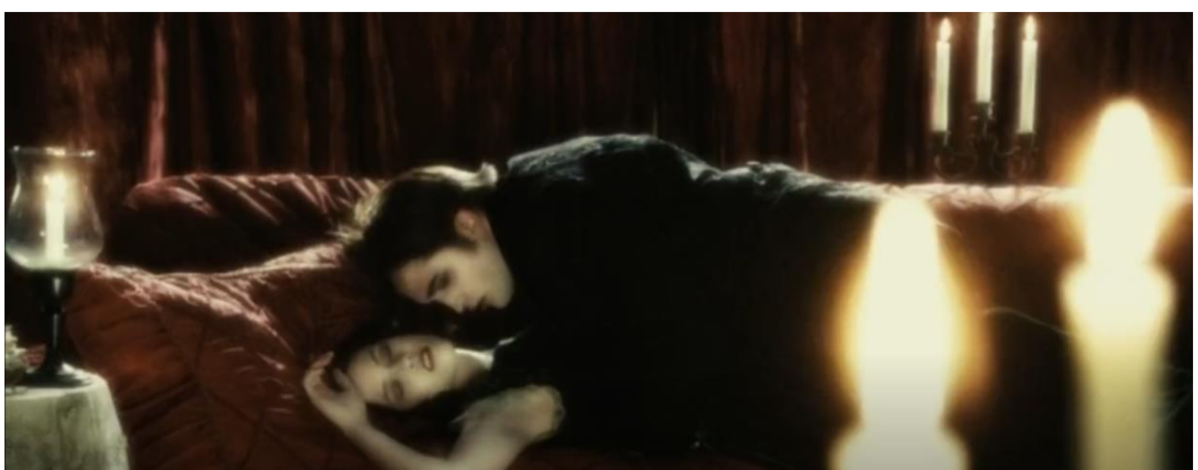

Figure 4.2. Bella's imagination runs to familiar tropes while researching vampires. (Screenshot from *Twilight)*

disappointing. In these two scenes, we are both told that Edward is a vampire, like the ones we have seen on film for decades, before immediately subverting our expectations by showing us that he can step into sunlight and wear practical jeans and jackets rather than dramatic capes. This assumed information surplus is what makes it possible for allegiance to surprise us with twists and subversions, as contradicting information might be revealed to the audience at a later stage. These two scenes in order might be a small example of the overall response to *Twilight,* as the expectation of what a vampire 'should' be might have ultimately disappointed some audiences. As a fan of horror films generally and/or vampire films specifically, you might expect the latest vampire phenomenon to fit with these genres neatly. However, the vampires of *Twilight* are not villainous, antagonistic or even that scary. Horror is a genre too broad, varied, and complex to neatly define, but one common expectation of horror films prevails; they should elicit fear. Similarly, or rather, identically, the vampire is too broad, varied and complex to neatly define, but one common expectation prevails; they should elicit fear. Edward and the Cullens are subversive in the vampire genre because they are presented as romantic and unthreatening leads rather than dangerous, seductive, antagonistic monsters. The film can be described as a female gothic, rather than a scary gothic, and this refocus on a female audience by a female director made some audiences disappointed in the de-fanged version of the vampire lore. This defanging, however, is a step towards anti-hero, and away from the villain the vampire is usually cast as.

The forest scene also furthers our allegiance, meaning our moral evaluation of the characters. Edward reveals that he is a vampire, but unlike most vampires, his family do not kill humans. Allegiance, says Smith, is also dependent on the audience trusting that they have reliable access to the character's state of mind, to understand the character's actions, and morally evaluate the character based on this (2022, 84). We learn that Edward can read minds, with one notable exception. He reveals that the reason he felt so overcome and erratic the first time he met Bella (in biology class) was both because her blood smelled exceptionally good, and that she is the only person he has met whose mind he cannot read. To Edward, she is a mystery, and in theory, the only person who can trick him or keep a secret, inner life from him. This is also a compelling argument for why the couple's power dynamic is not so skewed as it may appear. Being able to read someone's mind must be a dream scenario for a controlling and manipulating partner, but Edward finds Bella attractive, despite her being the person who he arguably is the least capable of controlling. He is forced to simply trust her. Like the audience, Edward has to trust that what he can read from her body language and facial expressions, paired with what she tells us, is in fact the truth.

4.3. 'You know everyone is staring?'

Some time after admitting their feelings for each other, the new couple arrives at school together, walking hand in hand through the parking lot. This public display, an official coming out, is met with stares from their fellow pupils. Aubrey et.al. suggests this scene captures a common teen fantasy of dating a celebrity, as Bella suddenly receives a lot of attention, despite being a normal 'nobody' (2010, 226). We establish early that everyone knows of the Cullens, making them effectively local celebrities, and Bella is thrust into the spotlight purely by association. Evoking celebrity imagery is probably also why Edward inexplicably wears sunglasses in this scene, despite just informing us that he cannot be seen in public in sunlight because of his revealing diamond skin.

The dialogue of the scene makes explicit what has been heavily implied in Pattinson's acting choices so far. Edward is a tortured soul, who not only fights internal battles to keep his instincts and bloodlust under control whenever he is around Bella. He also believes in damnation. The very existence of a vampire is transgressive and goes against God. After Bella points out that the whole school is staring at them as they walk together, Edward replies 'I'm breaking all the rules now anyway. Since I'm going to hell …' (Hardwicke, 2008). We cut to his vampire siblings all sitting in a car, staring at them. It is not explicit what rules Edward is breaking. Is there a code of conduct in the vampire community as a whole? Is it only his family's rules to not enter relationships with humans? Or perhaps just his own self-imposed moral? Ultimately, Edward cannot be called the antagonist of *Twilight*. Having a vampire in the hero rather than villain role of a romance also removes what Smith referred to as sympathy for the devil. Despite mourning the damnation of his soul, Edward ultimately does not come across as cruel, violent, or immoral. He is closer to an anti-hero, as his troubled past and initial coldness are later balanced by more favourable qualities. This means his initial role in the narrative is seemingly villainous, but the more we learn about his character, the more we understand his true nature. This character arch of travelling from initial antagonist to ultimate love interest is not common in horror fiction, but rather common in romance, furthering the argument that *Twilight* is the latter.

When discussing anti-heroes and morality, Smith emphasises the character arc. A character can change through the course of the narrative, and so might our allegiance. 'A character may not need to be anything like a moral paragon for us to root for them, but they must have the moral capacity and be morally redeemable' (Smith 2022, 253). The dynamics of a character's morality affect allegiance. To further explore the complexity of allegiance, Smith suggests there are different types of allegiance. In addition to global allegiance, where our moral evaluation of a character is both

favourable and sustained continuously throughout a film, we can experience partial and perverse allegiance. Partial allegiance describes when we feel sympathy towards some traits and actions in a character, but antipathetic to others (Smith 2022, 253). This is perhaps the most accurate description of our reaction to complex characters, like anti-heroes. A step further is perverse allegiance, where 'a narrative work seeks to turn around aspects of our normal evaluation, eliciting our sympathy for actions and attitudes which, on reflection, we realize we ought not to endorse' (Smith 2022, 254). Smith further stresses the prevailing appeal of morality, and states that in cases of immoral or amoral factors in characters we feel positive allegiance with, it is hard to find examples where our allegiance 'is not conjoined with and consolidated by more conventionally moral responses' (2022, 254). These traits are often loyalty like characters in mafia films feel towards their family, and beauty, which is often used in horror films. 'We do not root for or regret the waywardness of characters who are wholly beyond the pale of morality' (Smith 2022, 261). The combination of amoral traits like murder, selfishness and brooding, combined with moral traits like loyalty and beauty rings true in both Edward and the Byronic hero.

As discussed previously, Edward can be defined as a Byronic Hero. The very definition of this archetype is dubious in terms of morality and appeal. Here, Smith's suggestion that a character's function can change during a narrative is helpful. Similar to Mr Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, both Edward and Darcy start as stand-offish, cold and rude antagonistic characters, who change their opinion of the female protagonist, and ultimately fall in love with them. As discussed in the chapter on romance, the antagonist in a romance narrative is usually not a character, but rather a trait within a character to overcome, making them appear as the antagonist initially. Going from the main threat and antagonist to a morally grey antihero and love interest harkens back to Austen's domestication of the Byronic hero. Allowing the characters to keep the strength, wealth and aloof nature characteristic of the Byronic hero, but also show tenderness and care is one of the most prevalent tropes in romance fiction.

Allegiance with characters is a matter of moral evaluation. In other, more colloquial terms, this is a matter of sympathy and empathy. When judging a character's morality, and our emotional response to that character, Vaage suggests the feelings 'sympathy and empathy usually travel in pairs—the spectator typically empathizes mostly with those he has a positive (moral) evaluation of' (Vaage 2010, 166). When distinguishing alignment and allegiance, Smith argues a common mistake is seeing allegiance as a feature of alignment (2022, 186). Smith argues the distinction is important, and rooted in morals, as we can be aligned with a morally objectionable character if the narrative is built

around them, without feeling allegiance to them. Our alignment is not affected by our moral evaluation of a character, but our allegiance is. It is of course, says Smith, common for a narrative to elicit sympathy for the characters the audience is aligned with, but if this was a necessity, the very concept of anti-heroes would be non-existent (2022, 187). Anti-heroes are 'protagonists around whom the alignment structure of the film is built, but who remain unsympathetic' (Smith 2022, 187). Smith continues 'to become allied with a character, the spectator must evaluate the character as representing a morally desirable (or at least preferable) set of traits, in relation to other characters in the fiction' (2022, 187). In a sneaky and unassuming parenthesis, Smith makes an interesting point. Allegiance is apparently not just a matter of morality, but a matter of relativity. Does a character need to be morally good, or simply morally better than their peers? As Bella uncovers more information, both about Edward and the vampire community at large, she, and the aligned audience, learn that Edward is indeed a monster. However, as far as monsters go, he is as good as it gets. He might have a lust for human blood, but he refuses to drink it. He might read people's minds without consent, but he also cannot control this ability. And he might be 'the world's most dangerous predator', but he wants to protect you.

4.4. 'I've always wanted to try one thing'

One evening, as her father is working overtime to catch whatever monster is killing people around the community, Bella is visited by a monster of her own. She is sitting on her bed, talking to her mother on the phone, when suddenly, Edward is also in her bedroom. She asks how he got in, and he says 'the window'. He further elaborates that he has been doing this for 'the last couple of months' because he likes watching her sleep, and finds it fascinating. Edward then attempts something he admits to having never done before; kissing. He asks Bella to stay still, as he slowly leans in. The kiss is reserved and controlled before they both get carried away, as Bella refuses to 'stay still', and becomes more active in the seduction. Edward suddenly jumps off, flying across the room and says 'stop', to which a startled Bella apologizes. 'I can never lose control with you', a tortured Edward declares, but Bella begs him not to go. They then embark on a lovely, chaste montage of just chatting through the night in her bed, as she finally falls asleep with him next to her.

The line 'I like watching you sleep' is, perhaps understandably, often cited as proof that Edward is a creepy and controlling stalker. Phrases like 'losing control' also evoke associations to narratives of domestic abuse. But the intended message is not sinister, as Edward has moved from

villain monster to romantic interest at this point. Rather, he is meant to come off as protective, caring, and gallant. Edward represents traditional values from his own time, and while women do not need protection, the research of Friday and tropes from Austen do suggest that women find protection desirable and romantic. This scene also highlights another appeal I believe *Twilight* offers its young audience; The dual feeling of wanting to be desired, but not sexually pressured. Edward satisfies this fantasy, as we know there is nothing he wants more than to be with Bella, while simultaneously controlling himself to a point where she feels no pressure. Bella is in fact the one who initiates most of their physical exploration. This dual purpose of Edward's character as both dangerous and protective is explored in Wynn's video essay. Wynn builds on an argument by psychoanalyst Michael Bader, who believes desire and sexual fantasy, even more kinky and transgressive desires, all boil down to the core need for pleasure and safety. Wynn argues romance is a genre where situations are contrived to explore these fantasies and desires through plot necessity. Edward is not creepy, he is just protective. Also, he does not sleep at night anyway, so it is not as inconvenient for him as it would have been for a human romance. Bader and Wynn argue that fantasy and romance are tools to overcome guilt, shame, anxiety and other obstacles to pleasure. It is a genre where plot points are not necessarily logical or realistic, but a set of caveats and excuses that allow us to indulge in fantasies free of guilt. Is it so wrong to dream of a love interest who wants to protect you, even if you do not feel ready or mature enough for a sexual relationship?

Watching *Twilight* with a 2020s lens is particularly interesting when comparing it to the contemporary portrayal of teenagers. As mentioned by Driscoll, casting older actors to portray teenagers is nothing new. No one believes the T-birds in *Grease* (1978) are High School age. The casting is usually due to industry standards, as minors have much stricter labour laws and work shorter days, so from a production standpoint, you would favour an adult actor in your high school film or TV show, to make production more efficient with longer shoot days. A more jarring and uncomfortable development in teen media, however, is the prevalence of sexually explicit scenes. Using *Twilight* as a time stamp, prior shows and films of the 90s and 2000s like *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007), *Beverly Hills 90210* (1990-2000), *Dawson's Creek* (1998-2003), and *Clueless* (1995) had teen romance and sex, without depicting it onscreen. By comparison more recent examples like *Riverdale*(2017-2023), *Gossip Girl* (2007-2012 & 2021-2023), and perhaps most notoriously, *Euphoria* (2019-), not only depict sex scenes on-screen. They also set unrealistic and perhaps harmful aspirations where group sex, sex with adults, and drugs are depicted as unavoidable norms.

The dissonance of the audience is caused by the visuals. We are told that these characters are

literal children, yet what we see is attractive adults in their 20s, and our disgust is dampened, and perhaps even overshadowed by fascination or arousal. One example contemporary to *Twilight* is the show *Pretty Little Liars* (2010-2017), which was also adapted from a young adult book series. One of the teen girl characters has an on-and-off relationship with her English teacher throughout the show, which ultimately ends in the characters getting married. What should be considered as sexual exploitation of a minor and ultimately grooming is not perceived as objectionable because the couple does not look 'wrong'. We are told that the characters are 16 and 23, but the actors portraying them were 21 and 24 at the time, creating a much more acceptable romantic image in the audience's mind. The sexualization of underaged characters might be a result of budgeting and scheduling, but the result is still, if not harmful, at least unrealistic. To pretend that the chiselled, six-packed KJ Apa of *Riverdale* or Jacob Elordi of *Euphoria* are teenagers is as much an unrealistic fantasy as having a vampire in your biology class.

The current hyper-sexualization of teen characters, where an ensemble cast competes in partaking in the most transgressive and shocking activity presents a reality that is simply not true. Statistically, most teenagers are not sexually active, and are even less likely to have multiple partners or adult partners (CDC 2020). *Twiligh*t is a refreshing antidote to the current norm of teen media. The intimacy is awkward, fumbling, experimental, and very un-sexy, and the actors are cast age appropriately. I do find the somewhat chaste, inexperienced, and awkward romance of *Twilight* to be both more relatable and valuable to a teen audience.

Morality and moral psychology are not the only factors to consider when understanding character engagement. Additionally, Smith underlines the importance of emotion (2022, 266). Relevant here, is the research done on sympathy and empathy, which Smith has extrapolated to modes of imagining. Acentral imagining is an outside perspective, where we 'feel for' the characters, and is therefore linked to sympathy. We can for example see a character in peril and feel fearful for their faith, without feeling fear ourselves. Central imagining is less common, as it shifts our feelings from being 'for' a character, to being 'with' them. This level of empathy with a character's emotional state does however occur, but Smith argues it is used intermittently to encourage seeing the character's perspective and understanding their thoughts or emotions more clearly (2022, 267). However, recent developments in studying empathy propose the simulation theory, stating our ability to 'mindread' others by modelling our minds to the mental state we observe and feeling our way into their likely mindset. This recent development has gained further traction with the discovery of mirror neurons, which supposedly support our ability to simulate and empathize on a neural level

(Smith 2022, 268). Smith suggests this mirroring is not fixed, but shifts between parts of the narrative.

> Our basic stance towards characters is not an emphatic one in which we experience the fictional world consistently from their imagined perspectives; but through simulation (and related lower-level processes, like emotional contagion and affective mimicry, whereby we involuntarily 'catch' the affective states of others) we flip rapidly in and out of characters empathically, moving with imaginative agility through a variety of perspectives which are then aggregated and interrelated to produce the structure of sympathy. (Smith 2022, 269)

This is also a case of central imagining or empathy. While Smith suggests this is less common than acentral imagining, where we feel for a character but not necessarily what the character feels, I believe this scene is an example of the film's success. With close-ups, believable stuttered teen dialogue and a clumsy exploration of a new relationship, the audience, like Bella, falls for Edward. What was previously a cold, enigmatic classmate who seemed to dislike you for no reason is suddenly in your bedroom, confessing his love, and partaking in your first kiss. We do not feel for Bella, and her crush, but rather develop a crush on our own, perhaps explained by the simulation theory and recently discovered mirror neurons.

This crush, or character engagement explains one of, if not the main reason why *Twilight* became such a phenomenon. It is a successful romance that manages to place its audience in the protagonist's perspective, as both her and we develop a crush on this mysterious character. It might also explain why the film alienated most of its male audience. If the characters are not as attractive or alluring to you, most of the film's appeal is gone. More so than feel for Bella, the audience has to become her, and experience her strong, yearning feelings.

4.5. 'What if I'm not the hero? What if I'm the bad guy?'

What is important in Smith's structure of sympathy is that neither recognition, alignment nor allegiance involve replication of behaviour or thought by the spectator. We simply understand and evaluate the character based on the narrative information, and respond emotionally without replicating the character's emotions blindly (2022, 85). We watch characters behave, express and hint at inner emotions, and infer emotions and traits of the character without feeling or behaving the same way. This is one of many reasons why Smith suggests we drop the term 'identification' when describing and evaluating why we are moved or engaged by fictional characters. Identification implies a preconceived identity that is recognized, meaning we tend to identify with characters who

share our preexisting morals or opinions. From experience, we know this is not necessarily true, as films can challenge us, change our opinions, or even make us engage with characters whose morals and opinions are nothing like our own. We can engage with characters we do not identify with. We can even root for monsters.

Our engagement with fictional characters is not always as rational as the structure of sympathy might suggest. Our emotions and physical engagement are also triggered by visual cues, and this can alter our impression. The term mimicry explains how the body involuntarily and subconsciously can be triggered into mirroring what we observe. A character crying can lead to a lump in our throat, and a character smiling can make us smile without realizing it (Smith 2022, 98). This is, says Smith, not a voluntary act of imagining or simulation, but a reflexive experience of the emotion of another person triggered by facial and bodily cues. These simulations affect our emotions, like a reverse causality. An extreme example of how effective this is in human emotions is the research by neuroscientist Tanya L Chartrand. She found that an overuse of Botox can limit our ability to mimic the facial expression of a person we are talking with, which is an instinctive response in human interaction. This in turn makes us feel less for the person, as we cannot feel the intended emotions without mirroring their expression subconsciously (Tucker 2011). L Chartrand therefore suggests that Botox limits our empathy, and in turn how much our empathy and emotional state is altered by our physical, involuntary actions and facial expressions. The study went so far as to suggest the participants were not only suffering from less empathy than before the Botox, but some even struggled to identify what emotion they were observing in their conversation partner (Tucker 2011).

Mimicry can lead to conflicting emotions and interpretations of a character. As Smith explains, if we see a character who has been villainous and antagonistic throughout the narrative suddenly have a vulnerable and frightful facial expression in his final moments before an onscreen demise, delivered to the audience in close-up shots, the audience is more likely to feel conflicted. The structure of sympathy suggests we should find satisfaction and perhaps a level of schadenfreude in seeing a morally corrupt character get 'what they deserve', but the mimicry provoked by those close-ups runs against this feeling, and denies us the 'uncomplicated satisfaction' (Smith 2022, 105). Smith used Hitchcock's *Saboteur* (1942) as an example of this, as the antagonistic Fry (Norman Lloyd) is portrayed as exclusively unsympathetic and villainous, bar his final scene. Here, he dangles from the Statue of liberty, and his final moments show close-ups of his frightened face before he falls to his death. Hitchcock allegedly regretted the effect these close-ups had on the

audience, and in subsequent films, we see antagonistic characters being murdered off-screen to avoid mimicry, sympathy and conflicting emotions. This might also be why some later scenes of *Twilight* are framed the way they are.

After being kidnapped and isolated by the antagonistic vampire James, Bella is rescued by Edward and the Cullen family. We are told repeatedly that the Cullens are 'the nice vampires', morally superior to other monsters as they refuse to kill humans or drink their blood. They are non-violent and harmless (unless you are a woodland creature). The other vampires show little regard for human life, and we see them mercilessly and cruelly murder humans throughout the film, whereas the Cullens go to great lengths to fit into, appreciate and protect the human communities in which they settle. However, in this showdown the Cullens decide to murder James, a fellow vampire, to protect Bella. Seeing the fear and dread on a vampire's face would trigger mimicry, as vampires are visually human and capable of triggering the same responses a human character would. Especially *Twilight* vampires, who despite pale skin and the occasional sparkle are designed much less monstrously than vampires of Buffy or Dracula. Even if we did manage intellectually, rather than visually, to separate vampires from humans, *Twilight* spends nearly two hours prior to this scene teaching its audience that vampires actually are capable of human emotion and are worthy of sympathy. In a post-Saboteur Hitchcockian movie, James the evil vampire is violently beheaded, torn limb from limb and set on fire in a hazy, out-of-focus background activity while Edward saving Bella's life is foregrounded in the shot. This not only avoids any mimicry, but quickly refocuses the audience away from any violence performed by the Cullens, and restates that their most important qualities are their ability to love and save lives.

Edward tells Bella and the audience that he is a monster, capable of great violence, and alludes to a murderous past, without ever showing us. There are no scenes where Edward displays physical strength or threatening behaviour beyond a scowl and growl as he glares at perceived threats, and uproots and throws a tree as a handy demonstration of his strength.. Had we seen young vampire Edward in the 1920s murdering innocent people to drink their blood, we might have felt this disdain he feels for himself. In the scenes in which the antagonist vampires murder humans, the result is undivided disdain for the vampires and sadness and sympathy for the victims.

Another phenomenon that will complicate our judgement of a character is what Smith calls 'alloying', where a cluster of undesirable traits are linked with more desirable ones, leading the audience to judge the character less severely (2022, 207). This is a more nuanced way to portray characters than just 'good' or 'bad', conjuring more complex feelings in the spectator. Yes, Edward is

a bit creepy for watching Bella while she sleeps and gaslighting her into doubting her own recollections of the accident in the car park, but he also plays the piano and protects her from more creepy and more predatory men (and vampires). He is also presented as a far superior alternative. The boys in Bella's High School are positively giddy with excitement as a new girl moves to town, but behave age appropriately. When the age in question is 17, said behaviour is usually annoying. In a post *Euphoria* and *Riverdale* mediascape, this portrayal of 17-year-olds is refreshingly realistic, as they both look like children and act in a silly way. Their Joie de vivre and naïve optimism are still alien to the quiet and awkward Bella, but her outsider status is also a point of her character. When her classmate finds a worm in the compost during a field trip and shows it off on a stick, this is of course obnoxious and childish, but in no way untypical for his age. Contrasted with a Byronic, cryptic cryptid, Edward too serves a contrast to normal teen behaviour, and the match seems perfect.

The structure of sympathy presented by Smith has a number of variables. As mentioned, mimicry and recognition can affect our opinion of what we might logically judge to be an amoral character based on our personal beliefs. Smith also suggests we have quick reactions to a character, and might instinctively form opinions before having had the chance to observe and reflect on their actions and morals. When the very attractive Marlon Brando was cast and made up to be more attractive as Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), before committing all sorts of morally objectionable acts like gambling, domestic abuse, and ultimately rape, the casting appears to be a deliberate ploy to elicit conflicting opinions and reactions from the audience. We form a favourable opinion when we first see him, subconsciously and instinctively. We, like the characters in the story, are torn between knowing how badly this character behaves, and his charm and attractiveness. Tennessee Williams said of Brando when casting him for the original stage version of the play "'He was just about the best-looking young man I've ever seen' (BBC 2014). Brando was additionally put on a strict workout regime to build a muscular physique, and his costume T-shirts were washed and sown to look as tight as possible on his body (Unpeeled 2023). The casting and styling is then deliberate and an effective technique by the filmmakers to stir and engage an audience into ambivalence and moral tension. But sometimes we don't change our opinion even after the character behaves badly. Sometimes, says Smith, we root for the bad guy. This engagement is what Smith calls 'amoral fascination with a character' (2022, 261).

Our response, says Smith, is a 'quick and dirty' moral reaction, rather than a considered moral judgement (2022, 260). Because the judgement is quick, it is also affected subconsciously and

instinctively by factors outside of a character's morals. The halo effect suggests humans are more likely to attribute favourable qualities to people we already like something about, even if there is no proof or experience of such qualities. This is why we often assume attractive people are also friendly and good, even if we have not talked to them (Perera 2023). Therefore, says Smith, our sympathies can be captured by the non-moral 'virtues' of a character as well (2022, 260). This, in turn, is the reason why we sometimes root for the bad guy. Perhaps it can also explain the seemingly paradoxical feelings towards vampires that have been prevalent through both literature and film. Why is the creature written as a tool for horror films and gothic literature so appealing? The chapter on vampires points to this paradox being metaphorical and symbolic, but there is more at play once the monster moves from the page to the big screen.

Ironically, as the vampire is a transgressive and blasphemous being, the halo effect is at play in the vampire film. Bela Lugosi, Brad Pitt, Tom Cruise, and Gary Oldman were all heartthrobs playing vampires, and like Marlon Brando's character in *Streetcar*, our attraction is very much 'quick and dirty'. Morality, says Smith, is the lifeblood of dramatic fiction. What then of the dramaturgy of bloodsuckers? And is it not precisely this presence of morality that has made the *Twilight* vampires so controversial? Bela Lugosi and Gary Oldman's Dracula, Tom Cruice's Lestat and Brad Pitt's Lois are more traditional embodiments of the flamboyant aristocrat vampire archetype and are deemed alluring and interesting despite their blood-sucking and murderous rampages. In an endeavour to perhaps make the vampires more appealing by explicitly describing their moral quandaries and depicting their refusal to kill humans, *Twilight* damaged itself, and strayed too far from film vampires.

During a lecture on English literature I once attended, the lecturer asked us 'why is Satan so sexy?'. He was referring to that week's text, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Smith, too, uses *Paradise Lost's* Lucifer as an example of the alluring bad guy, pointing to him getting all 'the best lines' in the poem (2022, 261). Despite being raised atheist, I am aware that there are very few redeemable qualities in Satan.

There is an important distinction made by Smith between an anti-hero and villain. By virtue of being the hero of a story, even morally corrupt anti-heroes are more complex and dynamic and bear traces of an arc. We usually learn why they are the way they are. The immoral actions of a character, says Smith, can be a source of sympathy (2022, 262). Villains, on the other hand, are a more complex issue regarding sympathy. Research cited by Smith proves a correlation between certain responses to villainous characters, and personality traits in the spectator. Interestingly, but

perhaps not surprisingly, one group of spectators respond positively to villains: viewers possessing 'dark traits', like psychopathy, narcissism and Machiavellianism (2022, 263). Even more interestingly, yet even less surprisingly, these traits are 'most commonly, if not exclusively, found in young men' (Smith 2022, 263).

Reading against the film's intentions has been discussed since Roland Barthes declared the author's death in 1967. To quote Smith; 'storytellers tell their stories in the way that they do in order to elicit certain responses, but spectators engage with these stories with their own agendas' (Smith 2022, 263). As narcissistic young men might enjoy the havoc raised by villains, I also believe there is a case for misguided or misjudged atempts from filmmakers at evoking empathy. As a woman, I have suffered through many films that clearly expected me to root for male heroes whom I found utterly despicable. If you have watched 1988's *Cocktail* (Roger Donaldson) recently, you hopefully agree that Tom Cruise's undeniable movie star smile is the only argument for his character being charming, or even engaging. The plot depicts a protagonist who lies, cheats, and schemes, all while expecting us to root for Cruise, and cheer when he finally gets the girl. The research on sympathizing with 'the devil' suggests character engagement is gendered, which further can explain the apparent gender divide in *Twilight*'s popularity. A male audience would perhaps have preferred vampires that fit with the more traditional lore present in Coppola's Dracula, but not just because some men are psychopaths and/or vampire experts. Making Edward and his vampire family the villainous antagonists would make *Twilight* a more traditional horror film, and not the genre rebel it currently is. Despite being a film with vampires and gothic tropes, the film is, arguably, a romance, and the vampires being moved from villain to anti-heroes is a necessity for Edward to 'get the girl', a courtesy never offered to Dracula.

4.6. Fiction, Escapism & Wish fulfilment

Summarizing a long, western history of ideas around fiction and engagement, Smith points to the perspectives of Brecht and Aristotle, who echo the concern about the escapist nature of fiction. In the Brechtian tradition, says Smith, emotional and empathic responses to fiction lock us into one character's perspective, which in turn blocks our interrogating relationship with the remaining characters, and the narrative as a whole (2022, 54). The Aristotelian tradition is also concerned with the empathic engagement of fiction, stating that emotive narratives 'diverts our critical attention away from the world, by providing a safe, protected sphere in which we can experience sorrow, anger, outrage – and congratulate ourselves on our sensitivity – without having to act on these

emotions (Smith 2022, 54). This protected sphere of fiction where one can 'practice' emotional responses has recently been deemed a rather valuable aspect of fiction.

Conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, the research of Scrivner et al. considered whether engagement with relevant fiction, such as horror or pandemic film, 'was associated with greater preparedness for and psychological resilience toward the pandemic' (Scrivner et al. 2020). Engaging with fiction is compared to play, as both are a safe space to explore and imagine hypothetical situations one might face later in life. As young animals engage in rough-and-tumble play to learn how to fight, humans engage in fiction to gather both emotional and psychological skills for hypothetical and analogous situations (Scrivner et al. 2020). Scrivner et al. also argue that simulation is an efficient way of learning that saves time, and expenses, and is of course a safer option when dealing with catastrophes and dangerous situations (2020). The value of fiction is therefore, unlike the Aristotelian perspective suggests, that practising and experiencing emotional responses to fictitious narratives still prepares the audience and broadens our emotional horizon. Pointing to the increased popularity of the 10-year-old film *Contagion* during the pandemic, it seems like audiences are drawn to relevant and pressing topics and issues. Whether this is a conscious or subconscious yearning for knowledge and understanding, or a matter of catharsis as we see characters endure and possibly survive a situation similar to one we are currently struggling with is open to debate.

In an extreme addition to this debate, documentarian Dan Olson posted a video to his YouTube channel 'Folding Ideas' as early as March 31st, 2020 called *I Can't Stop Watching Contagion*. In the video he confessed to having watched the film *Contagion* (2011) more than fifteen times since the lockdown started, even restarting and seeing it multiple times in one day. He was not alone, citing statistics from Netflix where the film was the second most popular film at the time in Canada. 'The movie is an incredibly tense hundred minutes of society pushed to its breaking points, not as a fantastical disintegration into wastelands of leather-clad murder gangs or a zombie apocalypse, but one rooted in the historical reality of epidemics. And I can't stop watching it' (Olson 2020, 02:30).

Olson evokes the same hypothesis proven by Scrivner et al., stating one purpose of fiction is that it allows us a space to practice intense emotions and situations without exposing ourselves to the complexities or harms involved in real life. Olson goes one step further, evoking more genres than just horror and pandemic films, like women enjoying *50 Shades of Grey* or degrading porn as a fantasy, without necessarily wanting to experience sexual violence in real life (Olson 2020, 08:40). This extension is interesting, as it offers two explanations for *Twilight* as a case. Firstly, it suggests

that horror and disaster are not the only genres relevant when discussing mental and emotional practice. Like the example of *50 Shades of Grey, Twilight* is a romance film, where the audience can explore and learn more about their desires, wishes, and sexualities, as proposed by Nancy Friday regarding romance literature in the 70s. *Twilight* might also offer what Olson describes.
'Rather than practising intense emotional states before they happen, this instinct of exposing ourselves to what we're already experiencing, amplifying existing emotional states, that it works as a form of emotional inoculation. I am scared and anxious and uncertain, and so I will make myself more scared and more anxious and more uncertain because it's still fiction, it's still safe, it still has an end' (Olson 2020, 09:08). The emotional, hormonal, and social journey that is growing up is not unique or extraordinary. And yet, finding solace and guidance in art and media is a staple of youth, as it offers a safe space to shape, discover, and explore your burgeoning personality. Rather than preparing and practising, as Scrivner's research suggests, watching a film in your teens about teens overcoming and experiencing hardship can be cathartic.

Rikke Schubart's book *Mastering Fear: Women, Emotions, and Contemporary Horror* (2018) further explores the idea of simulation and preparation from a gendered perspective. We can feel real fear when watching a horror film, but crucially, unlike the characters who might die in the film, the audience survives. Our lives are not at stake when feeling fearful, because we are playing with fear (Schubart 2018, 15). Schubart too likens watching challenging films to explore our emotions to animals playing fighting; developing and practising skills in a safe space, albeit more complex. This exploration can be extrapolated to films that are less challenging, but engaging all the same. The emotional exploration discovered and practiced in the safety of a girl's bedroom can be favourable, especially in a time when one feels vulnerable and in constant fear of embarrassment, namely teen and young adulthood.

Scrivner et al. suggest audiences who deliberately seek out and engage with unpleasant themes and watch scary films, have a degree of morbid curiosity (2020). People with the trait of morbid curiosity sought out more pandemic-themed media early in lockdown, and it stands to reason that people with morbid curiosity traits have consumed and therefore gathered more relevant information and coping strategies for dangerous situations (Scrivner et al. 2020). As well as gathering knowledge of hypothetical situations and survival skills, exploring horror films can also help audiences familiarize themselves with and understand their own emotions and reactions. Eliciting fear in safe settings says Scrivner et al., horror films present an 'opportunity for audiences to hone their emotion regulation skills' (2020), which in turn can increase psychological resilience (Mestre et

al. 2017).

Smith states one motivation for engaging with fiction is to imagine oneself as more powerful. Imagining to be a character has a function (Smith 2022, 93). This is usually referred to as escapism, with negative connotations. The experience, which is usually trivialized or demonized, is described by Smith as a 'harmless distraction from one's everyday worries and limitations, or an illusory respite from oppressed existence which in reality only serves to perpetuate it' (Smith 2022, 93). Escapism and wish fulfilment are also cited as the main appeal of the romance genre, and bad objects, discussed in previous chapters. In these situations, it is also meant as an insult. However, both Smith and more recent work by Schubart suggest that engaging with fiction in an escapist way where one uses central imagining to both be the character or be oneself in the character's position can expand our experiential repertoire in a non-trivial and harmless way (Smith 2022, 93). Smith elaborates 'observing the behaviour of a person in a certain situation about which we have limited knowledge – as is often the case with a character in fiction – we imaginatively project ourselves into their situation, and hypothesize as to their emotions' (Smith 2022, 96). This emotional simulation can be very educational in developing a sense of personality. It is therefore interesting to analyse the effects of media on a young audience, as they are believed to be impressionable and oft-cited as the motivation for censoring fiction with characters who act as bad role models, fearing young people will emulate bad behaviour performed by characters they idolize. Smith suggests that this type of media should be harmless, both because there is a difference between being engaged with, and copying a character's behaviour, opinions, and morals, and because even when we do imagine ourselves as different, potentially questionable characters, it can be seen as a learning experience.

The prevalence and popularity of 'bad' films, albeit morally objectionable or considered of lower quality points to an appreciation and use for such things. Robert B. Heilman describes 'the great perennial human activity of escape' as a fixture of human existence since the dawn of man (1975, 439-440). Most prevalent in early definitions, escape is a physical and practical thing, as humanity has avoided a myriad of threats like war, capture, famine, disease, etc. The term later developed offering a parallel, metaphorical meaning, and Heilman cites examples of books as early as the 1920s entitled *The Escape from the Primitive* (1926), *Escape from Fear* (1940), and *Escape from Authority* (1961) (1975, 440). This change in both literature and overall culture was reflected in changes to the dictionaries, which up to this point had only included the physical act of avoiding threats and danger as the definition of escape. The 1964 revised edition of Chamber's *Etymological Dictionary* included six definitions of the word, one being 'flight from reality' (Heilman 1975, 442). In

the following years, this became a well-established understanding of the word, as the Oxford English Dictionary of 1972 and the Webster's *New Collegiate* of 1973 included the definitions' the figurative sense of distraction from, avoidance of, or retreat from the realities of life' and 'distraction or relief from routine or reality'' respectively (Heilman 1975, 442).

One way of escaping 'the realities of life' is through art and fiction. While the word 'escape' gained a metaphorical meaning, the word 'escapism' also gained popularity, after first entering dictionaries in the late 1930s (Heilman 1975, 444). The use of the term was originally unambiguously hostile, as a way of denigrating a piece of art the writer found objectionable. Through the 1940s and 50s, the word became a fixture of literary criticism and was equated to 'wish fulfilment' (Heilman 1975, 445). But why would 'wish fulfilment' and 'escapism' be considered derogatory insults? Is it not the point of fiction, art and storytelling to transport an audience mentally? Heilman suggests this bias can be traced back to the original American colonies, as there was a Puritan attack on poetry, literature and drama exported from England to America (1975, 447). The belief of the time, expressed in Stephen Gosson's *School of Abuse* (1579), was that all fiction was 'untrue in fact and immoral in effect' (Heilman 1975, 447). In 1595, however, Sir Philip Sidney published *An Apologie for Poetry,* where he argued the value of fiction is to mould men by providing 'repulsive examples of vice, and attractive examples of virtue, in action' (Heilman 1975, 448).

In a modern context, escapism has become associated with commercialism and often applies to 'bad objects' of the aesthetic rather than moral criteria. Escapism can now be defined as the 'self-selected separation of oneself from one's immediate reality – through the consumption of media resources, or texts, such as television, music, games and movies' (Jones et.al 2018).

In 2010, Dr. Carlilse Cullen, Edward's adoptive father and patriarch of the Cullen vampire family, was named the wealthiest fictional character by Forbes on their 'The Forbes Fictional 15' (Noer & Ewalt 2010). The wealth of the Cullen family, estimated to be an impressive $34.1 billion in Carlile's name alone, is a key part of the character's depiction in the film. Designer clothing, expensive and multiple cars, and an impressive modern family home offer a backdrop to the lifestyle this family enjoys, and could be offered if joined. This is, I believe, an essential part of the film's escapism and wish fulfilment. Not only have you, an awkward teenage girl finally met a peer who is mature, sophisticated and well-mannered, but he is also wealthy beyond comprehension.

Wealth and luxury, and the security and freedom it offers, is a common element of escapism. The prevalence of wealthy fictional characters proves the audience responds to and enjoys stories and characters from very different situations than your own. Even non-fiction characters like reality

television stars such as *The Real Housewives* of multiple metropolitan cities, *the Kardashians*, and dating shows in luxury hotels prove this enjoyment goes beyond fiction (although, as we know of reality television, not too far beyond).

As discussed in the romance chapter, wealth is a common trope in romance fiction, as many tropes stem from a time when women marrying into poverty would be seen as a tragedy by female readers. Additionally, there are examples of successful love stories involving impoverished or working class men, like *Titanic*, *Notting Hill* (1999), and the fever dream that is *Moonstruck* (1987).

Unlike characters in other teen films and television like *Gossip Girl* and *Clueless, Twilight's* Bella could not care less for fashion, designer clothing and luxury. There is little in the film that suggests her attraction to Edward is increased for material aspirations or wishes for a luxurious life. Rather, I believe we are meant to see Edward and the life he offers as aspirational because it is comfortable and safe. Bella has had a creative and free-spirited single mother and now lives with her quiet, awkward father who doubts his parenting ability. With her parents, Bella is used to being the mature one, self-sufficient, level-headed and rational. By contrast, Edward can offer a carefree existence where money is no issue. This 'rescue' from a boring life is also what Edward offers. Says Aubrey et.al. Edward saves every-girl Bella from a life of 'domestic chores, distant relationships, and unsatisfying schoolwork' (Aubrey et al. 2010, 226).

This take on a vampire's wealth is another break from the film monster's established tropes. Because of aristocratic lineage, accumulated wealth or corrupt morals regarding other people's property (and, indeed, murder), vampires are usually depicted as wealthy. However, no one is eager to live at Dracula's, even if it is a castle. No one is envious of Dracula's wardrobe.

The escapism offered in *Twilight* is not materialistic or luxurious. The wish fulfilment is seeing a young female character who feels awkward and uncomfortable finally feel understood. Unlike most teen films where the make-over is so essential it has become a trope of the character, it is refreshing to see a film where the character, rather than change herself, finds a place to belong. Unlike Sandy in *Grease* or Tai in *Clueless*, Bella does not change anything about her appearance or personality by the end of the film. The wish fulfilment for the audience is not always 'someday I'll have a rich friend who tells me what to wear and what make-up to use, so boys will finally like me', but rather 'one day I might meet someone who likes me for who I am'. The latter, I would argue, is a better lesson for a young audience.

5. THE WEATHER IS LOOKING VERY 'HUA HUA HUA'

Last summer, a viral trend on social media spurred by the release of *Asteroid City* attempted to mimic the style of Wes Anderson's films. With vintage fonts and more vintage clothing, a sepia tint and a jaunty score from the *French Dispatch*, people attempted to show their lives from a specific perspective and communicate a particular feeling. The mood of a Wes Anderson film, or perhaps just the mood of a boiled down and simplified Wes Anderson meme became instantly recognizable. As the weather turned and autumn approached, a new filmmaker and indeed, a new mood went viral. As most people evidently remember sparkling vampires, Bella and Edward, and an endless supply of parody-worthy scenes, the mood of *Twilight* has an undeniable appeal. This mood is still relevant in 2024, and simply tinting your video blue and adding any song from the soundtrack will transport both you and your online followers to a rainy, gothic forest filled with monsters, romance and flannel.

5.1. Mood

In his writing on emotions and mood, cognitive film scholar Greg M. Smith defines mood as a 'preparatory state in which one is seeking an opportunity to express a particular emotion or emotion set' (1999, 113). Moods, says G. Smith, are expectancies awaiting a particular emotion, as we look for particular cues to trigger these emotions (1999, 113). The distinction between mood and emotions is a matter of duration and intensity. G. Smith cites research that points to emotions being more temporary than we might be aware of, as the duration of emotions is relatively brief. Unlike these short bursts of emotions, a mood is described as a 'low-level emotional state', which is less intense than emotions, but rather a tendency towards particular groups of emotions (G. Smith 1999, 113).

G. Smith suggests moods encourage us to 'revisit stimulus again and again, each time refreshing the emotional experience with a new burst of emotion. These surges of emotion in turn support the mood, making us more likely to continue to view the world emotionally' (1999, 114). This feedback loop of a mood priming certain emotions triggered by certain cues, which in turn strengthens the mood is the intended response to films. If you make a horror film, you want the audience to be in a fearful mood, which in turn makes them react more strongly with fear and dread to scary triggers and cues. Mood helps us have a coherent experience, as it points us towards relevant cues, and filters out the rest. The lasting memory is therefore more coherent. The approach for film analysis proposed by G. Smith is called the mood-cue approach and is a tool for identifying

the cinematic structures that appeal to the audience's emotions (1999, 115). As previously discussed, it is more sustainable to create a mood that lasts for the duration of a film, as it is difficult to continuously generate brief bursts of emotions. Jump scares in horror films come to mind as several bursts of fear build a fearful mood throughout the film. To summarize the approach in G. Smith's own words, 'mood encourages us to experience emotion, and experiencing emotions encourages us to continue in the present mood' (1999, 115). This is achieved through 'redundant cues', including 'facial expressions, narrative situation, music, lighting, and mise-en-scène' (G. Smith 1999, 116)

The appeal of *Twilight* beyond its characters is its mood, and considering recent online trends, mood seems to have moved up as the film's main quality. Hardwicks indie film background is evident in her close-ups and tight framing, trapping the teenagers in their newfound intimacy. The characteristic blue tint should feel cold and damp but is rather reminiscent of autumnal rain or Victorian, gothic fog, a backdrop harkening back to vintage ghost stories. The soundtrack contains songs from alternative rock, folk, and electronica, and branded the film as 'emo', with more alternative artists than were popular in the contemporary mainstream.

This dissertation deliberately focuses solely on the film *Twilight,* but a quick comparison to the film's sequels and the overall saga is a pressing issue once the director is discussed. When *Twilight* is referenced, parodied, memed or replicated in reels, it is the look of the first film we see. Hardwick created a film that launched a franchise and a global phenomenon, and also arguably affected the look and sound of teen media to come. The mood created by her authorship, expressed in the redundant cues, is demonstrably still remembered, revisited, and cherished. Nevertheless, and for reasons still unclear, she did not direct the following films. Vague explanations like tight schedules and demanding workloads were cited at the time (Tyler 2020), but it is hard to not feel a sense of misogyny prevalent in the film industry in these decisions. The subsequent four films were all directed by men. Most egregiously, David Slade, who directed the vampire film *30 Days of Night* (2007) said of *Twilight* in a radio interview when asked if he would see the film drunk '*Twilight* drunk? No, not even drunk? *Twilight* on acid? No, not even on acid. *Twilight* at gunpoint? Just shoot me.' (Billington 2009). Only 3 years later, he directed the third film of the saga, *Eclipse*. *New Moon* director Chris Weitz said on a 2021 podcast regarding him being asked to do the first sequel rather than Hardwicke, 'I think these days it would be quite unlikely that I would have been selected for the second movie. I think it would have been a woman, and I think that would have been right.' (Newman & Sims 2021, 01:12:50). A director who can create a suspenseful mood, and has spent his whole career experimenting with mixing genres and expanding horror, M. Night Shyamalan,

described Hardwick's film as 'tonally perfect'. The tone, or mood, is sustained by a succession of cues, as well as bursts of emotion sprinkled throughout to reward the audience (G. Smith 1999, 117).

One of the most commonly mocked aspects of *Twilight* is the choices made by the two lead actors. The film's characters were described and mimicked for mockery as awkward, groans, moans and awkward sounds. Kirsten Stewart and Robert Pattinson made bold, but different choices on how their characters should be portrayed. While Pattinson's performance is more subtle, it is still noteworthy. Allegedly, Pattinson wanted to portray Edward as a character in constant emotional pain, riddled with self-hatred for his mere existence (Newman & Sims 2021, 00:36:05). Not only does he hate that he is a vampire, but his continuous lust for the blood of the girl he ultimately loves and feels protective of fills him with shame and guilt. Additionally, his physical acting highlights that Edward, despite his appearance, is in fact not human. Mimicking animalistic behaviour, Pattinson perches on tree branches, hunches on rocks and growls at predatory men approaching Bella. He climbs trees with ease and stares with wide eyes in the least subtle way possible. Steward's portrayal of Bella is strangely both more true to real life, and more critiqued. Her stuttering and murmuring, shifty eyes and hair grabbing were mocked at the time and used as evidence of her being uncomfortable in front of the camera. There are two main reasons why I believe this critique to be undeserved and just plain wrong. Firstly Steward was a child actress and had been in films prior to *Twilight*, where she, despite her young age, had given good performances. One example is David Fincher's *Panic Room* (2002), where an 11-year-old Stewart was co-lead to veteran actress Jodi Foster. The way you play awkward and actually look when you feel awkward is visually very different, and I believe she was simply a talented actress who played socially awkward a little too well. Secondly, Steward is now hailed as an indie darling, being the first American actress to win the French Caesar Award for *Clouds of Sils Maria* (2014) (BBC 2015). It is noteworthy that her acting is not necessarily drastically different, at least not beyond what you would expect from someone naturally progressing and growing in their profession with age. Rather, she has shifted focus to films that fit her style more. Context is key, and what was mocked in the mass franchise *Twilight* is hailed as nuanced and subtle in indie films like *Personal Shopper*(2016) and *Spencer*(2021). To quote Adam Johnson in an online *Twilight* commentary, 'The only difference I see in Stewart's performance in *Twilight* and *Personal Shopper* is her agonising over which monster she wants to fuck. For one it's a vampire, in the other, it's a ghost.' (Johnson 2020, 03:52). Weitz said in his work with Stewart that her approach was to find as much realism as possible, giving naturalistic and real emotional responses to what is

ultimately a fantastical situation. Perhaps her interest in this approach made her graduation to indie film a natural choice.

The setting of *Twilight* is an essential contributor to the film's mood. Beyond the narrative necessity of the vampires needing to live somewhere with little sun, and Bella experiencing a huge shift in her life as she moves from Arizona to Forks, the rainforest on the east coast of America, it is a prevalent backdrop to the majority of the film. The constant rain and fog, the vast, beautiful nature, and the dramatic scenery of beaches, cliffs and mountains lend the film a very distinct look from most teen media. The norm would be a sunny, California-adjacent-looking high school, with characters in colourful clothes. The constant rain and the working-class small town are far from the aspirational settings of *Clueless* or *Buffy*. The autumnal comfort of a stormy setting evokes associations with classical monster films, where Victorian cities and European villages were cloaked in permanent fog from which monsters could emerge. It also conditions the audience to find the mood in real life, as evidenced by the social media trend of filming rain, adding a song from the Twilight soundtrack, and stating that the weather and changing seasons indicate it is the time of year when we watch *Twilight* for comfort. The most prevalent song used Eyes on Fire, opens with a distinct, ghostly female vocal, which has been attempted transcribed as 'hua hua hua', further leading to captions and on-screen text in reels stating that the weather is looking very 'hua hua hua'.(Fig.5.1.)

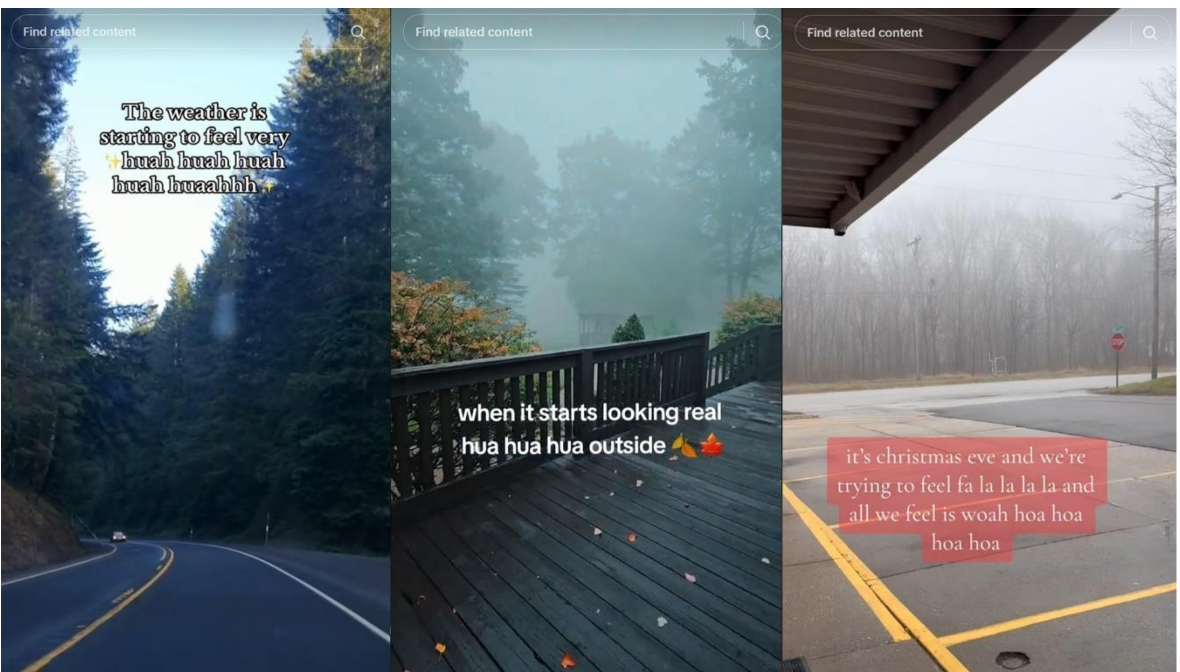

Figure 5.1. Reels capturing the mood of *Twilight* in everyday life, accompanied by the song *Eyes on Fire*. (Screenshots from TikTok)

The interior settings of *Twilight* are also noteworthy, mainly the contrast of the Cullen and Swan family homes. Bella's home with her dad looks small and suburban and besides the purple bedding in her room which disturbingly seems to never get changed, there is little to note. By contrast, in both to Bella's ordinary home, and the dwelling of Vampires we are used to seeing on film, the Cullen house is a custom, contemporary modernist glass house (Fig. 5.2.). The exterior walls are almost exclusively windows, and the home is remote, so the forest feels like a part of the home. It is a stark contrast to the gothic castles usually favoured by vampires. Once again the forest and nature are where we learn more about vampires, as Edward says their home has so many windows because they are shielded by the forest. 'it is the one place we can be ourselves'. Bella confronts Edward in the forest, and he reveals his vampire powers and sparkling skin. He also takes her to a meadow where they spend a lot of time looking into each other's eyes lovingly. Nature's true self belonging in the forest harkens back to Pattinson choosing to portray Edward more like an animal.

Figure 5.2. The Cullen family home is a stark contrast to Dracula's gothic castle. (Screenshot from *Twilight)*

The *Twiligh*t soundtrack was the best-selling film soundtrack in the US since *Chicago* (2002)(Grein 2009), and songs from the album are used on social media as *Twilight* shorthand to this day. The album, like *Twilight*, is distinctly different from what one would expect to be natural influences. Compared to teen films, the artists are not representative of what was popular at the time, but rather more alternative genres like electronica and indie, showing how the story and its

characters do not quite fit in with their teen peers in high school and popular culture. As evident by the TikTok trend, the soundtrack is still appealing and engaging, and an efficient shorthand for the film's mood.

The re-watchability of *Twilight* can stem from nostalgia and the mood it successfully builds. It is also, like cult films that flourish at midnight screenings, riddled with absurd details in its Mise-en-scène. Hardwicke was a production designer prior to directing, which makes some of these shots even more baffling. If the Cullen family aims to blend in with other high schoolers, and have done so for what we believe to be decades, how do they still not know what makes a believable packed lunch? At one point we see Emmet carrying a zip-lock plastic bag full of hard-boiled eggs (Fig. 5.3.) The Cullen family table in the cafeteria is so rich with absurd detail that these shots alone would make for an engaging watch.

Figure 5.3. The bag of eggs is just one of many intriguing details in the film's mise-en-scène. (Screenshot from *Twilight*)

The costuming and styling of *Twilight* highlight two key points. Firstly, it emphasises how ordinary and unglamorous it is to be a teenager. No make-up montage takes place, and we see characters re-wear outfits. The characters are dressed in weather-appropriate layers and practical clothing, and the make-up and hairstyles vary from very messy to very neat, as they would within a high school student body. The human characters are where we see Hardwicke's indie film background, as they are mundane and believably ordinary. Secondly, and by stark contrast, the Cullens stick out like a sore thumb. Harkening back to the uncanniness of vampire lore, where vampires both fit in and stand out is evident here. Most of them wear wigs or have unusually styled

hair, pale makeup and light brown contact lenses. They also wear more make-up than the human characters, to emphasise their beauty and alluring appearance. To make sure they stand out even more, they also seem to enjoy colour-coordinating their expensive clothing and are introduced in a scene where they all wear white and blue outfits. As they sit together, in matching clothes, they feel like a menacing or threatening presence, evoking real-life associations to cults.

Not specified in G. Smith's list, yet crucial when discussing *Twilight* is the colour grading. The distinct blue, cold tint is both something the film was mocked for and the easiest shorthand for recreating the mood when making your film for social media. As discussed in the chapter on teen film, one of the main reasons I believe *Twilight* does not fit, is the aspirational visuals. Fashionable, colourful wardrobes, bright lipstick and sunny weather are washed out to insignificance, as everyone in forks are coated in a grey tint removing bright colours (Fig. 4.1.). This muted expression not only evokes a cold, damp mood of the rainy forest and foggy town but also harkens back to black-and-white monster films. The washed-out, pale vampires are not so distinct from the washed-out, pale humans, almost arguing for them settling here. Everyone in Forks is pale and cold, so a vampire blends right in, regardless of their changing eye colour and beauty.

Prior to The confession in the forest scene, the entire film was tinted a cold green, a colour often used to evoke an uneasy and unsettling feeling. Bella is in a new place, and her discomfort and anxiety paint her world. However, when she decides to stay, we see warmer colours in her bedroom, a sphere she shares alone with Edward.

5.2. A Gothic Dream

Perhaps more so than any other genre, the gothic is often described in terms of mood. There is a very distinct look and feel to a gothic film, and when describing it, it is often in terms of redundant cues, like the setting, costuming and hard-working fog machines. These redundant cues also offer a visual likeness to more abstract and dreamy scenes.

Early and seminal vampire stories like Stoker's *Dracula* and Le Fanu's *Carmilla* use dreams to present vampirism. Le Fanu writes 'I can't have been more than six years old when one night I awoke, and looking around the room from my bed, failed to see the nursery maid … [T]o my surprise, I saw a solemn, but very pretty face looking at me from the side of the bed. It was that young lady who was kneeling, with her hands under the coverlet.' (Le Fanu 2013, 7). Stoker describes Lucy's attack from Count Dracula, leaning into the more abstract nature of dreams: 'I have a vague

memory of something long and dark with red eyes … and something very sweet and bitter all around me at once. Then I seemed to sink into deep green water, and there was a singing in my ears, as I have heard there is to drowning men; and then everything seemed to pass away from me; my soul seemed to go out of my body and float around the air.' (Stoker 1897, 117). Perhaps harking back to this literary tradition, there is a scene in *Twilight* where Bella wakes up in the night and sees Edward standing in a dark corner of her bedroom. As she quickly looks away to turn on a lamp on her nightstand, and when she looks back, the corner is empty. A voice-over informs us that Bella drew what is, at this moment, the most logical conclusion; 'That was the first night I dreamt of Edward Cullen' (Hardwicke, 2008). The film culminates in a poetic, emotional, and symbolic montage as Bella is near death after the vampire attack. Like the film overall, this presents an emotional reality rather than a literal one, and we see flashes of the romantic meadow covered in snow as her world goes dark (Fig. 5.4.).

Figure 5.4. Bella's near-death experience launches an abstract montage of her inner life. (Screenshot from *Twilight)*

With its unique colour grading and sweeping nature shots, *Twilight* also feels like a dream. Or rather, the emotional state of a teenager interwoven with her fantasies. For where else can vampires exist but in the mind? Film critic for the Atlantic, David Sims, once described *Twilight* on a podcast as the perfect depiction of a teenage crush. The intensity and earnestness the film was ridiculed for is also what makes it so relatable. Nothing is more all-consuming and mindboggling than your first whirlwind, hormone-induced crush.

> That's what I love [about the film]. You're 17 years old and you're like 'I have such a crush on Edward from Bio. If he wanted to kill me, I'd be pretty into that. I honestly kind of think about him killing me'. The mania of a crush…
>
> (Newman & Sims 2021)

As cheesy as the writing is, as Edward says 'hold tight, spider monkey' before he scales and jumps massive trees in the West Coast rain forest, he is inarguably sweeping Bella off her feet. She holds on tight for a thrilling, scary, unpredictable ride, and the person she holds on to and trusts the most is also the one most capable of hurting her. Is that not the perfect image of a 17-year-old in love?

6. FANS & FANGS

Both the film *Twilight* and the book it was based on, became a global phenomenon. Prior to the film's release in 2008, the book had been translated into 37 languages. Some interesting title changes include the more horror adjacent *Bis (Biss) zum Morgengrauen* (Bite until Dawn, Germany), and *Om jag kunde drömma* (If I Could Dream, Sweden), the ambiguous *Fascination* (Fascination, France), and *Houkutus* (Temptation, Finland), and the very poetic title I originally read in Norwegian, *Evighetens kyss* (The kiss of Eternity). The film's midnight screening grossed more than $7 million, and continued to make $35.7 million on its opening day (McClintock 2008). Overall, the film's global gross totalled at $408,491,728 (BoxOfficeMojo).

The reception outside of the dedicated fan base told a less successful story. In a 2012 interview, Melissa Rosenberg, who was the film's screenwriter, said of the response 'When you start to read the criticism of *Twilight* it's just vitriol, it's intense, the contempt. From critics both men and women.' (Women and Hollywood 2012). Rosenberg points to the gendered divide of the feedback, and points to the perceived hierarchy of genres that exists. There seems to be a morality attached when discussing genre films aimed at young girls. Rosenberg agrees, stating that films aimed at men receive less severe backlashes. Says Rosenberg

> We've seen more than our fair share of bad action movies, bad movies geared toward men or 13-year-old boys. And you know, the reviews are like okay that was crappy, but a fun ride. But no one says "Oh my god. If you go to see this movie you're a complete fucking idiot." And that's the tone, that is the tone with which people attack *Twilight*. (Women and Hollywood 2012)

The divided response to *Twilight* has always seemed paradoxical. As the film (and the book it is based on) is most commonly critiqued for its traditional and conservative portrayals of gender and sexuality, the audience with whom it resonated the strongest, and the fiercest defenders, were girls and young women. In *Bitten by Twilight: Youth Culture, Media, & the Vampire Franchise* (2010), feminist media scholars Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz, Melissa A. Click and Jennifer Stevens Aubrey write that they, too, given their field of study, marvelled at the appeal *Twilight* had had for each of them (2010, 137). They further share the unexpected appeal of the film that is beyond the original intended audience of teen girls, as the film also appears to have struck a chord with adult women. This is evident in fan activity, such as the popularity of the fan website Twilightmoms.com, with more than

33 000 registered users in 2009, contemporary to the first film of the franchise. The adult female *Twilight* fans are not limited to their own fan sites, as they were also present at *Twilight* events. In the US, 45% of the audience for *Twilight* was older than 25 (McClintock 2008, in Click et al. 2010). The film was rated PG13, so there may well be some chaperoning parents affecting this statistic. As evident in online activity though, there certainly is an adult fan base connected to *Twilight*.

In Sheffield and Merlo's essay reporting on the events of 2009, the *Twilight* fandom's presence at Comic-Con and the following reactions feel very gendered. The main criticism is their panel squatting, meaning fans would attend panels and talks on themes they had no interest in, simply to save that seat for a later panel with the cast of *Twilight*. However, as Sheffield and Merlo state, panel-squatting is very common at Comic-Con, and the members of other properties seemed to think the *Twilight* fans were 'particularly unwelcome' (2010, 207). The fans were described as 'hoards of screaming fan-girls', and as not belonging at comic-con (Sheffield & Merlo 2010, 207). This description of the *Twilight* fans, paired with implications of superiority from other fandoms is, I believe, the very centre of the issue of why *Twilight* was such a controversial film. Even spaces created for fans and passion were not welcoming and created a very isolated fan base. Sheffield and Merlo argue that the rhetoric and language used by critics and anti-fans when discussing both the film and its audience are highly gendered and feminized (2010, 207).

A true mark of success and recognition in mainstream culture is parody, as it is dependent on recognition and references a majority of the audience will understand. *Twilight's* success coincided with the rise of YouTube, and there is no shortage of evidence as to why teenage girls might have felt inclined to keep their appreciation for the film a secret. Some notable works include *Twilight Sucks: Emo Vampire Song,* where a sad Dracula laments how emo vampires are more popular than him now, and *Twilight with a Cheeseburger,* where Bella is replaced with a cheeseburger, and Edward's dialogue about a desire to eat her is unchanged (Atencio 2009). Popular American sketch show SNL (Saturday Night Live) managed to involve people affiliated with the property to parody it. In one skit, Taylor Swift, who as an up-and-coming singer asked to do a cameo in *New Moon* because she was a fan, is cast as Bella. In the skit, the Cullens are replaced with the Franks, and Bella falls in love with a green Frankenstein's monster. Swift copies the famous lip-biting of Stewart in every shot she is in and confesses her love in a forest confrontation scene. These small details hold no humour for someone who has not seen the film, meaning there either were a lot of people laughing at *Twilight* who had indeed seen it, or the mark on pop culture was so big that people knew its trademarks through osmosis and parodies. Another SNL skit had Taylor Lautner, one of the *Twilight* cast, play a

parodically obsessed teen girl who is in love with Edward, as he wears pink, pigtails and lip gloss (Saturday Night Live 2009, Saturday Night Live 2009). This joke, too, would make little sense to an audience if they are not aware that Lautner plays Edward's main rival, Jacob, in the later *Twilight* films. Presented as irrational and delusional, stating they know they will one day marry a fictional vampire, the skit ridicules the very audience *Twilight* has to thank for its success.

The gendered notion of fan engagement and emotional investment in fiction which the *Twilight* audience was mocked for seems to have long roots in film studies, as Smith discusses the opinions of Colin Radford. Radford states that our emotional response is linked to rationality, and the only reason we react emotionally is because we believe something to be the truth. We will react with sadness and compassion if a close friend confides in us, sharing a traumatic experience. If our friend then is revealed as a liar, our emotions change, and we realize our sadness was unwarranted and undeserved. Grounding a film in reality seems to lend the story more credibility, and perhaps, if Radford is to be believed, evoke a more emotional response. To enforce gendered stereotypes of emotion, and perhaps show his age, Radford further states that having emotional responses to real-life events is 'a brute fact of human existence', but that similar emotional responses to fiction are 'absurd, unintelligible, and unmanly' (Smith 2022, 55). Branding emotional investment in fictional stories and characters as something feminine is apparently not limited to the response to *Twilight*, but an attitude presented much earlier, as this quote from Radford dates back to 1975. Radford still concluded that a belief that something is real is only necessary for an emotional response in real life, and not in fiction, but adds that one is inferior to the other (Smith 2022, 56). Radford argues that the emotional response elicited in real life is superior to that of fiction, because it has utility, as fear of real dangerous animals helps us survive and live longer, but 'a fear of fictional Green Slime does not' (2022, 56). Thankfully, the research of Scrivner et al. shows that the human mind is not so literal in transferring experiences, and fear of slime might transfer to coping with other threats in real life. Scrivner et al. highlighted that 'the most important part of many stories may not be their literal similarity to real life, but the meaning that can be extracted from them and applied to real-world situations' (2020). As this research concluded, films about zombies and alien invasions proved useful in preparing for a global pandemic.

Expressed as early as 1995, and again in the second edition from 2022, Smith's hypothesis is clear; Our propensity to respond emotionally to fictional characters is a key aspect of our experience and enjoyment of narrative films (2022, 1). Our engagement, however, has long been debated in Western thought and expressed in what is called the paradox of fiction. This points to the idea that

we need to believe that the film we watch is real in order to engage emotionally, while simultaneously knowing that it is, obviously, not real. This paradox is based on both the idea that we would not respond emotionally to something we know is fake or untrue in real life, and in the reason-emotion antinomy, which is the idea that reason and emotion are at odds with one another (2022, 3). This latter argument is echoed in a lot of the criticism aimed at *Twilight*, where the public ridicule of passionate fan behaviour led to certain fans feeling the need to distance themselves from the public reputation of the female fandom. Jessica Sheffield & Elyse Merlo explore this fan phenomenon in their text *Biting Back: Twilight anti-fandom and the rhetoric of superiority (2010).* 'In an attempt to defend their enjoyment of the *Twilight* series as a guilty pleasure or popular culture text, […] they must first differentiate themselves as 'sane' (rational) fans and disregard the 'feminine' (irrational) fan behaviors of the *Twilight* fandom that get much of the attention.' (Sheffield and Merlo 2010, 218).

The general consensus was that 'feminine' approaches to engagement were silly, illogical, and lesser than rational approaches, where fans would admit their enjoyment of the series while distancing themselves with 'superior fan status' with knowledge of the series' shortcomings. In the aforementioned adult fan websites and forums, there also seemed to be a need for this distinction. The Twilightmoms.com website is no longer active, but an X (previously Twitter) account of the same name is still running, and the reason-emotion distinction is evident in the group's branding. The description of the account is 'Older and wiser fans of the *Twilight* series. A sisterhood and community of great friends.' (X 2024). Distancing themselves from the primarily young teen fandom, the Twilight-moms are not only older, but also wiser, which in turn implies the young fans are less wise, and perhaps less rational. I would argue, however, that the notions of rationality and fandom are contradictory, and as the strain presented with the paradox of fiction, an emotional response is a perfectly valid reason to enjoy and appreciate a film. A rational fandom is an oxymoron.

Engaging with fiction, says Smith, is a form of imaginative activity, but not just in a flight of fancy, escapist manner (2022, 74). This engagement can develop our skills in comprehension and interpretation, and 'utilize many other cognitive skills and strategies which go well beyond a mere registration or mirroring of the narrative material' (Smith 2022, 74). However, our experience is both guided and constrained by the fiction's narration, what information is shared with the audience, and at what point. As these cognitive skills of engagement and imaginative activity are developed, we can see how it is expressed in different stages. Young children often play and act out scenarios and characters from films and stories they like, or learn to draw their favourite characters. The main

demographic of the *Twilight* audience, namely teen girls and young women, are often associated with expressing imagination and creativity through writing fan fiction, where the limitations of the narrative are challenged, the world and characters expanded, and an unimaginable number of gaps are filled in. One notable example of *Twilight's* ripple effect through popular culture is the case of *50 Shades of Grey*. This worldwide literary phenomenon was originally a *Twilight* fan fiction published online, where Edward was imagined as a billionaire businessman, and Bella was a young student who was swept away in his secret desires. Except, CEO Edward is not hiding that he is a vampire, but rather that he enjoys BDSM, and he introduced Bella to a world of kinks. This very popular fan fiction, with slight revisioning and new character names for copyright reasons, was later published as the book series *50 Shades of Grey* and later adapted into very financially successful films. Adapting fan fiction as films would have seemed impossible 15 years ago, but it has now become a recurring phenomenon, with the *After* series, which was originally fan fiction about the British pop star Harry Styles, and the upcoming *Love Hypothesis*, which is based on a book whose roots are *Star Wars* fan fiction. Evidently, we are still experiencing the effects of *Twilight* to this day, as its illegitimate offspring proved fan fiction adaptations a profitable genre.

Smith emphasizes that we should be open to characters changing and that traits and readings ascribed early in a narrative potentially can change throughout the film. The traits may 'conform with or depart from a stereotypical person-type available within the culture as a whole, or within a tradition of fiction, to a greater or lesser degree. This will affect the degree to which we find the character plausible' (Smith 2022, 116). This willingness to believe a character based on established stereotypes or tropes in a culture or fiction might be why so many audiences resisted *Twilight*. Some of the main criticism initially aimed at the film, before feminist scholars or horror writers entered the scene, was a general rejection of how *Twilight* had changed and adapted vampire mythology. The rules of *Twilight* (vampires are not harmed by sunlight, but are merely exposed if they walk out in it, and can be photographed and have reflections in the mirror) were so mocked that it appeared the general mainstream suddenly had advanced knowledge of vampiric historical mythology. This mental rejection and disengagement is understandable if one expects a certain mythology, trope or genre and is fed something different. Still, I do not believe it is in and of itself cause to reject the film. As established in the chapter on vampires, the mythology and depictions in fiction have varied vastly, and there is hardly any set of rules that can apply to all fictional vampires, even before the Cullens entered the scene. Derogatory slogans and jokes stating the *Twilight* vampires as 'gay' because they sparkle and were defanged further show the gendered ridicule aimed at the film, as

softness, attractiveness and femininity were mocked. This choice of phrase is, of course, a tad ironic once we consider the queer metaphors inherent to vampire mythology.

In the essay *Twilight and the Production of the 21st Century Teen Idol* (2010), Aubrey et.al. argue that the characters of *Twilight* occupy the same space as objects of adoration and desire for adolescent girls as real teen idols like musicians and actors do. Says Aubrey et al., even before Robert Pattinson was cast as Edward Cullen, the mere mention of the vampire's name at public readings would elicit a Beatlemania-like response of squealing from teen girls in attendance (2010, 226). The characters are so appealing, real, and distinct, that the adoration is clearly targeted at a fictitious character and not (only) aimed at young, attractive actors gestalting them. In a 2009 interview, Pattinson stated that 'The girls scream for Edward, not Robert. I still can't get a date' (Aubrey et.al. 2010, 225).

In the early noughties and 2010s, franchising properties became the norm in blockbuster filmmaking, resulting in the superhero hellscape we find ourselves trapped in today. Prior to *Twilight*, the standard was set by successful film series like *Harry Potter, Transformers, Pirates of the Caribbean,* and *Lord of the Rings* (Aubrey et.al 2010, 229). What sets *Twilight* apart from these preceding examples is the target audience. According to Nancy Kirkpatrick, president of worldwide marketing at Summit, *Twilight* had no precedent, as it was a 'female property' Aubrey et.al 2010, 230). Indeed the aforementioned examples, as well as the biggest franchises currently, like Marvel, and upcoming legacy sequels to *Ghostbusters, Mad Max, Alien* and *Indiana Jones*, are undeniably targeted at a male or mixed audiences.

The interwoven engagement with the film, the phenomenon and everyone involved can be exemplified in one absurd instance. In 2012, it was revealed that Kirsten Stewart was involved with a producer on a film she was working on, and had allegedly cheated on Robert Pattinson. Of course, timelines and legitimacies of celebrity romances are to be taken with a grain of salt, but the scandal elicited a response from audiences all the same. It is, once again, hard to not think this response is tinged with misogyny. Stewart was 22 at the time and was blamed for the relationship, rather than her producer Rupert Sanders, who was 19 years her senior, married and had children. One can hope that in a post #metoo world, this would have been regarded as a misuse of power and exploitation of a young actress. A strong contender for the figurehead of misogyny, former president Donald Trump is perhaps the most surprising instance of fan engagement in this anecdote. Ever the tweeter, and apparently very affected by the scandal, Trump wrote:

> Robert Pattinson should not take back Kristen Stewart. She cheated on him like a dog & will do it again--just watch. He can do much better! (Oct 17th 2012)
> Lots of response to my Pattinson/Kristen Stewart reunion. She will cheat again--
> 100 certain--am I ever wrong? (Oct 18th 2012)
> Everyone knows I am right that Robert Pattinson should dump Kristen Stewart. In a couple of years, he will thank me. Be smart, Robert. (Oct 22nd 2012)
> Miss Universe 2012 Pageant will be airing live on @nbc & @Telemundo december 19th. Open invite stands for Robert Pattinson. (Oct 25th 2012)
> (Rosen 2017)

If Donald Trump can spend days obsessing over the actors in a teen film and their personal relationship, the appeal and engagement of this phenomenon is evidently not reserved for teen girls. In a recent interview, Stewart revealed the incident inspired her public coming out when hosting SNL. Having one of the most powerful men in America join in the hate campaign that had, at this point, raged against her for years was also an absurd incident. Says Stewart of the tweets 'of course, he had to weigh in on my tarring and feathering. Like, what is this 20-year-old who has no idea about life doing to this man?' (Perry 2024).

The study of fans and fandom is particularly relevant in this analysis, as one could argue it is another approach to understanding engagement with film. The aim of a film is, undeniably, to grab an audience's attention, and generate some form of engagement. However, early fan studies seem to think fandom is a step too far. Fan studies scholars of the 1990s had a shift in focus, aiming to rectify the commonly held belief that fans were 'fanatic worshippers whose interests are fundamentally alien to the realm of 'normal' cultural experience and whose mentality is dangerously out of touch with reality' (Jenkins 1992). This period also drew from Certeau's 1984 work on social tactics of the disempowered, which suggests fandom as 'a phenomenon of economic and social resistance of marginalized groups' (Sheffield & Merlo 2010, 208). The field further developed in the early 2000s, as the earlier research was criticised for limiting what activity was deemed necessary to partake in fan culture, thereby excluding fans who did not attend fan conventions, write fan fiction, or partake in activities deemed necessary to qualify for the definition. Hills argued in 2002 that fandom is not one static definition, but rather 'a performative, psychological action that differs according to person, fandom, and generation' (Sheffield & Merlo 2010, 208).

An interesting and particularly relevant part of the study of fan behaviour, is anti-fandom.

Sheffield and Merlo argue that the discourse response to the *Twilight* film was 'complex, public, and highly gendered' (2010, 209). The consensus of the *Twilight* anti-fandom is that *Twilight* fans give other fandoms a bad name. This echoes the sentiment of comic con, where the attendants can be assumed to all be eager fans of different fandoms, but still feel the need to distance themselves from the *Twilight* fans with ridiculous cardboard signs. Another type of *Twilight* anti-fandom presents itself as more serious and engaging, discussing the films thoroughly to prove fans wrong. These anti-fans might even seem genuinely worried for the fans, as they explain why gender roles and storytelling are lacking or harmful (Sheffield & Merlo 2010, 212).

The response to the film as a mirror of the attitudes toward young women and their culture is best summarized in *Twilight* screenwriter Melissa Rosenberg's interview. 'It's also because it's female it's worthy of contempt. Because it feels female, it is less than. And that is simply a reflection of our society' (Women of Hollywood 2012). When re-examining the young female *Twilight* audience, and the ridicule they faced by both peers, adult critics, popular culture, and a president to be, I wish we'd all remember the trials and tribulations of being a teenager. Smith describes a psychological theory regarding the bias present when condemning the agency of others. The 'fundamental attribution error', says Smith, points to a human tendency to attribute the failings of others to their individual personality traits, rather than situational factors, but do not place that same judgement on ourselves (2022, 248). This bias of the self means that if I make a mistake, I am likely to blame it on my situation, whereas if I observe someone else make the mistake, I will blame their character or ability. If I oversleep, it is because my phone or alarm clock is faulty, or someone didn't wake me up as promised, but if someone else oversleeps they are lazy and forgetful. If I fall in love with someone who isn't right for me, it is because I was manipulated, or pressured, or perhaps too young to know better. If Bella falls in love with an objectionable person, it is because she is stupid, weak, and a terrible role model. It is a common feeling to watch fiction and wish the characters would make 'better' or 'more logical' choices, but the fact of the matter is, that we all make mistakes, and we all fall victim to our emotions, hormones, or our circumstance all the time. That does not mean the story is not worth telling, and the characters are not worthy of sympathy. Or our engagement.

6.1. 'I know what you are'

Moreso than a bad object, *Twilight* is a confusing one, as it does not fit neatly into one genre. In his book on film genres, Rick Altman suggests that they are mainly beneficial for producers. Genres offer a financial security, as generic genre films, says Altman, already have a pre-existing audience you can expect will see the film (1999, 112). This book is from 1999, but this idea rings true for how franchises operate today. The reason yet another Star Wars, Marvel, Indiana Jones and Ghostbusters film or TV series keep popping up is because of the safe investment, knowing there is a big, pre-existing audience. Altman likens studios to any other manufacturers that want to avoid risk and rather seek a guaranteed, if limited return (1999, 112).

There is some inconsistency in the genres I have observed attributed to *Twilight*, to this day. IMDB calls it a 'drama fantasy romance'(IMDB 2024), whilst the Norwegian newspaper VG bafflingly calls it a 'British action film'(VGTV 2008), and the Norwegian streaming site TV2 Play has listed 'comedy' as its only genre (TV2 Play 2024). When selling the novel to publishers, Meyer called it a 'suspense/romance/horror/comedy' (Kirschling 2008). A lot of criticism and dislike of *Twilight* seems to stem from what it is not, rather than what it actually is. In this thesis, several genres were explored and evaluated, and although the film contains elements and sensibilities from genres like horror, vampire, teen, youth and young adult narratives, the primary genre is romance. As a fittingly gothic Frankestein's monster of genre and influences, the female gothic and romance are perhaps the clearest parts of *Twilight*. As Austen domesticated the monstrous Byronic heroes, I would argue that Edward is simply a modern incarnation of this trend. After all, what is a defanged vampire but a domesticated Byronic hero?

Cawelti proposes somewhat of a hierarchy in romance stories. While 'love triumphant and permanent, overcoming all obstacles' (1977, 42) seems to be a core of all romance stories, Cawelti proposes that while the usual outcome is marriage, more 'sophisticated' love stories end in death. Either one or both of the lovers can die, but it should be in such a way that the impact of the love is permanent. To this, *Twilight* seems to reply 'and what is more permanent than immortality'? Says Cawelti of these love stories 'the lovers' passion is directly related to the extent to which their love is doomed. It simply cannot continue to exist in the fictional situation either for social or psychological reasons and consequently the passion itself brings about the death of one or both of the lovers' (1977, 42). It is Edward's passion that could ultimately doom their relationship, and kill Bella. Whether Cawelti would see *Twilight* as a sophisticated love story is, perhaps, doubtful. *Twilight* ends with the couple dancing happily in love, yet the feeling that their love 'simply cannot continue to

exist' in this current situation for very long is present, as danger still looms from both internal and external forces.

Twilight might not be a tear-jerking melodrama, as the performances and visuals are more muted than heightened. However, ingredients from melodrama are present. A core theme of melodramas is sex, specifically the 'the conflict between desire and morality, virginity and experience, love and lust, frustration and satisfaction, action and consequences' (Friedman et al. 2014, 97). The puritanical history of America made this both an alluring and controversial aspect of the genre and the mass appeal of melodramas is perhaps what led to the perceived need to shame its audience. The most common incarnation of these themes in melodramas is infidelity or class, as a sexual relationship either threatens to destroy a marriage (and by extension, the American nuclear family!), or be deemed socially unacceptable due to class transgressions. *Twilight* is not about marriage or class, but the pairs listed by Friedland et al. ring true all the same. Bella and Edward's burgeoning relationship does question desire and morality, and love and lust, as Edward's inner conflict is a yearning for Bella, but a fear for her safety if he loses control over his bloodlust. Also, is his attraction a matter of love, or hunger? Can it be both? Here lies the question of frustration and satisfaction, and action and consequence, as Edward's bloodlust cannot be satisfied without compromising his relationship with Bella, making him doomed to constant frustration. Despite his unnaturally many years of experience, Edward is also inexperienced, and their relationship is therefore not necessarily a conflict of virginity and experience. Bella is the one who initiates contact or attempts to further their physical relationship, proving Edward is only more experienced than her in literally everything else in life, bar sex and love.

In 1820, James Robinson Planché's play *The Vampire, or, The Bride of the Isles* introduced a trope which helped to move the vampire from a threatening and ambiguous background monster to a compelling character and even protagonist; the vampire pained with remorse and self-loathing at his own, undead state. Piaché's vampire laments 'Demon as I am, that walk the earth to slaughter and devour!' (Jones 2002, 83). He then remarks on his heart, or what little bit that remains of it, which shrinks with every appalling act. This self-loathing embedded in the Byronic hero archetype turned some vampiric characters, I would argue, from villain to antihero. This also solves our conundrum presented by Smith. Is it possible to root for 'the bad guy'? Yes, if the bad guy agrees that they are indeed bad, and are pained with inner turmoil, rather than indulge in their wicked impulses. Similarly to Planché's vampire, Edward is a pained vampire upgraded from villain to anti-hero.

Romance is a genre for wish fulfilment, and more so than most genres, female wish fulfilment. If the trope coined by Nathan Robin called 'the manic pixie dream girl' is a flat and selfless female character whose narrative purpose is to further the character development of a male protagonist (2007), a flipped version of this trope is perhaps true of the most influential Byronic heroes of fiction. Writes Robin in 2007, 'The Manic Pixie Dream Girl exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures' (Robin 2007). A narrative targeting a female audience will have a different understanding of wish fulfilment, posing the question if a gender-flipped manic pixie dream girl is possible. Are Mr Darcy, Rorchester, Heatchliff and Edward not simply depressed monster nightmare men? Their narrative function, like the manic pixie dream girl for male protagonists, is to challenge and ultimately change the female protagonists of their respective stories.

This new type of vampire is as much a mix of references as the genre of the film overall. Edward is Byronic in his cold aloofness, Victorian in his virtue and chivalry and Gothic in his combination of beauty and danger (Rogobete 2012, 124). The allegorical or metaphorical meanings a vampire offers are also ever-changing and dependent on the time the story was created. The frequency of vampires as representing both sex and sexuality is perhaps the most prevalent. As an example of the inherent sexual connotation to the vampire, I offer this story from the pre-production of the quintessential vampire film, *Dracula* (1931). One of Universal producer Carl Laemmle Jr.'s notes in the margins of the film's final script read 'Dracula should only go for women and not men!' (Jones 2002, 85). In both literature and later on film, the vampire has been read as a metaphor for sex, desire, and often homosexuality and taboo sexuality. Without depicting sex, nudity or even kissing, it seems clear that Laemmle Jr. was vary of these possible readings of a vampire attack on screen. To my knowledge, no such note was given to the scripts of other monster films, and there is seemingly no gender discrimination in the onscreen attacks from Frankenstein's monster, the invisible man, or the wolf man.

Despite being mocked as 'gay and horny' because of its sparkling, unthreatening vampires and yearning love story, *Twilight* is arguably very straight and very chaste. Edward refuses both literal and metaphorical sex with Bella, as he will neither sleep with her nor drink her blood. This also applies to all other characters, as Edward and his family are metaphorically celibate, but only he is also literally so. There is also no case of same-sex blood exchange or romance, making the story abnormally conservative for a vampire tale. The sexual reading of a vampire's bite is still present in *Twilight*. It presents abstinence, but not without eroticism. 'Anticipation is the basic pleasure of

eroticism' (Wynn 2024, 38:25)

In a recent interview with Variety, Stewart had some thought to the metaphorical readings of the text. Stewart came out publicly in 2017, and has been open about her queer sexuality. Reflecting on her career and personal journey, Stewart now states that *Twilight* (which the journalist refers to as 'the most heterosexual thing she's ever done'), has a clear, queer subtext. Says Stewart 'I can only see it now. […] It's such a gay movie. I mean, Jesus Christ, Taylor [Lautner] and Rob and me, and it's so hidden and not OK. I mean, a Mormon woman wrote this book. It's all about oppression, about wanting what's going to destroy you. That's a very Gothic, gay inclination that I love.' (Vary 2024).

A vampire's very existence is transgressive. However, sex before marriage, with many partners, or with the same gender is not considered as transgressive today as in the periods the fictional vampire originated. A more modern and less common metaphor for blood consumption present in *Twilight* is that of addiction and control. Blood is addictive. Not just in the sense that vampires depend on it to live, which would make it analogous to food. Rather, the way Edward describes the effect Bella's blood has on him evokes imagery of addiction. Considering zombies, werewolves, demonic possession and psychological thrillers, the loss of self-control and personal agency is a recurring and powerful theme in horror (Big Joel 2019). A core fear that is both all too real and familiar, Joel suggests the discomfort that arises when watching zombies, is seeing something that looks and used to be human, that now acts on pure instinct without agency or control. This in turn forces us to contemplate that this could happen to us (Big Joel 2019).
When he is confronted in the forest by Bella, Edward states that he has never wanted to drink a human's blood so much in his entire life. Despite having lived for more than 100 years, the unquenchable thirst for human blood is unyielding in vampires, and a momentary slip-up could have dire consequences. As Edward states when he attempts intimacy with Bella, 'I can never lose control around you' (Hardwicke, 2008). The loss of control would have destructive consequences for both Bella, but also Edward who would feel the guilt, shame and self-hatred of not being able to control his thirst. In one of the final scenes of the film, Edward briefly experiences what he has yearned for. He must suck Bella's blood to retract the vampire venom she was inflicted with from another vampire. Pattinson's pained expression reaches new heights of anguish, as he experiences both immense pleasure and self-hatred, all while trying to control himself and stop before killing her. After Bella wakes up, he decides that he is too dangerous for her, and asks her to leave Forks and live with her mother again. Bella refuses. When the film concludes with Bella expressing her wish to become a vampire so that she can stay with Edward forever, he refuses, as he views his existence as

eternally painful, and would not wish that upon the girl he loves. If Bella is Edward's personal brand of heroin, he feels both immense shame and intoxication in her presence, and I believe this is a good description of Pattinson's performance. His existence is hell, and every day is an internal battle.

6.2. Bella: My own personal brand of heroine

A considerable part of the negative response and ridicule of *Twilight*, and a further argument that the discourse around the film was affected by misogyny, was the treatment of the character Bella, and the actress Kirsten Stewart. As previously discussed, she was called 'a dog' by one of the most powerful men in the United States on his public platform, and a bad actress for convincingly portraying social anxiety. The online parodies were also not limited to parodying the film and its fans. The YouTube channel Key of Awesome, which has more than 5 million subscribers, made 10 videos parodying Stewart's mannerisms and performance (The Key of Awesome 2024). A 2013 poll from *The Cut* placed Stewart as the 2nd most hated celebrity in Hollywood (O'Connor 2013), and The Daily Beast published the article *Kristen Stewart's Bad Attitude*, lamenting how she did not smile enough (Kaufman 2009). Stewart was 19 at the time. Her character was mocked for Stewart's mannerisms, but also for her narrative function as a socially awkward, anxious and passive character in need of rescue by her vampire boyfriend. As evident by bedroom culture and online activities, and the public ridicule of both the film and its fans, Driscoll laments that girlhood and partaking in girl culture often is a process of containment (Driscoll 2002, 257).

Is Bella, then, an anti-feminist nightmare who has caused thousands of young women to emulate her behaviour like celibacy before marriage, victimizing yourself to be saved by an adoring man, and defying your parents for your boyfriend, or a cautionary tale? As has become the running theme of this thesis, I believe this is a matter of disappointed expectations. The genres most immediately comparable to *Twilight* come with a set of expectations for a female protagonist. The horror genre offers the final girl, whose resilience, alertness, and grit make her an active protagonist and the sole survivor of a gruesome attack. The teen film's female protagonist is an outgoing popular girl with a great sense of fashion. Bella does not fit neatly into any of these tropes. She does, however, fit with a more universal experience of adolescence. Anecdotally, I can safely say that none of my female friends, nor I, have undergone a fashionable make-over, had an aspirational dating life, or survived the attack of a masked murderer. We have, however, felt awkward, insecure, and unglamorous at school, and the emotional whirlwind of a first crush. Bella is not relatable to every teen girl, but

neither is Cher or Buffy. They are, more importantly, all relatable to some. These friends and I did enjoy our *Twilight* festival. We channelled our desire, sympathy and attraction in a crush schema, voting for who we found the most attractive after each film. We laughed at moments of intentional and unintentional humour. We also swooned at scenes of intimacy and sincerity, and a grave silence fell as Bella's father desperately tried to stop her from running away.

Let us conclude that *Twilight* is a neo-gothic vampire teen romance bildungsroman, and a 'girl film'. While I have argued that the appeal of the film is its characters and its mood, I also believe the bildungsroman or coming-of-age story is important when understanding this film and its audience. The story concerns a young girl who enters the strange, new world of adulthood and learns that the world is a more morally complex and potentially dangerous place than she knew as a child, and that even good and aspirational things like love can be complicated, and sometimes painful. The use of the female gothic in this film lends it gravity and seriousness not always afforded young girls, but the heroine Bella is all the more relatable for it.

Daniela Rogobete argues the film translates our fascination with darkness, transgression and desires, and acknowledges them as an inherent part of the human condition (2012, 111). Unlike the candy-coloured teen films of the 90s, the incorporated gothic allows the audience to dwell on juvenile problems, fears and anxieties, rather than 'the escapist, fairy-like stories, that focus upon the fantastic worlds of innocence and purity' (Rogobete 2012, 116). She further argues that teen gothic fiction prepares its audience for a challenging adult world by presenting adolescent problems, but sometimes disguises them in metaphorical ways. The focus is also on internal conflicts and dangers, rather than external threats.

A combination of the escapist nature of a romance story, and the monstrous of the gothic can explain the vampires of *Twilight*. It also acknowledges these darker feelings that emerge in adolescence, as one might experience anxiety and self-doubt for the first time. The vampire lore is adapted, removing Dracula's stench of death, hairy hands and great limitations regarding travel and sleep. The vampires presented in *Twilight* are aspirational. Becoming this type of vampire is the ultimate wish fulfilment. Imagine a teen body that is in constant change, with hormones disturbing your emotional stability, and a body that you do not recognize. Additionally, you change from one unacceptable shape to the next based on your internalized beauty standards and societal pressure. An unfortunate aspect of girl culture and girlhood, says Driscoll, is a normalized feeling of never being as perfect as one aspires to be (2002, 249). The option of being turned into the most powerful and beautiful version of yourself is not simply a matter of feeling desirable. It is also a relief from

constant change and insecurity and a relief from a fear of death that many might only seriously contemplate in adolescence.

Debating trademarks of vampire lore, horror film tropes and toxic romances is ultimately not sufficient in understanding *Twilight*. The film tells an emotional rather than a literal truth. Driscoll called some teen films 'educational romances'. Laura Kinsale wrote in *The Androgynous Reader* 'Romance novels have nothing to do with women's relationships with real men. The whole adventure is an interior one.' (Kinsale 1992). This education and adventure gives more credit to the young female audience. As critics, scholars, and men at Comic-Con and the internet at large both mocked and preached the dangers of a wish fulfilment romance, there is little evidence that suggests *Twilight* has caused lasting damage to millennial women. After all, it is possible to enjoy a film and its characters without swallowing its surface messages whole. A female audience can swoon over the attractive, wealthy vampire who respects their sexual inexperience and treats them chivalrously, while simultaneously concluding that they would find someone watching them sleep a step too far. A bad object can still be cherished for its badness.

In a different, better universe, there was just one *Twilight* film. It was this film, and despite its success, it inspired no sequels directed by men who added fighting and action sequences, and no CGI hellscape. If there are sequels, in this better universe, they were directed by Sophia Coppola, and girlhood is a relevant and serious theme to explore, even while using imagery and tropes from the horror genre. After all, as Walters wrote, 'Girlhood is, they seem to say, a time of awakening not only to oneself but also to the often disappointing and sometimes outright horrifying realities of the world. (…)- from innocence to knowledge; from girlhood to womanhood' (Walters 2023).

The romance has changed a lot since Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, and the stories that resonate with us and have longevity in culture are not instructive. Films that resonate with audiences and become important do not tell you how to live. They assure you that you are not alone, that other people make the same mistakes you have made, and that is ok.

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Personal Shopper (Olivier Assayas, 2016)

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Pearl Harbor (Michael Bay, 2001)

Trainspotting (Danny Boyle, 1996)

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Avatar (James Cameron, 2009)

Avatar: The Way of Water (James Cameron, 2022)

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Scream (Wes Craven, 1996)

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Moonstruck (Norman Jewison, 1987)

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Superbad (Greg Mottola, 2007)

Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire (Mike Newell, 2005)

Bonnie & Clyde (Arthur Penn, 1968)

The Hunger Games (Gary Ross, 2012)

Gossip Girl (Joshua Safran (developed by), 2021-2023)

Gossip Girl (Josh Schwartz & Stephanie Savage (developed by), 2007-2012)

Gilmore Girls (Amy Sherman-Palladino (created by), 2000-2007)

30 Days of Night (David Slade, 2007)

The Twilight Saga: Eclipse (David Slade, 2010)

Contagion (Steven Soderbergh, 2011)

Beverly Hills 90210 (Darren Star (created by), 1990-200)

50 Shades of Grey (Sam Taylor-Wood, 2015)

Antichrist (Lars von Trier, 2009)

The Golden Compass (Chris Weitz, 2007)

Buffy the Vampire Slayer (Joss Whedon (created by), 1997-2001)

Booksmart (Olivia Wilde, 2019)

Dawson's Creek (Kevin Williamson (created by), 1998-2003)

The Sound of Music (Robert Wise, 1965)

The Twilight Saga: New Moon (Chris Weitz, 2009)

Harry Potter and the Order of the Pheonix (David Yates, 2007)

Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince (David Yates, 2009)

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows – Part 1 (David Yates, 2010)

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows – Part 2 (David Yates, 2011)

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