

MARS HILL GRADUATE SCHOOL

“WHY ARE YOU APOLOGIZING FOR BLEEDING?”

CONFRONTING THE EVANGELICAL EMBRACE OF STEPHENIE MEYER’S
TWILIGHT SAGA

AN INTEGRATIVE PROJECT SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY PROGRAM
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF DIVINITY

BY

Kj SWANSON

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

MARCH, 2010

For Abby and Freya

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
PREFACE	iv
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	viii
INTRODUCTION: WHY TWILIGHT?	1
RESISTING TEMPTATION; PROMOTING DUALISM: THE <i>TWILIGHT</i> PARADIGM	6
Into the Text: <i>Twilight</i>	8
Into the Culture: Temptation	10
A Call for Embodiment	13
MALE PROTECTOR; FEMALE CIPHER: THE <i>NEW MOON</i> PARADIGM	17
Into the Text: New Moon	19
Into the Culture: Protection	21
A Call for Empowerment	24
SACRIFICIAL LOVE; SELF ANNIHILATION: THE <i>ECLIPSE</i> PARADIGM	27
Into the Text: <i>Eclipse</i>	28
Into the Culture: Sacrifice	30
A Call for Emancipation	33
OVERCOMING SIN NATURE; NATURALIZING SEXUAL AGGRESSION: THE <i>BREAKING DAWN</i> PARADIGM	36
Into the Text: <i>Breaking Dawn</i>	38
Into the Culture: Sinful Nature	41
A Call for Equality	45
CONCLUSION	47
BIBLIOGRAPHY	50

ABSTRACT

This project confronts a predominant evangelical Christian posture towards female identity, particularly the manner in which gender roles and modes of sexual expression and experience are theologized and disseminated. By correlating the categories by which evangelical Christian media has praised Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* saga to the theology of popular evangelical gender-formation texts geared towards young women, this paper critiques the demonization of female sexuality and the spiritualization of female subjugation common to both. Part 1 examines the evangelical Christian embrace of *Twilight* as a pro-abstinence narrative, showing that in fact, the praising of *Twilight*'s portrayal of resisting sexual temptation promotes a harmful feminine body/mind dualism. Part 2 uses examples from *New Moon* to parse out the complementarian bias of casting male as protector at the expense of woman being envisaged as perpetual victim. Part 3 reframes *Eclipse*'s theme of sacrificial love as that of self-annihilation. Part 4 exposes *Breaking Dawn*'s linking of violence with romantic love, and the condoning of dangerous power differentials that occurs through Evangelicalism's theologizing of gender hierarchies. In conclusion, the negative impact of evangelical Christians' endorsement of the *Twilight* saga's sexual ethics and gender constructs in correlation to the similar models proffered by evangelical relationship texts for young women, is countered by a call for embodiment, empowerment, emancipation and equality in regard to female identity, sexuality, and spirituality.

PREFACE

The first time I heard of *Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer, I was in the Barnes & Nobel annex of the Arizona airport. I'd asked an employee for help finding some 19th century title that was, as I'd already intuited, too obscure for an airport book-nook to stock. When the book search turned up empty, the friendly employee recommended instead, a thick black book emblazoned with two white hands holding a red apple on the cover. She told me that though it was a teen book about vampires, it was hugely popular with adults. I kindly said no thank you, but made a mental note that perhaps a new *Harry Potter* craze had begun, this time centered on vampire romance instead of kids who do magical homework. I was less than intrigued.

By the end of the year however, I decided to investigate this series that friends were describing as an irresistible guilty pleasure and according to some, a refreshing perspective on abstinence. Within twenty pages however, I was reading furiously—but not the swept away by imagination type of fury—it was anger tinged with despair. This aptly named “guilty pleasure” that my peers (and millions of adolescent girls) were reading appeared to be a novelized tract about the *guilt* one should feel in response to *pleasure*. More rape-fantasy than love story, the lack of honest communication, tenderness, trust or even delight present in the central love relationship was made more disturbing by the physical and psychological violence embedded in every level of the narrative. Never had I read a book so shaming of pleasure, so devoted to guilt.

I received a second shock when I heard a Christian man I respect deeply talking about how he was reading the books with his daughters. While I loved the image of this

Dad actively partaking in his daughters' interests, I wondered how this book series, which I'd defaulted to calling "somasochistic teenage erotica," had slipped under the radar into Christian homes. The more I investigated, the more I found *Twilight* being raised up in Christian circles with the shout of—"Finally! A healthy and moral book we don't have to keep away from our daughters!" While I'm hardly an advocate for cultural censorship or sheltering, the irony of this book getting the green light where *Harry Potter* did not, struck me as beyond disturbing—it was scary.

But my reaction to this phenomenon would never have moved beyond snarky complaints to friends had it not been for a phone call I received in May 2009. Feminist writer and instructor Kimberly George had caught wind of my *Twilight* rantings and asked if I'd guest lecture for a "Sexual Violence in the Media" class she was teaching at a local church. While I couldn't make my schedule work to participate in the class, that phone conversation with Kim linked synapses in my mind regarding *Twilight* that thus far had been safely segregated into realms of pop culture and church culture. While we identified categories of sexual violence, gender roles, and harmful dualisms that were rising out of our *Twilight*-Christianity-and-culture conversation, I paused a moment and said to her, "I think this may be what I spend the next year working on. I think this is going to be my Masters of Divinity Integrative Project." And I did not look back.

This journey, which quickly led into the world of female-gearred evangelical Christian publishing that I had not visited since I was seventeen years old and its target audience, has been one marked both by grief and gratitude: grief at the stories I and other women raised in certain evangelical paradigms have been forced to occupy, grief at how painful extricating myself out of those myths has been, and grief for the young girls who

are still being offered such insufficient, destructive and life-less models of female Christian identity.

But I have found gratitude as well for the witness of God's redeeming work in my life, seen most visibly through those individuals whose presence, knowledge and courage has not only inspired and supported me along the way, but have mirrored back to me visions of Beauty I could not previously have claimed for myself. I am indebted to the patience, guidance, encouragement and Kingdom-hope of the faculty of Mars Hill Graduate School. For this project I am particularly grateful for the mentorship, wisdom and kindness of Dr. Jo-Ann Badley, Dr. Dwight Friesen and Christie Lynk.

As mentioned before, this project may not have been born if not for Kimberly George and her invitational and instructive conversations with me. Her years of work in this area paved the first steps of this project, particularly in directing me towards the work of Carol Gilligan and Marie Fortune. Further, the initial conversation with Kim would not have happened without the playful and powerful discernment of Jeremy Pietsch, Stacy Pietsch, Shannon Pressler, Holly Grigsby and Lucy Spiro, with whom I first engaged the question of *Twilight's* potency in contemporary culture.

I am grateful for the friendship of Maryann Shaw and Tucker Fitzgerald who generously shared their experiences of *Twilight* with me, while also modeling brave hope on behalf of women's flourishing.

Finally, research and writing of this scope is not only a lonely endeavor but one fraught with battles mental and spiritual. To the women and men of my graduating MDiv cohort: Rachael Clinton, Mary Closson, Joshua Longbrake, Ben Oldham, David Rice and Daniel Tidwell, it has been my honor to journey with you these past four years and I

could not have made it through the past nine months without the company of your faith, perseverance and love. Your influence is on every page. Thank you.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figures

1. Twilight Mouse pad, <http://www.cafepress.com/+edward-can-bust-my-headboard+mousepads> (accessed December 18, 2009).....37

Real love happens between two people of value, not between a girl who thinks she is nothing and the boy is everything.

—Beth Felker Jones, *Touched By A Vampire*

INTRODUCTION: WHY *TWILIGHT*?

Since the publication of *Twilight* in 2005, Stephenie Meyer's teen vampire romance saga has rapidly gained ground as a pop culture phenomenon to rival that of *Harry Potter*. The most marked difference between the current media explosion and the former is that the *Twilight* saga's fan base is made up almost entirely of females.¹ As evidenced by websites such as *Twilightmoms.com*, these Young Adult novels have captivated the romantic imaginations of thousands of women as well as girls. The story of teenage Bella's courtship and eventual marriage to Edward Cullen, the vampire frozen at age seventeen for over one hundred years, has aroused a fan following more reminiscent of Beatlemania than the school-library boom of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series.² *Twilight*-fans, *Twilighters*, and *Twilight*-hards have tattooed their bodies with text from the books and images of the films' stars, thrown vampire-themed proms, and caused the small logging town of Forks, Washington to become a tourist site with sold-out packages to view the setting of the fictional stories.

One of the most intriguing outcomes of *Twilight*-mania, however, is evangelical Christians' eagerness to join the *Twilight* conversation. Whereas groups like *Focus on the Family* decried *Harry Potter* as inappropriate for Christians to let their children read,³

¹ John Granger, "On Critical Reception of Harry Potter and Twilight: 'It's Deja Vu All Over Again' Part 2: Culture War," *Hogwarts Professor: Thoughts for the Serious Reader of Harry Potter*, February 10, 2009, <http://74.125.155.132/search?q=cache:gzhKo2LfgXYJ:hogwartsprofessor.com/%3Fp%3D699+female+readers+of+twilight+male+reader+of+harry+potter&cd=6&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us&client=safari> (Accessed March 4, 2010).

² Vicky Hallett, "The Power of Potter," *US News and World Report*, July 17, 2005, <http://www.usnews.com/usnews/culture/articles/050725/25read.htm> (accessed March 4, 2010).

³ Apologetics Index, "The Harry Potter Debate: Research Resources," Apologetics Index Web site, <http://www.apologeticsindex.org/p03.html> (accessed March 4, 2010).

numerous evangelical organizations have devoted print and web-space to laud the relational and spiritual applicability of Meyer's vampire saga. As of March 2010, four full-length books⁴ and one Bible study⁵ have been published, wherein Christian authors explore the themes and lessons of the *Twilight* saga. The focus of these books is dual purpose: using adolescent girls' passionate response to the books as a springboard for a gospel message, and providing a resource for parents wanting to know whether or not the fiction series aligns with a Christian worldview. What is clear from these books and the larger evangelical media response to the *Twilight* saga is that there is more at stake with the question of *Twilight* than deciding what books and movies are permissible for evangelical teenagers to consume. Rather, to respond to the *Twilight* phenomenon is to enter the territory of female sexuality and desire. The intensity of adolescent girls' (and thousands of adult women's) identification with the characters of the *Twilight* series and the level to which they have immersed themselves in the fantasy offered by it and the films based the two books, opens a wide door into the storied world of aroused female passion such as has arguably never before been seen in popular American culture.

While feminist critics have called the *Twilight* saga "an allegorical tale about the dangers of unregulated female sexuality"⁶, including issues of patriarchal gender roles

⁴ Kurt Bruner, *The Twilight Phenomenon: Forbidden Fruit or Thirst-Quenching Fantasy?* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Publishers, Inc., 2009); Beth Felker Jones, *Touched By A Vampire: Discovering the Hidden Messages in the Twilight Saga* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2009); Kimberly Powers, *Escaping The Vampire: Desperate for the Immortal Hero* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009); Dave Roberts, *The Twilight Gospel: The Spiritual Roots of Stephenie Meyer's Vampire Saga* (USA: Monarch Books, 2009).

⁵ Diane Schantin, *Parables from Twilight: A Bible Study* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2009).

⁶ Carmen D. Siering, "Taking a Bite Out of Twilight," *Ms* 19, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 51, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed September 10, 2009).

and rape fantasy,⁷ the majority of the evangelical Christian response to *Twilight* has been one of praise for its morality, particularly in regards to sexuality. Conservative groups like *Concerned Women For America*⁸ have celebrated the fact that because Bella and Edward save sex until marriage, the *Twilight* saga positively promotes an abstinence message. *Christianity Today*'s college-g geared online magazine *Campus Life* published an article detailing how Bella and Edward's relationship serves as a model for the Christian life.⁹ What these and other articles and books published by evangelical media sources highlight as beneficial about *Twilight* can be understood in four categories: resistance to sexual temptation, nobility of male as protector, significance of sacrificial love and victory over sinful nature. These categories may be at the opposite spectrum of feminist criticism, but they too reveal a great deal about women's place in culture, for the evangelical response to *Twilight*, whether it be positive or negative, is ultimately a response to female sexuality.

Beth Felker Jones explains in *Touched By A Vampire*, "the themes of *Twilight* are all about what it means to be female."¹⁰ This question of what it means to be female is one Evangelicals have been trying to help girls answer for years. Whether it's the formidable *Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* or the franchised *Every Man*

⁷ Christine Seifert, "Bite Me! (Or Don't)," *Bitch Magazine: Feminist Response to Pop Culture* no. 42 (Winter 2009): 25. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 10, 2009).

⁸ Concerned Women for America, "Breaking Dawn Presenting Abstinence Message To Teens," Beverly LaHaye Institute Web site, mp3 file, <http://www.beverlylahayeinstitute.org/articledisplay.asp?id=15641&department=BLI&categoryid=commentary&subcategoryId=blicul> (accessed November 29, 2009).

⁹ Stacey Lingle, "What Shines in Twilight?," *Christianity Today*, October 2, 2008, under "Campus Life's Ignite Your Faith" <http://www.christianitytoday.com/iyf/advice/mediaqa/Twilight.html> (accessed August 28, 2009).

¹⁰ Beth Felker Jones, *Touched By A Vampire: Discovering the Hidden Messages in the Twilight Saga* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2009) 3.

series, evangelical media has birthed an entire industry of relationship advice books that are not primarily about managing one's love life, but are rather, instructional guides to help readers personify "authentic" masculinity and femininity. Notably, with the publication of books about *Twilight* written by evangelical Christian authors for adolescent girls, the evangelical conversation about *Twilight* has actually merged with the genre of evangelical relationship texts for young women. The manner in which such books respond to the cultural impact of *Twilight* follows the evangelical trajectory of placing gender at the heart of Christian faith.¹¹ In Kristin Kobes du Mez's words, evangelical relationship texts geared toward young women normalize patriarchal interpretations of femininity, spiritualizing them in the process of defining them.

The evangelical response to *Twilight* reveals a pattern between what is highlighted about *Twilight*'s sexual ethics and the definitions of femininity reinforced in evangelical relationship texts for young women. Critiquing evangelical praise for *Twilight* by way of the gendered theology of popular evangelical texts for young women reveals the following themes, all rooted in a basic distrust of female sexuality. The four categories of evangelical praise for *Twilight* in correlation to evangelical gender role texts reinforce dualism between the female mind and female body, promote damaging power differentials in relationship, conflate the concept of sacrifice with self-annihilation, and normalize male sexual aggression. Exploring how these four themes are expressed in the books that encompass the *Twilight* saga: *Twilight*, *New Moon*, *Eclipse* and *Breaking Dawn*, reveals a need for a theology of sexuality that teaches girls to express their sexuality in integrated ways not contingent on the male experience. Confronting the

¹¹ Kristin Kobes du Mez, "Beyond Knights and Damsels: Evangelicals and Gender," *The Gospel and Culture Project*, March 19, 2009, <http://www.gospelandculture.org/2009/03/beyond-knights-damsels/> (accessed December 12, 2009).

evangelical embrace of *Twilight* serves as a call for embodiment, empowerment, emancipation and equality on behalf of female identity, spirituality and sexuality.

In *New Moon*, when Bella is injured from falling off a motorcycle, her friend Jacob approaches her to see if she is okay. Bella quickly says, “Oh, I’m so sorry Jacob” to which Jacob offers the important question, “Why are you apologizing for bleeding?”¹² This paper seeks to shed light on the ways young evangelical women have been formed by a theology of gender that causes them, like the character of Bella, to view their feelings and experiences as ancillary to men, apologizing not just for being hurt, but for being, in fact, women.

¹² Stephenie Meyer, *New Moon* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2006) 188.

**RESISTING TEMPTATION; PROMOTING DUALISM:
THE *TWILIGHT* PARADIGM**

“You’ll be the death of me, Bella”

—Edward, *Twilight*

Pivotal to the plot of the *Twilight* saga is the danger inherent in Bella and Edward’s love for one another. In the world of *Twilight* that Stephenie Meyer created, vampires are not demons but creatures with free will that can choose to satisfy their blood lust by feeding on animals rather than humans. A superhuman hunter, “the world’s best predator,”¹³ the vampire’s impulse to feed is one not easily overcome. In choosing to be “vegetarians” Edward and his coven family, the Cullens, discipline themselves not to succumb to their feeding instincts, but instead, to live their lives among humans, never revealing their true identity as vampires.

What this means for Bella and Edward, once she has discovered his secret, is that Edward is always in danger of losing control and allowing his vampire instincts to take over, thus killing Bella. This makes the simple act of kissing a colossal effort of self-control for Edward, and a frustrating battle of mixed messages for Bella. To ensure that Edward does not accidentally kill her, either from his vampire urges or his superhuman strength, Bella must be as unresponsive as possible to Edward’s initially tentative then increasingly passionate physical expressions of affection. These same dangers make sex prohibitive for Edward and Bella, as responding to sexual arousal could quickly and suddenly release Edward’s violent vampire instincts.

¹³ Stephenie Meyer, *Twilight* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005) 263.

Evangelicals have found in Bella and Edward the surprising pairing of teen romance and sexual abstinence. In “A Christian Look at Twilight Books and Movies,” Kathryn Darden explains, “the *Twilight* books are ultimately about temptation and abstinence in all its forms.”¹⁴ Kurt Bruner, in his book *The Twilight Phenomenon: Forbidden Fruit or Thirst-Quenching Fantasy*, claims, “the romance between Bella and Edward harkens back to more traditional values because, as fans are quick to point out, they don’t sleep together despite the temptation to do so.”¹⁵ Further, in *Christianity Today*’s web exclusive “What Shines in Twilight: Looking at four key ideas of the vampire saga that stand out for Christ followers,” Stacey Lingle writes,

[Edward] takes temptation seriously. He knows actions have consequences and that if he gives himself one tiny inch, he could lose control... When he wants to eat Bella, he doesn't let himself get too close to her. And when he wants to sleep with Bella, he doesn't let their physical relationship go past kissing. This is a decent example of the Christian life.¹⁶

The *Twilight* saga offering a popular culture example of teenagers abstaining from pre-marital sex has become an opportunity for Evangelicals to refine the message of what it means to resist temptation. As author and teen-conference speaker Kimberly Powers posits, “it is not the vampire’s passion that is captivating but his self control.”¹⁷ But when we look more closely at what occurs between Edward and Bella in *Twilight*, with

¹⁴ Kathryn Darden, “A Christian Look at Twilight Books and Movies: Part 2 of a 2-Part Series,” *Examiner.com*, September 13, 2009, <http://www.examiner.com/x-11989-Nashville-Gospel-Music--Entertainment-Examiner%7Ey2009m9d13-A-Christian-look-at-Twilight-books-and-movies-Part-2-of-a-2part-series-with-cast-slideshow> (accessed November 29, 2009).

¹⁵ Kurt Bruner, *The Twilight Phenomenon: Forbidden Fruit or Thirst-Quenching Fantasy?* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Publishers, Inc., 2009) 99.

¹⁶ Stacey Lingle, “What Shines in Twilight?” *Christianity Today*, October 2, 2008, under “Campus Life’s Ignite Your Faith” <http://www.christianitytoday.com/iyf/advice/mediaqa/Twilight.html> (accessed August 28, 2009).

¹⁷ Kimberly Powers, *Escaping The Vampire: Desperate for the Immortal Hero* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009) 24.

particular attention to how Bella is treated in the midst of her desire, it is possible to see that in praising Edward and Bella's relationship as a "decent example of the Christian life," Evangelicals are contributing to a dynamic wherein female sexuality is portrayed as deviant, and male desire as irrepressible. But first, we will look at two scenes from *Twilight* that exemplify the dynamics of sexual temptation and restraint between Edward and Bella.

Into the Text: *Twilight*

Once Bella successfully discerns the incomprehensible fact that the mysterious boy who has captured her heart is indeed a vampire, she and Edward embark on a treacherous journey towards intimacy. Initially, Edward tests the boundaries of his self-control so he can know what parameters to stay in while close to Bella:

"Be very still" he whispered, as if I wasn't already frozen.
 Slowly, never moving his eyes from mine, he leaned toward me.
 Then abruptly, but very gently, he rested his cold cheek against the hollow
 at the base of my throat. I was quite unable to move, even if I wanted to.¹⁸

Already, we see the theme of Bella being forbidden to move or participate in the intimate exchange with Edward. In this case, she is literally told to "be very still" but is also restrained by the intensity of her experience. Shortly after, during their first kiss, both Bella's experience of pleasure and expression of desire are restrained, literally by Edward's physical strength and psychologically by his response:

Edward hesitated to test himself, to see if this was safe, to make
 sure he was still in control of his need.
 And then his cold, marble lips pressed very softly against mine.
 What neither of us was prepared for was my response.

¹⁸ Meyer, *Twilight*, 275-27.

Blood boiled under my skin, burned in my lips. My breath came in a wild gasp. My fingers knotted in his hair, clutching him to me. My lips parted as I breathed in his heady scent.

Immediately I felt him turn to unresponsive stone beneath my lips. His hands gently, but with irresistible force, pushed my face back. I opened my eyes and saw his guarded expression.

“Oops” I breathed.

“That’s an understatement.”

His eyes were wild, his jaw clenched in acute restraint...I tried to disengage myself, to give him some room.

His hands refused to let me move so much as an inch.¹⁹

In this passage, Bella indicates shock at her response to arousal. Neither she nor Edward was “prepared” for her to have an equal, if not more passionate, response to Edward’s seductive kiss. Despite previously being told to restrain herself when close to Edward, Bella has a natural physical and emotional response to being kissed by the young man she is deeply attracted to. The moment this happens, however, Edward becomes unresponsive and distances himself while still maintaining a restraining grasp on Bella’s body. In this fictional setting, Edward may be a vampire trying to protect the young woman he loves, but the fundamental paradigm of the text is one wherein a girl must restrain both her experience of pleasure and expression of desire in order to receive physical intimacy from a male. When the female breaks this rule she is punished by physical and emotional separation from her male partner. While Bella’s experience of shame may be implicit in the above passage, (“Oops”) a scene later in the book shows the level of shame she has internalized as a result of the blame placed on her by Edward for arousing him rather than merely being a recipient of his sexual advances.

...he took my face in his hands almost roughly, and kissed me in earnest, his unyielding lips moving against mine.

There was really no excuse for my behavior. Obviously I knew better by now. And yet I couldn’t seem to stop from reacting exactly as I had the first time. Instead of keeping safely motionless, my arms reached

¹⁹ Meyer, *Twilight*, 282-283

to twine tightly around his neck, and I was suddenly welded to his stone figure.

He staggered back, breaking my grip effortlessly.

“Damn it Bella!” he broke off, gasping. “You’ll be the death of me, I swear you will”²⁰

Because Bella did not remain “safely motionless”, she is parted physically by Edward separating himself from her embrace and emotionally by his shift from tenderness to anger.²¹ This time, however, she calls her aroused response inexcusable, having internalized the connection between her expression of sexuality and Edward’s loss of control as being a benign fact, rather than tragic irony. Moreover, Edward angrily incriminates her for crossing the lines he established about their sexual intimacy. As the scene continues, Edward remains angry with Bella, presumably for taking advantage of his weakness. Thus, while Edward is free to kiss and touch Bella, any participation or initiation from her is severely punished with anger, blame and separation. In *Twilight*, resisting temptation means resisting women’s shameful sexual responses.

Into the Culture: Temptation

While *Twilight* is ostensibly a love story, Carmen Siering notes “the overriding message is that young women are incapable of understanding or controlling their own sexuality; it takes a man to keep them in check.”²² In many cases, evangelical commendation for Edward’s virtuous example of resisting temptation is paired with derision for Bella as the threat to Edward’s virtue. Kurt Bruner states, “as much as we

²⁰ Meyer, *Twilight*, 363.

²¹ The implications of Edward’s rough and “unyielding” sexuality will be addressed later in this paper.

²² Siering, “Taking a Bite,” 51.

may want to sympathize with Bella, we can't overlook the fact that she lacks moral fiber and allows herself to become so caught up in the passion of romance that she becomes the temptress."²³ Bruner directly follows this statement with the "woman of vice" passage from Proverbs 5,²⁴ through which he compares Bella to the allegorical immoral woman who leads virtuous men astray. Bruner concludes that "considering the parallels between what the Scriptures call a 'crafty harlot' and the actions of Bella Swan, she is hardly the kind of girl we want our elementary-aged daughters celebrating or emulating."²⁵

What statements such as Bruner's ignore is the reality that while Edward is the ultimate decision maker when it comes to setting sexual boundaries, he also freely initiates sexual contact with Bella. In fact, it is the rare occasion that Bella is the initiator of sexual encounter. Instead, she follows Edward's lead. The message, therefore, is that expression of male sexual desire is natural and nearly uncontrollable, but expression of female sexual desire is unnatural and sinful.

In evangelical relationship texts geared toward young women, this message is communicated implicitly by perpetuating the false belief that females do not have the same sexual desire as males. Unlike saying that women express their sexuality differently from men, these texts speak from a perspective that believes women do not naturally desire sex. Instead, women only want emotional intimacy. In *Every Woman's*

²³ Bruner, *Twilight Phenomenon*, 120-121.

²⁴ "For the lips of an immoral woman drip honey, and her mouth is smoother than oil; but in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword. Her feet go down to death, her steps lay hold of hell... Remove your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house, lest you give your honor to others, and your years to the cruel one... when your flesh and your body are consumed." Proverbs 5:3-11 as cited by Bruner, *Twilight Phenomenon*, 121.

²⁵ Bruner, *Twilight Phenomenon*, 122.

Battle, Shannon Ethridge explains to readers that “the *physical* act of sex isn’t an overwhelming temptation for women like it is for men,”²⁶ and that rather, it is a woman’s emotional needs that drive her. Ethridge concludes, “That’s why it’s said men *give love to get sex* and women *give sex to get love*. This isn’t intended to be a bashing statement, it’s simply the way God made us.”²⁷ While Ethridge’s opinion may reflect common experiences among men and women, by claiming the dichotomy of women having to give sex in order to get love as not only a fact, but God’s design, the stage is set for women to reject the physical experience of sex as man’s territory, and thus, distance herself from her own body, her choices and her experience of pleasure. A dualism is set up wherein female sexuality becomes disembodied—sex being relegated to an emotional experience rather than a physical one.

Girls who respond to their physical desires are labeled “temptress” or “crafty harlot,” as in Bruner’s example above. A young woman free to express her sexuality crosses over to male terrain, thus threatening his self-control. The logic behind this position encourages a status quo wherein all female sexual encounters are predicated on male desire. Like Bella’s experience with Edward, sexual intimacy becomes linked to separation, loss and shame.²⁸ In *Young Lady In Waiting*, Jackie Kendall and Debbie Jones explain,

Once passion is introduced into the relationship, it is difficult for the man to stop and be satisfied with just developing friendship. The man becomes distracted by the physical. This is why so many women enjoy the

²⁶ Shannon Ethridge, *Every Woman’s Battle: Discovering God’s Plan for Sexual and Emotional Fulfillment* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2003) 13.

²⁷ Ethridge, *Every Woman’s Battle*, 13.

²⁸ Carol Gilligan, *The Birth of Pleasure: A New Map of Love* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 17.

relationship until the “friendship” changes to “dating.” Something is lost when physical passion begins.²⁹

Women may *give sex to get love*, but they are also told not to give sex or they will lose love. Girls exposed to these messages from evangelical texts written specifically for them may find themselves confused and ashamed, like Bella with Edward; pursued by sexually expressive males, but unable to respond—desiring to respond but aware that they will be abandoned emotionally and relationally if they do. If this is Evangelicalism’s recipe for sexual purity, then purity requires women to fear their desires as barriers to relationship.³⁰ When Evangelicals praise *Twilight* for its abstinence message, they are in fact praising a story that teaches girls the dangers of desire—a story that fits within the guidelines of what evangelical girls are already being taught.

A Call for Embodiment

Despite such messages of dualism and detachment there are alternatives to the requirement of girls splitting their emotional and physical experiences into separate categories. An initial step forward is to acknowledge how the bifurcation of sexuality and spirituality has contributed to the false dualism of the good woman/bad woman template.³¹ Clinical psychologist and Methodist minister Karen McClintock writes, “one’s spiritual self and one’s sexual self cannot be separated without the danger of

²⁹ Jackie Kendall and Debbie Jones, *Young Lady in Waiting: Developing the Heart of a Princess* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Publishers, Inc., 2008) 158.

³⁰ Gilligan, *Birth of Pleasure*, 24.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 152.

shame and violence.”³² She further states, “the theological underpinnings of women’s shame reaches back to the concept of virginity as the purest and holiest state for women before God.”³³ Georgia Newman acknowledges this harmful standard, wherein “the appellation *virgin* is wedded to the role of *mother* in the figure of Mary,” suggesting “that the feminine ideal is, quite simply, unattainable for women.”³⁴

This unattainable feminine ideal is further reflected in the challenges of girls’ adolescent development in the midst of an androcentric culture. According to Carol Gilligan’s developmental psychology research, it is in adolescence that “girls often discover or fear that if they give voice to vital parts of themselves, their pleasure and their knowledge, they will endanger their connections with others.”³⁵ It is at this same time that girls are initiated “into the world of good and bad women,”³⁶ as a girl’s body “becomes a woman’s body and thus an object of men’s desire and attention.”³⁷ Gilligan explains,

The ascendance of the split between good and bad women marks the moment of change [in a woman’s fear of sharing vital parts of herself] and also fills in its motivation. With this split, pleasure—once associated with vitality, with love, with light, and with life—becomes the marker of the bad woman.³⁸

³² Karen A. McClintock, *Sexual Shame: An Urgent Call To Healing* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001) 94.

³³ *Ibid.*, 65.

³⁴ Georgia A. Newman, “Woman’s Place or Women’s Spaces: Intertwining History, *Herstory* and Christianity,” in *Religion and Sexuality: Passionate Debates*, ed C.K. Robertson (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2006), 72. See also Glen Scorgie, *The Journey Back to Eden: Restoring the Creator’s Design for Women and Men* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005) 174.

³⁵ Gilligan, *Birth of Pleasure*, 29.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 144.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 152.

When experiencing, expressing or even desiring pleasure is seen as “the marker of the bad woman,” the remaining option for young girls becomes dissociation: separating physical intimacy from emotional intimacy.³⁹ Girls are encouraged to crave emotional relationships, but taught that sexual desire exists in opposition to their spirituality.⁴⁰ According to McClintock, it is in this gap between sexuality and spirituality that shame grows.⁴¹ This split fosters the belief for girls that “sex is something done to them by a male”⁴² and that their “proper sexual role is passivity.”⁴³ When sexuality is compartmentalized, choice is replaced by shame.

However, the alternative to promoting the dualism of the female mind and female body in regards to Christian sexuality is not a counter-pendulum swing in favor of unbridled promiscuity. Rather, it is a call to understand the spiritual and emotional cost being rendered unto young girls when shame (as bad woman) or dissociation (as good woman) are the only options provided for how to comprehend their sexual development. Acknowledging the existence of sexual impulses is not the same as acting on them. A first step to providing girls a way out of shame and into healthy, integrated embodiment is removing the lie that it is males alone who have sexual feelings.⁴⁴ When fear and shame are relegated away from sexuality, the power of agency and choice is returned to

³⁹ Gilligan, *Birth of Pleasure*, 23.

⁴⁰ A telling example of how this encouragement/shaming of young women with regards to intimacy is communicated can be found in two sections titled “The Guy’s Responsibility” and “The Girl’s Responsibility” in Joshua Harris, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye: A New Attitude Toward Romance and Relationships*, Updated Edition (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2003) 98-101.

⁴¹ McClintock, *Sexual Shame*, 12.

⁴² Marie M. Fortune, *Sexual Violence: The Sin Revisited* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2005) 25.

⁴³ Fortune, *Sexual Violence*, 25.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

its rightful place.⁴⁵ The fallacy of aberrant female sexual desire and irrepressible male sexual conduct only serves to degrade both sexes. Abstinence need not mean a splitting between sexuality and spirituality, nor body from soul.

⁴⁵ Fortune, *Sexual Violence*, 25.

**MALE PROTECTOR; FEMALE CIPHER:
THE *NEW MOON* PARADIGM**

“He was angry now and the anger was so lovely”
—**Bella, *New Moon***

Along with abstinence, another word that commonly occurs within evangelical reviews of *Twilight* is the word *protector*. With his superhuman strength and ability to read minds, Edward regularly rescues Bella from danger. The trigger event for their relationship is Edward’s stepping between Bella and an out-of-control car about to hit her. He easily stops the car with his hand while shielding Bella from the impact. From this point on, Edward rescues Bella from hazardous situations but also forcefully takes on the role of her personal bodyguard. Edward watches Bella as she sleeps, obsessively tracks her comings and goings, rescues her from evil vampires and, at one point, stops a gang of would-be rapists from attacking her. The words “be safe” have become a popular bumper sticker, and tattoo for that matter, as young women delight in imagining that Edward has written the two-word note to them, rather than to Bella.

For evangelical Christians, the protection Edward gives to Bella is an inspiring model of strength and chivalry. In *Escaping the Vampire*, Kimberly Powers identifies with her teen readers, saying,

Each of us is searching for a hero who is eternally attached to, fiercely protective of, and passionately committed to us. As we discovered in our conversation about what drew us to Edward, we’re all on a search for a hero who will prove his love no matter the cost.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Powers, *Escaping the Vampire*, 155.

The hero Powers hopes her readers will ultimately reach for is Jesus, whom she refers to throughout the text as the “Ultimate Rescuer.” In her conversational book, Powers combines the themes of what draws girls so deeply into the world of Edward and Bella, and invites them to direct that longing towards Christ. Considering the ways Edward protects Bella, Powers asks, “what about you? There’s probably at least one time in your life when you’ve needed to be rescued.”⁴⁷ Powers finds in Edward’s watchful care an example of what every girls longs for in her heart.⁴⁸

Kurt Bruner, on the other hand, raises Edward up as an example for young men to follow. Citing the legacy of virtuous men who “found a sense of meaning in the role of provider and protector,” Bruner says, “Edward’s character symbolizes a man’s conscious decision to abandon the self-centered tendencies of boyhood and intentionally move toward the self-sacrificial call of manhood.”⁴⁹ Steven Isaac also points out Edward’s valiant protection of Bella, noting “he’s man enough to thank Jacob [her best friend] for rescuing her when he was not around to do so.”⁵⁰ Isaac praises Edward for acknowledging that even his enemy Jacob is worthy of respect for stepping in as Bella’s protector when he himself could not.

While Edward seems to have captured the moral imagination of evangelical reviewers, Bella’s position as the one who needs rescuing and protection, resonates with many women writers who recognize a basic desire for wanting to be rescued. Elizabeth

⁴⁷ Powers, *Escaping the Vampire*, 152.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁴⁹ Bruner, *The Twilight Phenomenon*, 103.

⁵⁰ Steven Isaac, “The Twilight Saga: New Moon,” Focus On The Family’s Plugged In Online, under “Movie Reviews,” <http://www.pluggedin.com/movies/intheaters/Twilightsganewmoon.aspx> (accessed November 28, 2009)

Leitch summarizes the appeal of Edward as a character because he symbolizes “the protector always standing by to rescue us.”⁵¹

Clearly, the rescuer/rescued dyad holds powerful significance for many evangelical Christian readers of the *Twilight* saga. However, if we investigate the effect of Edward’s protective stance towards Bella, we may find it actually has an adverse affect on her. With Edward’s hyper-vigilance comes Bella’s understanding that control means care and that protection is conveyed through anger. When love is given primarily through protection, being in danger becomes a necessary scenario for receiving love.

Into the Text: *New Moon*

At the beginning of *New Moon*, the second book in the *Twilight* Saga, Edward makes the decision to leave Bella after a close call between Bella and Edward’s brother Jasper. Though Bella defends Jasper, knowing what happened was an accident, Edward chooses to save Bella from a life of near-death experiences, and tells her she will never have to see or think about him again. Naturally, Bella is devastated. Only after months of silence and depression does she slowly begin to try and live her life without Edward.

To relieve her concerned father’s mind, Bella agrees to see a movie with a girlfriend. While on the street, Bella thinks she recognizes the group of men that cornered her in an alley a year before. Instead of leaving the area, however, Bella finds herself strangely drawn towards the men; “I didn’t understand why, but the nebulous threat the men presented drew me toward them. It was a senseless impulse, but I hadn’t felt any

⁵¹ Elizabeth Leitch, “The Eternal Romance,” *HollywoodJesus.com*, under “Twilight (2008) Preview,” <http://www.hollywoodjesus.com/DVDDetail.cfm/i/69061AAF%2D000C%2D110F%2DF0925BD6BA7D1A26/ia/BD8898A1%2DFafa%2DE05A%2D1CFCCEF177ABC8C3> (accessed November 28, 2009).

kind of impulse in so long...I followed it.”⁵² Following her impulse to move closer to the men, she suddenly hears Edward’s voice in her head telling her to stop:

...it wasn’t Jessica’s voice that rebuked me now, it was a furious voice, a familiar voice, a beautiful voice—soft like velvet even though it was irate. It was *his* voice.

...In the instant I heard his voice, everything was very clear. Like my head suddenly surfaced out of some dark pool.

... “Go back to Jessica,” the lovely voice ordered, still angry.⁵³

Bella continues to move toward the dangerous men, hoping the Edward in her mind will keep speaking to her. She says, “He felt impossibly close, close for the first time since the end” and that “the anger in his voice was concern, the same anger that was once very familiar.”⁵⁴ Yet knowing Edward is not truly there, she tries to interpret what is happening:

My subconscious mind was giving me what it thought I wanted. This was wish fulfillment—a momentary relief from pain by embracing the incorrect idea that *he* cared whether I lived or died. Projecting what he would have said if A) he were here and B) he would be in any way bothered by something happening to me.

...my reaction was hardly sane, though—I was *grateful*. The sound of his voice was something that I’d feared I was losing, and so, more than anything else, I felt overwhelming gratitude that my unconscious mind had held onto that sound better than my conscious one had.⁵⁵

Believing she will never be with Edward again, Bella finds herself drawn toward danger in order to recreate the paradigm in which she most felt loved by him: his protection. But even in her imagined memory of Edward, his voice is “furious” and “irate.” It is this very anger, which Bella calls “beautiful” and “like velvet”, that comforts

⁵² Meyer, *New Moon*, 109-110.

⁵³ Meyer, *New Moon*, 111.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 112-113.

and relieves her. In the absence of love, Bella runs toward danger, subconsciously expecting her lover-protector to return. She likewise admits, “anger was what I wanted to hear—false, fabricated evidence that he cared.”⁵⁶ For Bella, Edward’s angry treatment of her is synonymous with care. The sound of his irate cautions eases her wounded heart. This is what Edward’s hyper-vigilance causes: a young woman preferring an angry man’s voice in her head over her own. Bella gives up her voice and sense of self-preservation for the illusion that being a damsel in distress will bring her knight back. As *New Moon* continues, Bella seeks out increasingly dangerous ways to tempt back her projection of Edward, even to the point of jumping off a cliff. In *New Moon*, man as protector necessitates woman as grateful victim.

Into the Culture: Protection

The evangelical response to Edward’s continual need to protect Bella from life-threatening danger echoes the popular complementarian belief that men are made to lead and women to follow. Most particularly, the warrior/princess metaphor for men and women is arguably the commonest theme among evangelical relationship texts written for young women. Books like *Lady in Waiting*, *Young Lady in Waiting* and *Captivating* usher young women into a grand narrative wherein godly femininity is exemplified by the celebration of male strength. After explaining that “men are made for battle,” Stasi Eldredge claims to her readers, “you might not want to fight in a war, but don’t you long for a man who will fight for *you*?”⁵⁷ According to *Captivating*, the “essence of man is

⁵⁶ Meyer, *New Moon*, 113.

⁵⁷ John and Stasi Eldredge, *Captivating: Unveiling the Mystery of a Woman’s Soul* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005) 17.

strength,”⁵⁸ “the essence of woman is beauty,”⁵⁹ and women “long for the protection masculine strength offers.”⁶⁰

The flipside of male strength is that women are urged to become passive and silent objects of beauty waiting to be rescued. Stasi Eldredge tells women that “to experience the strength of a man is to have him speak on our behalf.” The underlying message of this seemingly innocuous statement about men standing up for women is that it is in fact about men *speaking* for women; man’s strength is exemplified in the presence of his voice over a woman’s. In Kimberly George’s reflection from *Jesus Girls: True Tales of Growing Up Female and Evangelical*, she quotes the words she heard at a girls-only event hosted by her church. A male youth leader tells a group of adolescent girls, “your silence as a woman is a very powerful thing...Paul talks about that. The man is listening to God, and your role is to respond to him.”⁶¹ From this example, girls are taught not only to view silence as empowering, but that it is men to whom they should be responding, not God.

Kurt Bruner makes a similar argument while explaining the benefit of Bella being the one person whose mind Edward cannot read. He says, “A big part of what makes a woman so intriguing to men is what can’t be known or seen.”⁶² Defining this as feminine

⁵⁸ Eldredge, *Captivating*, 128.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 129.

³⁶ Kimberly George, “Feminist-in-Waiting,” In *Jesus Girls: True Tales of Growing Up Female and Evangelical*, edited by Hannah Faith Notes (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2009) 143.

⁶² Bruner, *Twilight Phenomenon*, 105.

mystique, “something you can observe but not understand,”⁶³ Bruner writes, “when you couple mystique with feminine, you get the picture of a man staring at a lovely creature who can be observed but not understood.”⁶⁴ Bruner pairs *femininity* with the image of a man looking at a “creature.” While the message that women should be seen and not heard is only implicit in this statement, Bruner clarifies the message, saying,

In our generation the notion of mystique has gone the way of the dinosaurs. Boys don’t wonder about feminine charms because those charms are no longer hidden. A boy doesn’t need to read a girl’s mind since most girls are all too eager to reveal every secret thought and overwhelm boys with a barrage of phone calls, text messages, and online chat sessions that drain away all sense of “mystery” from the relationship.⁶⁵

According to Bruner, it’s better that Bella’s (and every female’s) mind is left a mystery so that men can experience “feminine charms” without interference from feminine voices. When Bella finds comfort in the imagined angry voice of her warrior-protector-love, she succumbs to the pressure of a controlling voice’s ability to make her own voice seem unnecessary. She seeks out peril so that love will not only fight for her, but speak for her as well. When Evangelicals find valiance and strength in Edward’s controlling anger and beauty in Bella’s submissive love for Edward, they further the cultural idea that women are most desirable as silent objects of beauty for men to protect. As Kendall and Jones write in *Young Lady in Waiting*, “God wants you to have the joy of saying to your knight on that special wedding night, ‘Here I am, clean and pure, emotionally and physically.’”⁶⁶

⁶³ Bruner, *Twilight Phenomenon*, 105.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 105-106

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁶⁶ Kendall and Jones, *Young Lady In Waiting*, 160.

The model being raised up for young girls through books like *Captivating* as well as Evangelicals' response to Edward's role in Bella's life, is that women will always be in need of rescue and should therefore surrender their will to a protector who will take care of it better than they could themselves. As Evangelicals respond positively to Edward and Bella's knight/damsel archetype, they reinforce the belief that girls have nothing better to offer than beauty for a man to protect.

A Call for Empowerment

In *The Journey Back to Eden: Restoring the Creator's Design for Women and Men*, theologian Glen Scorgie advocates a vision of egalitarianism from within and on behalf of evangelicalism. He writes,

Low self-esteem, pandemic among females in the West, is particularly serious among Christian girls and women. Too often churches foster among women traits of triviality, dependence on others, and general underdevelopment of the self.

We must realize—in a moment of painful epiphany, perhaps—how much the gospel of Jesus Christ is discredited by our continued affirmation of gender hierarchy.⁶⁷

He explains further how under the pressure of these external messages and lack of visible female leadership in the evangelical church, girls “can internalize the themes of patriarchy, and accept the lie that they belong to the weaker, more trivial and flawed version of humanity.”⁶⁸

Raising girls to believe that they are inherently flawed compared to their male peers sets the stage for female victimization. Karen McClintock states, “the church has

⁶⁷ Scorgie, *Back to Eden*, 190-191.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

participated in perpetuating sexual abuse by theologically articulating patriarchy,⁶⁹ wherein Christians are told “God is the ruler over man and that man is to rule over the woman and children.”⁷⁰ As Marie Fortune says in *Sexual Violence: The Sin Revisited*, this conception of the created order bears theological implications wherein women are created to be victims.⁷¹ Fortune writes, “this assumption requires an understanding of God as one who is hostile and cruel to have created two classes of persons—the victims and the victimizers.”⁷²

Such hierarchal concepts of gender not only endanger female bodies, but damage female identity and relationality. As Carol Gilligan says, “any hierarchy creates tension, competition, and splits that keep people from feeling free to love.”⁷³ While issues of power differentials and violence in relationship will be addressed further in this paper, a significant point to note is how the devaluation of women not only produces a victim mindset, but hinders women’s ability to participate in mature, loving relationships. The infantilizing posture of such “theologically articulated patriarchy” disempowers women by casting relationships with God and others in terms of hierarchal power structures of which women are at the bottom. When hierarchy is placed at the heart of intimacy,⁷⁴ separation is highlighted, rather than connection. For evangelical women who are taught

⁶⁹ McClintock, *Sexual Shame*, 50.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Fortune, *Sexual Violence*, xx.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Gilligan, *Birth of Pleasure*, 69.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 21.

above all else to value and nurture intimate relationships, a system that validates such theological claims for separation serves to produce only suffering.

**SACRIFICIAL LOVE; SELF ANNIHILATION:
THE *ECLIPSE* PARADIGM**

“Let me suffer. I deserve it.”

—Bella, *Eclipse*

While the most advertised Evangelical championing of the *Twilight* saga has to do with abstinence, the most lauded element of the books and movies is the theme of sacrificial love. Even within negative evangelical responses to *Twilight*, the role of sacrifice for the sake of love is still highlighted as positive.⁷⁵ Reviewers praise Edward and Bella for the various times they put themselves in harm’s way to try to save the life of another. Elizabeth Leitch writes that in the same way Bella’s willingness to sacrifice her life for Edward, “speaks to her ability to see Edward as more than just the monster he believes himself to be, so too does Christ’s sacrifice speak to the value within each of us that makes us not only deserving of his love but capable of bestowing that love on others.”⁷⁶ Jacob Sahms claims “the display of sacrificial love by Stephenie Meyer through her characters was downright Christ-like.”⁷⁷ Steven Isaac states “Edward and Jacob both end up taking a backseat to Bella’s courage and self-sacrificial spirit.”⁷⁸

⁷⁵ The most notable exception being Beth Felker Jones’ remarkable full-length critique of *Twilight, Touched By A Vampire: Discovering the Hidden Messages in the Twilight Saga*.

⁴² Elizabeth Leitch, “When Monsters Love,” *HollywoodJesus.com*, under “Twilight Saga: New Moon (2009) Review,” <http://www.hollywoodjesus.com/movieDetail.cfm/i/BB0216E7%2DBE4E%2DCBE2%2D46C6976A30013E81/ia/140C441A%2DC3F7%2DCB69%2D48752C4800012DC3> (accessed November 28, 2009).

⁷⁷ Jacob Sahms, “Vampire With A Soul,” *HollywoodJesus.com*, under “Twilight (2008) Review,” <http://www.hollywoodjesus.com/dvdDetail.cfm/i/69061AAF-000C-110F-F0925BD6BA7D1A26/ia/5CBA91A7-D5E8-0299-D77D0417D62CE839> (accessed November 28, 2009).

⁷⁸ Isaac, *Focus On The Family’s Plugged In Online*.

Bruner agrees that “all of the previous examples of mind over matter and self discipline pale in comparison to Bella willingly laying down her life for another,”⁷⁹ and that in this way, “the Christian theme of heroic self-sacrifice enters the back door of the story.”⁸⁰

Bella certainly has plenty of opportunities to offer her life for someone else’s. In the first two books alone, Bella offers herself for her mother’s life, for Edward’s life and goes out of her way to keep her father as far from the vampire world as possible. Not only is Bella always in danger, she also takes it upon herself to make sure no one suffers for her sake. Bella is always willing to sacrifice so others won’t have to.

As seen in the above examples, the evangelical response to Bella’s self-sacrifice is regularly compared to Christ’s sacrifice. Bella’s countless offers to give up her life, are perceived as the ultimate gift of love. But comparing Bella’s sacrifice to Christ’s overlooks the larger context in which Bella runs toward death for the sake of her loved ones. A closer look reveals that Bella’s desire to give up her life comes more from a place of shame than one of love. Bella offers her life because she thinks her life is not worth saving. These sacrificial acts done out of self-contempt are not courageous, but rather, perpetuate a myth of female masochism: that women are most happy when they are suffering.

Into the Text: *Eclipse*

By the third book of the saga, Edward has returned to Bella but their relationship is strained by Bella’s deepened relationship with her best friend Jacob. Edward and Jacob are natural enemies as Edward is a vampire, and Jacob, a type of werewolf. While

⁷⁹ Bruner, *Twilight Phenomenon*, 149.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

their two families/tribes made an uncertain truce a century earlier, Bella's closeness with both of them leads to varying levels of trouble, not the least of which being a vampire and a werewolf fighting over the same girl. Bella's loyalties to both are stretched, as she is unwilling to give up either her best friend or her boyfriend.

In *Eclipse*, Bella fears for both of their lives as Edward and Jacob are forced to work together to repel an enemy seeking to kill Bella. With a family of superhuman vampires and an entire wolf-pack of super-sized werewolves ready and eager to fight to the death to save her, Bella is put in her least comfortable situation yet: having to believe her life is worth another's. She desperately searches for a way to keep the Cullens and the wolves of the Quillayute tribe from shedding one drop of blood for her sake.

She finds her solution in a Quillayute legend; centuries earlier, the third wife of a chief changed the tide of a battle against an evil vampire woman. Bella hears the story of chief Taha Aki's third wife, who, in order to distract the vampire and give the warriors a chance to strike, plunges a dagger into her own heart. The sudden gush of blood causes the vampire to lose focus for a split second, which is all that is needed for the warriors to defeat the enemy who until that moment had them utterly conquered. From the moment Bella hears this story, she cannot rest until she figures out how she can, at the exact right moment, sacrifice herself so the Cullens and Quillayutes will not have to fight for her. The irony of course is that the whole reason the two families are preparing for battle is to save Bella's life. In trying to give up her life for theirs, she would actually be perpetrating the very thing they are trying to prevent. With unknowing irony, she inwardly declares, "If I had to bleed to save them, I would do it. I would die to do it, like

the third wife.”⁸¹ Bella refuses to let others make sacrifices for her, resorting to shame and self-contempt whenever anyone offers kindness or courage on her behalf.

Even after she is essentially tricked into kissing Jacob, and Edward willingly forgives her, she cannot forgive herself. She screams at Edward, “I want you to tell me that you’re disgusted with me and you’re going to leave so I can beg and grovel on my knees for you to stay.”⁸² When Edward refuses to placate her sense of shame, she says, “Let me suffer. I deserve it.”⁸³

Bella’s default response to any situation is to take the blame. Though she is surrounded by clans of people with supernatural powers who want to protect her and can do so without straining a supernatural muscle, Bella, the least empowered of them all, believes it is her duty to suffer so others do not. Bella grovels in self-contempt, and jumps at any excuse to end her life. To commend this as sacrificial love is to define love as the desperate urge to erase oneself.⁸⁴ It’s not that Bella *wants* to suffer, but that she believes she *deserves* to suffer. In the *Twilight* saga, self-sacrifice is actually shame laying itself on the altar in hopes of being punished.

Into the Culture: Sacrifice

The theme of shame and suffering is not uncommon in evangelical texts written for young women. In the early pages of *Captivating*, Stasi Eldredge calls shame the

⁸¹ Stephenie Meyer, *Eclipse* (New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2007) 539.

⁸² Meyer, *Eclipse*, 534.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Beth Felker Jones, “Vampires and Young Female Desire,” *The Gospel and Culture Project*, November 14, 2008, <http://www.gospelandculture.org/2008/11/vampires-and-young-female-desire/> (accessed December 12, 2009).

“universal companion of women.”⁸⁵ *Young Lady in Waiting* explains, “Women tend to struggle with insecurity because of the unique way God created them.”⁸⁶ In both of these statements, shame is spoken of as a given—part of a woman’s makeup or an unavoidable fact. This model for standard womanhood becomes even more dangerous when guilt is confused with shame. In *Sexual Shame*, McClintock distinguishes guilt from shame in this way:

Guilt is the conscience telling us that we have done something wrong. It serves as a protection for us, as a warning sign that we have violated our own values. With guilt we have injured others or ourselves by a behavior that is unacceptable.

...With shame, [however] actions are not the whole story. Our very beings are at fault. It isn’t simply that I hurt my brother, but that I am not worthy of my brother’s forgiveness.⁸⁷

Notice the difference, then, in how Kimberly Powers explains shame to the readers of *Escaping the Vampire*.

You see, shame can work in two very different ways. The first is to remain in your life and discolor your world by constantly reminding you of the poor choices you made or the circumstances that brought you to this point. When shame is allowed to work this way in your life, you’re miserable and overwhelmed by negative thoughts and feelings.

...But there’s an alternative. You see, the other way shame works is to actually push you *toward God*. Did you catch that? The shame you feel can actually help you draw closer to God!⁸⁸

...Shame puts you in such a vulnerable spot that you finally understand that all you have is Him. You realize it’s only through His life—through the pain He endured and the complete forgiveness He provides—that you can move on.

By this definition, shame signifies a healthy response to remorse. Shame is what pushes one toward God. Pain becomes the way to receive forgiveness, rather than the

⁸⁵ Eldredge, *Captivating*, 7.

⁸⁶ Kendall and Jones, *Young Lady In Waiting*, 182.

⁸⁷ McClintock, *Sexual Shame*, 28-29.

⁸⁸ Powers, *Escaping the Vampire*, 116-117.

reason for needing it. In a culture that already shames young women for any hint of sexual feeling and regards their voices as subordinate to men, this theology of shame needlessly spiritualizes women's suffering as an agent towards righteousness, or more specifically, womanliness. As Stasi Eldridge writes in *Captivating*, "to possess true beauty, we must be willing to suffer."⁸⁹

More specifically, the spiritualization of women's shame and suffering codifies an imbalanced relational exchange between men and women. Aside from being taught to value shame experiences as teaching lessons, young girls exposed to this message hear that service to men is a Christ-like gift. In *Every Woman's Battle*, Shannon Ethridge gives the following advice to women in the midst of struggling marriages,

By letting go of your expectations for your husband to meet your emotional needs and redirecting your focus on meeting his needs instead (whether those needs be for plenty of sleep or for physical pleasure), you are serving him. In this way, his desire will eventually be to serve you as well.⁹⁰

Ethridge encourages women to give up any hope or expectation of being cared for in exchange for becoming even better caretakers. She tells women they should serve their husbands while "expecting nothing in return."⁹¹ While it may be wise to advise women not to expect their husband to meet all their emotional needs, Ethridge's advice assumes an imbalance of care. Women are expected to be satisfied with getting nothing for giving much. This pattern of relinquishing self through misplaced shame, unnecessary suffering, and willing subservience, amounts to the spiritualization of self-

⁸⁹ Eldredge, *Captivating*, 143.

⁹⁰ Ethridge, *Every Woman's Battle*, 146.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 146-147.

annihilation. The righteous woman is the non-woman who asks for nothing and is happy to receive nothing. The more she suffers, the more beautiful she becomes.

In this way, the evangelical Christian response to Bella's compulsion toward self-erasure⁹² is disturbingly symptomatic of the message that suffering is a beautiful gift women give to men and to God. While men may be the protectors, it is women's job to make sure no one suffers on their account. A woman of true worth is one who knows she's worthless. Praising Bella's self-sacrifice comes at the cost of praising her desire to be punished for the sins of others. But as Beth Felker Jones points out in regards to Bella's distorted expression of sacrifice, "if we hope to imitate Christ's sacrifice, we cannot despise what we are sacrificing."⁹³ In the case of Bella, sacrificial love should never be equated with lack of self-worth.

A Call for Emancipation

In *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narrative*, Phyllis Tribble examines four Old Testament narratives of women's suffering, through a Christological lens. Writing of Hagar and the "Desolation of Rejection,"⁹⁴ Tribble identifies the symbolic power of Hagar's story of powerlessness with Hagar resonating as "the self-effacing female whose identity shrinks in service to others."⁹⁵ Tribble's Christological reading departs from predominant messages for women in regards to

⁹² Jones, *Touched By a Vampire*, 69.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁹⁴ Phyllis Tribble, *Texts of Terror: Literary Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 9-35.

⁹⁵ Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 28.

Christ's sacrifice, as the focus is not in praising women who *made sacrifices*, but in drawing attention to the marginalized accounts of women who *were sacrificed*. The story of the "self-effacing woman" is not held up as a Christlike model to emulate, but as a symbol of what Christ's death called to an end.⁹⁶

The disproportionate focus on the atonement as an act of necessary violence⁹⁷ has perhaps done more to entrench women's sanctified suffering than has any New Testament text on women's subjugation. The idealization of Christ's torture on the cross has, in the words of Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker, revisited that torture on others, "masked by the words 'virtuous suffering' and 'self-sacrificing love'."⁹⁸ Glen Scorgie identifies as well how it is not only the misapplication of Christ's subordination on the cross⁹⁹ that has imprisoned women into the role of sufferer, but also the example of Mary as a "sexless, serene, and passively suffering woman whose grace under affliction [is] promoted as an example to all."¹⁰⁰

These models of self-sacrifice, when held up for women already in the midst of cultural marginalization and silencing, serve to entrench rather than challenge the system of women's oppression.¹⁰¹ Serene Jones describes the dynamics thus,

Already suffering from an excess of humility and a debilitating lack of self-containment, [woman] is made by God's grace to recapitulate the dynamics of her oppression and self-loss...Rather than a conversion

⁹⁶ Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 29.

⁹⁷ Fortune, *Sexual Violence*, 142.

⁹⁸ Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001) 249-50 as cited by Fortune, *Sexual Violence*, 142.

⁹⁹ Scorgie, *Back to Eden*, 37-56

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁰¹ Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 63.

narrative that opens into transformation and new beginning, the story that meets woman here is the story of a shattering she knows all too well—more like sin than the freeing act of divine mercy.¹⁰²

Karen McClintock, reminding her readers that “Jesus did not go to the cross ashamed,”¹⁰³ argues that the cross should be viewed “from the perspective of Christ’s resistance rather than his sacrifice.”¹⁰⁴ In this way, “the cross may be seen as the place of liberation from shame and the resurrection as a power that we too may share, as we seek to love one another, liberating us from sin and unworthiness.”¹⁰⁵

Christian women cannot expect to find freedom from shame while the model for their salvation legitimizes their bondage. As Serene Jones puts it, “God desires to empower and liberate women rather than to break what little self-confidence they have.”¹⁰⁶ For women, self-annihilation can have no place in the good news of salvation.

¹⁰² Jones, *Feminist Theory*, 63.

¹⁰³ McClintock, *Sexual Shame*, 117.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Jones, *Feminist Theory*, 63.

**OVERCOMING SIN NATURE; NATURALIZING SEXUAL
AGGRESSION:
THE *BREAKING DAWN* PARADIGM**

“I tried to remember this—to remember pain—but I couldn’t.”

—Bella, *Breaking Dawn*

The final commonality in Evangelicals’ positive response to *Twilight* is the theme of overcoming unhealthy desires or temptations and choosing instead to do good. Edward is praised not only for his ability to resist sexual temptation, but for his choice not to kill Bella in the first place. Stacey Lingle notes how Edward exercises his free will, making up his mind that he “will not eat Bella, no matter how hungry he feels or how good she smells to him. He decides that something is more important than his hunger: Bella’s life.”¹⁰⁷ Kathryn Darden praises Edward’s “innate sense of right and wrong, his concern for his soul, and his willingness to pursue what is right, even if he suffers greatly in doing so.”¹⁰⁸ Likewise, she points out that much of the *Twilight* saga is “about exercising free will to choose to turn away from darkness in search of what is noble, pure and right.”¹⁰⁹ The theme of Edward overcoming his monstrous design, serves as a symbol of overcoming sin and pursuing righteousness. As one fan commenter on

¹⁰⁷ Stacey Lingle, “What Shines in Twilight?,” *Christianity Today*.

¹⁰⁸ Kathryn Darden, “A Christian Look at Twilight Books and Movies: Part 1 of a 2-Part Series,” *Examiner.com*.

¹⁰⁹ Kathryn Darden, “A Christian Look at Twilight Books and Movies: Part 2 of a 2-Part Series,” *Examiner.com*.

Christian Spotlight says, “it's the story of a boy who denies his sin nature and works to become a better person despite his circumstances.”¹¹⁰

The idea of a bloodthirsty vampire controlling his dangerous impulses for the sake of love is indeed, one of the most seductive draws to the *Twilight* saga. Edward’s turmoil about falling in love with his prey arouses compassion in Bella, and devotion from his real-world fans. In Elizabeth Leitch’s words, “the vampire is the bad boy our presence somehow tames and the tortured soul our love somehow soothes.”¹¹¹

But it stands to question whether the narrative actually reveals Edward being anything other than a monster. Yes, he may choose not to kill humans and he refuses to have sex with Bella until she is his wife, but when viewed through categories of sexual violence, the character of Edward represents a dangerous view of male sexuality. Unfortunately, it is this very aspect of Edward that has throngs of women and girls purchasing bumper stickers or wearing T-shirts emblazoned with this logo:

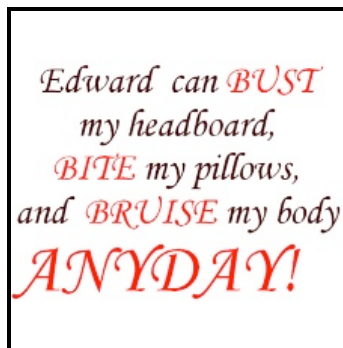


Figure 1. Twilight Mouse pad, <http://www.cafepress.com/+edward-can-bust-my-headboard+mousepads> (accessed December 18, 2009).

¹¹⁰ Brittany [pseud.], comment on “Movie Review: Twilight,” *Christian Spotlight*, a Ministry of ChristianAnswers.Net, <http://www.christiananswers.net/spotlight/movies/2008/Twilight2008.html> (accessed November 28, 2009).

¹¹¹ Elizabeth Leitch, “The Eternal Romance,” *HollywoodJesus.com*.

For all the conversation about abstinence and virtue, the *Twilight* saga is ultimately a vampire romance that eroticizes dangerous love. Edward may be a moral vampire, but he is still a monster. While the character might overcome sinful tendencies, the book's narrative effectively draws on a cultural precedence that links sex to violence. In the final book, we find evidence for why calling Edward a reformed monster is a gross misjudgment.

Into the Text: *Breaking Dawn*

The fourth and final book of the saga begins with a wedding. After a year and a half of tumultuous courtship and countless near-death experiences, Bella finally says, "I do" to Edward. She does so reluctantly, however, as her parents' divorce taught her that marriage dooms love, especially marriage that begins right out of high school. Bella is content with the kind of eternal devotion to Edward that doesn't involve the words "husband" and "wife." 105-year-old Edward, on the other hand, having been born and raised in a more conservative era, presses and cajoles Bella to accept his offer of marriage. The bargain they make is that Edward will agree to change her into a vampire (which he has refused to do out of fear she might lose her soul) after she marries him (which she has refused to do out of fear of becoming a statistic).

Along with becoming a vampire, what Bella has argued for most is the chance for she and Edward to have sex. Edward initially rejects her urging because of his hard-to-control vampire tendencies, but once he's learned to manage those, the real issue becomes not wanting to lose his virtue, or Bella, hers. Knowing that at times in his vampire life he's given in to rage and killed men, though only criminals, he believes his

virtue, (his word for virginity),¹¹² may be his only redeeming quality—literally.¹¹³

Edward believes that as a vampire he no longer has a soul or, if he does, that his soul is not worth saving. His virginity-virtue is the one thing he has left that he thinks might enable him to have eternal rest were he to be killed, [vampires live forever and are nearly impossible to kill].

With their marriage, Edward concedes to attempt sex with Bella but fears even though his vampire instincts are under control that he could still accidentally kill her by his superhuman strength. Bella is convinced that after a year and a half of protecting her, Edward would be physically incapable of hurting her. With caution and nervousness on both sides, they consummate their marriage on their honeymoon night.

The next morning, Bella is shocked and confused by Edward's terse and distant responses. While she wakes up feeling "blissed out,"¹¹⁴ Bella discovers Edward is anything but joyous about their night together. As Bella searches her memory for what he might be so angry about, Edward finally asks reprovably, "how badly are you hurt, Bella? The truth, don't try to downplay it."¹¹⁵ Confused, Bella finally looks down at herself.

...large purplish bruises were beginning to blossom across the pale skin on my arm. My eyes followed the trail they made up to my shoulder, and then down across my ribs. I pulled my hand free to poke at a discoloration on my left forearm, watching it fade where I touched and then reappear. It throbbed a little.

So lightly that he was barely touching me, Edward placed his hand against the bruises on my arm, one at a time, matching his long fingers to the bruises.

¹¹² Meyer, *Eclipse*, 453.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 454.

¹¹⁴ Stephenie Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2008) 91.

¹¹⁵ Meyer, *Breaking Dawn*, 87.

“Oh,” I said.

I tried to remember this—to remember pain—but I couldn’t. I couldn’t recall a moment when his hold had been too tight, his hands too hard against me. I only remembered wanting him to hold me tighter, and being pleased when he did.¹¹⁶

What Bella (and the reader) learns is that despite his best efforts to contain his immeasurable strength, Edward’s passion has physically wounded her. What makes this scenario so disturbing are the lengths to which Bella goes to convince Edward that she is not hurt and only remembers pleasure. While Edward is ashamed of what he allowed his monstrous power to do to her, Bella quickly and easily forgives him, trying to coax Edward out of his dark mood and into one more befitting a honeymoon morning. Even in her narration, Bella is unable to perceive any negative aspect to being physically wounded by sex. She describes her bruises as “blossoming” and her body as “decorated with patches of blue and purple.”¹¹⁷ To Bella, the bruises on her body are pleasant reminders of lovemaking.

We also learn that in the heat of passion, Edward has ripped pillows apart with his teeth, leaving the both of them covered in feathers. After they reattempt sex a few days later Bella wakes to further find that Edward tore entire chunks out of the wooden bed frame. As *Twilight* fandom has proven, Edward’s violent passion, which involves *biting* pillows, *busting* headboards and *bruising* Bella’s body, is more thrilling than fearsome. Though Edward despises what he’s done to Bella, readers find themselves sympathizing with Bella, preferring to revel in the fulfillment of desire than consider the ramifications of Bella’s bruises. Bella does not fear Edward’s strength even when it leaves her black and blue. Instead, Edward’s violence is portrayed as the apex of sexual expression. His

¹¹⁶ Meyer, *Breaking Dawn*, 89.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 95.

passion was so strong that he literally tore the room apart. Whatever character traits might soften Edward's physical violence, the narrative portrays violent sex as the ultimate fantasy. No matter the ethical code Edward has persevered to live by, it is clearly the *monster* that Bella, and the reader are drawn to.

Into The Culture: Sinful Nature

Of the books written by Christians on the topic of *Twilight*'s appeal, only Beth Felker Jones' *Touched By a Vampire* does the work of parsing out the real-life relational implications of Stephenie Meyer's fantasy world beyond solely its spiritual aspects.¹¹⁸

Of Edward and Bella's sexual encounters, Jones writes,

If you, like many readers, find these scenes exciting, it may be because it's part of a powerful cultural tradition in which sex is seen as dangerous, especially for women, and the excitement and intensity of sex is heightened by that sense of danger. We have to reject these lies. Sex is exciting—not because of danger, but because it's a gift from God.¹¹⁹

Jones recognizes the appeal of eroticized violence, and encourages her female readers to consider why it is so exciting. And while evangelical relationship texts written for young women may not glorify sexual violence, there is an element of spiritualized violence present in the lionization of male strength. *Captivating*, the female-gearred follow up to *Wild at Heart*, John Edlredge's guide to authentic Christian masculinity, admonishes women to value men's strength using imagery that connotes danger.

Regarding the need for vulnerability in loving both God and men, Stasi Eldredge says that women "can't wait to feel safe to love and invite. In fact, if you feel a little scared,

¹¹⁸ Dave Roberts' *The Twilight Gospel: The Spiritual Roots of Stephenie Meyer's Vampire Saga*, offers excellent critique of the saga's promotion of materialism and cultural beauty stereotypes, but his criticism largely misses the presence of violence within the relationships portrayed.

¹¹⁹ Jones, *Touched By a Vampire*, 57.

then you're probably on the right path."¹²⁰ Earlier, she explains that "women don't fear a man's strength if he's a good man."¹²¹ By drawing correlations between fear and love, Eldredge encourages a perception that men are naturally volatile, but women should lovingly accept the risk in order to be with them. Eldredge mourns how "so many women fear the wildness God put in their man,"¹²² while encouraging women to emulate Biblical women such as Tamar, Ruth, Rahab and Mary. In holding these women up as models to emulate for their "courage, cunning and stunning vulnerability,"¹²³ Eldredge overlooks the fact that each of these women had to, in ways either violent or submissive, give their bodies up for men's use. Tamar was raped by her brother, Rahab was a prostitute, Ruth offered herself sexually to receive a man's protection, and teenage Mary agreed to carry a child in her womb despite the fact she was unmarried. Though each story does portray these women's courageous perseverance through abuse, neglect and shame, raising them up as exemplars for vulnerability is tantamount to condoning the violation of their bodies. Eldredge misses the danger inherent in these women's stories as she misses the danger in promoting a belief that fear of men is a healthy response to their expression of strength.

In *The Twilight Phenomenon*, Kurt Bruner also fails to notice the threatening implications of Bella and Edward's honeymoon night. He writes,

Like every virgin couple discovering the excitement of sex, [Bella and Edward] had to go slow and learn—especially since Edward knew he could easily ruin the marriage by unintentionally killing his bride. But they

¹²⁰ Eldredge, *Captivating*, 141.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 158.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 155-156.

figured things out, and Bella quickly overcame her aversion to marriage.¹²⁴

Bruner understands the scene to be about the trial and error of embarking on sexual intimacy, rather than the glorification of violence as sexy. Edward's violence is apparently secondary to Bella's unnatural aversion to marriage. Bruner goes on later to critique the character of Bella for lacking "many of the qualities historically associated with femininity—including an upbeat, nurturing spirit that makes a girl appealing to boys."¹²⁵ Furthermore, Bruner highlights that, "until forced, Bella is even averse to the joys of marriage and motherhood."¹²⁶ Bruner implies "the joys of marriage," in this case, sex, are something that can allowably be forced in order to help a woman accept it as right. Combined with this interpretation and our earlier readings of Edward's role relationally and sexually to Bella, its not difficult to see him fitting most of the traits from the following description of "male sexuality as defined by the dominant culture,"¹²⁷ from Marie Fortune's, *Sexual Violence: The Sin Revisited*:

- a desire that its object be "innocent," that is, powerless, passive, subordinate;
- a need to *objectify* the other in order to avoid intimacy;
- a desire to use another person exclusively to meet one's own needs;
- an ability to *rationalize* the experience "she likes it, wants it, needs it...";
- a lack of regard for the other as an autonomous person;
- a lack of responsibility for one's acts; no one makes any demands or requires any form of accountability
- an inability to find erotic or emotional pleasure with an equal...or with someone who takes the initiative sexually;

¹²⁴ Bruner, *Twilight Phenomenon*, 146.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ Fortune, *Sexual Violence*, 20.

- a sexual orientation that is predatory and dependant on the subordination of the partner;
- an attempt to avoid rejection by always being in control.¹²⁸

When reading Edward and Bella's relationship through these lenses, it appears more rooted in domestic abuse and sexual exploitation than in mutual respect and affection. Bella's willingness to overlook Edward's monster heritage does not ennoble her willingness to be marked physically and emotionally by his control, anger and violence. Within the world of the *Twilight* saga, the reason behind everything Edward and Bella do for one another is love, but in the minds of young girls who read these texts, the message broadcasted is that "good" sex is violent sex.¹²⁹ According to Fortune, the dominant culture teaches girls "to desire a romantic, sentimental love relationship *and* to expect a sexually aggressive male who is in control of the social and sexual interaction but not in control of himself."¹³⁰ As a result, "in order to have the romance, girls learn to accept the aggression."¹³¹ Like Bella's acceptance of Edward's destructive touch, evangelical young women are encouraged respond to aggression as authentic masculinity. The eroticization of violence that occurs in the *Twilight* saga is worsened when those who review it on behalf of girls and young women fail to see the patterns of abuse and boundary-violation within the narrative. While Evangelicals note Edward's ability to make sacrifices to pursue righteousness, they miss the fact that Bella is the one being broken for his sins.

¹²⁸ Fortune, *Sexual Violence*, 20.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

A Call for Equality

The eroticization of violence functions at a basic level wherein sexual violence is misconstrued with sexual activity.¹³² Karen McClintock defines violence as “power over another, aggression, hostility, and intimidation,”¹³³ whereas sexual intimacy is “shared power, playfulness, love, and risk taking.”¹³⁴

It wasn't until the 1970's that Western society began to more appropriately identify rape as a violent act, rather than a sexual act.¹³⁵ Thankfully, today the message that rape is about power, not sex is widely disseminated through school health programs and teen advocacy groups.¹³⁶ What is not made clear is the role that power differentials play in our cultural perceptions of romance. In a culture where “male dominance has become eroticized as has its corollary, female submission,”¹³⁷ the belief emerges that “dominance and submission, . . . power and powerlessness create the formula that sparks erotic desire in both men and women.”¹³⁸ As Kimberly George puts it, “domestic violence patterns, eroticized violence deemed ‘romance,’ and harmful power differentials between men and women that are either not noticed or are mindlessly condoned”¹³⁹ are

¹³² Fortune, *Sexual Violence*, xiii.

¹³³ McClintock, *Sexual Shame*, 49-50.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹³⁵ Fortune, *Sexual Violence*, 15.

¹³⁶ Nemours, “Rape,” *KidsHealth.org*, under “TeensHealth” http://kidshealth.org/teen/safety/safebasics/rape_what_to_do.html (accessed March 5, 2010).

¹³⁷ Fortune, *Sexual Violence*, 19.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ Kimberly George, “Normative Restrictions: from 19th century Victorian ‘Ideals’ to Twilight,” *72-27: A Cross-Generational Dialogue between Two Christian Feminists*, <http://eewc.com/72-27/2009/12/01/normative-restrictions-from-19th-century-victorian-ideals-to-twilight/> (accessed December 1, 2009).

reflections of our culture's worst patriarchal dysfunctions. McClintock boldly asserts that "whenever genital contact involves an imbalance of power, it is sinful."¹⁴⁰

Here is where an important clarification is needed. The problem lies not in aggressive expressions of sexuality but when such encounters take place in the midst of an imbalance of power between partners.¹⁴¹ As McClintock writes, sexual intimacy must involve boundaries and activities that are mutually agreed upon.¹⁴² When power differentials are the only mode for sexual arousal, abuse becomes conflated with sexual activity.

What is needed instead is the eroticization of equality,¹⁴³ wherein mutuality becomes not only the sexual ideal, but the relational ideal as well. Indeed, the image of love expressed through shared power is fundamentally Trinitarian. In a culture that relies so heavily on the commoditization of sex, perhaps one of the greatest impacts the Church could have is to lead the way in extricating hierarchy from the heart of intimacy.¹⁴⁴ When equality is eroticized rather than violence, trust and vulnerability are honored and the cowardice of violence is exposed. Such a message of compassion overcoming the urge to control lies at the heart of the Gospel, and would be for women in particular, truly Good News.

¹⁴⁰ McClintock, *Sexual Shame*, 49.

¹⁴¹ While this paper has dealt exclusively with heterosexuality due to the content of the texts being critiqued as well as the culture of evangelical Christianity, the issue of damaging power differentials is relevant for same sex relationships as well.

¹⁴² McClintock, *Sexual Shame*, 50.

¹⁴³ Fortune, *Sexual Violence*, 45.

¹⁴⁴ Gilligan, *Birth of Pleasure*, 21.

CONCLUSION

The most famous quote from the *Twilight* saga is Bella's confession to herself, after putting together the pieces of Edward's secret:

About three things I was absolutely positive. First, Edward was a vampire. Second, there was part of him — and I didn't know how potent that part might be — that thirsted for my blood. And third, I was unconditionally and irrevocably in love with him.¹⁴⁵

In *Escaping the Vampire*, Kimberly Powers rewrites Bella's words as an encouragement for young Christian girls:

About three things you can be absolutely positive: First, every girl longs to be loved with a vast and endless passion. Second, there is a fiercely protective Immortal Hero who longs for your heart. And third, He loves you with an unconditional and irrevocable love.¹⁴⁶

Powers urges young women to seek fulfillment for love and security in Christ, rather than in the fantasy of Edward Cullen. While this may be a valuable message to convey to girls who find that their lives do not live up to the drama and romance of *Twilight*, the categories being offered girls are still those of unmet desire, need for rescue, and love that overpowers. While all the statements in Powers' rewrite may be true, the medium of the message aligns her meaning with a story rooted in female subjugation and male dominance.

By supporting a narrative wherein the female protagonist must dissociate from her body, silence her voice, sacrifice her life and submit to violence in order to receive intimacy, evangelical Christian reviewers of *Twilight* reinforce patterns of misogyny present not only in the dominant North American culture, but specifically in the implicit

¹⁴⁵ Meyer, *Twilight*, 195.

¹⁴⁶ Powers, *Escaping the Vampire*, 111.

theology of popular evangelical gender role texts. The evangelical embrace of *Twilight* symbolizes a willingness in Christian culture to view women as expendable for the sake of men. Like David Nilson of *The Evangelical Outpost* who says, “Edward Cullen is one of only a few role models who takes sexual purity seriously, and who actually embodies it in an attractive manner”¹⁴⁷ the evangelical response to *Twilight* culminates in acceptance of splitting from self to resist temptation, domination as loving-care, self-annihilation as expression of love, and the acceptance of violence as healthy sexual expression. If *Twilight* represents a worthy model of the Christian life, then Christian girls have little to hope for beyond being rescued, then silenced, then broken.

Instead, the overwhelming popularity of the *Twilight* saga could serve as ground for conversation about how love could look when equality rather than violence is eroticized and women’s voices and bodies are respected and honored, rather than controlled and subdued. While Bella may resignedly spend her life apologizing to others for bleeding—for being female—a Christian response to *Twilight* can and should be one wherein young women are taught instead to recognize their bodies as their own, their voices as beautiful, their love as life-giving and their pleasure as gift. Saint Augustine wrote, “Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are Anger and Courage: Anger at the way things are, and Courage to see that they do not remain as they are.”¹⁴⁸ Beauty such as this does not need to be rescued, for she can see for herself in which way lies danger and in which way lies life. The gift of *Twilight* is its ability to shine a light on the

¹⁴⁷ David Nilson, “The Power of Twilight,” *The Evangelical Outpost: Reflections on Culture, Politics, and Religion from an Evangelical Worldview*, entry posted on July 1, 2009, <http://evangelicaloutpost.com/archives/2009/07/the-power-of-twilight.html>, (accessed August 28, 2009).

¹⁴⁸ St. Augustine, as cited by Shari MacDonald Strong, in “The Slope,” in *Jesus Girls: True Tales of Growing Up Female and Evangelical*, edited by Hannah Faith Notes (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2009) 137.

ways destruction of female beauty has become the common story. May we find, beyond anger and courage, a hope that empowers us to tell a truer narrative of relationship other than that of dangerous, vampiric, and consuming love.

“Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;
My body also will live in hope,
Because you will not abandon me to the grave,
Nor will you let your Holy One see decay.
You have made known to me the paths of life;
You will fill me with joy in your presence.”

—Acts 2:26-28

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bruner, Kurt. *The Twilight Phenomenon: Forbidden Fruit or Thirst-Quenching Fantasy?* Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Publishers, Inc., 2009.
- Darden, Kathryn. "A Christian Look at Twilight Books and Movies: Part 1 of a 2-Part Series," *Examiner.com*, September 13, 2009, <http://www.examiner.com/x-11989-Nashville-Gospel-Music--Entertainment-Examiner%7Ey2009m9d13-A-Christian-look-at-Twilight-books-and-movies-Part-1-of-a-2part-series-New-Moon-trailer> (accessed November 29, 2009).
- . "A Christian Look at Twilight Books and Movies: Part 2 of a 2-Part Series," *Examiner.com*, September 13, 2009, <http://www.examiner.com/x-11989-Nashville-Gospel-Music--Entertainment-Examiner%7Ey2009m9d13-A-Christian-look-at-Twilight-books-and-movies-Part-2-of-a-2part-series-with-cast-slideshow> (accessed November 29, 2009).
- Eldredge, John. *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001.
- Eldredge, John and Stasi Eldredge. *Captivating: Unveiling the Mystery of a Woman's Soul*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005.
- Ethridge, Shannon. *Every Woman's Battle: Discovering God's Plan for Sexual and Emotional Fulfillment*. Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2003.
- Fortune, Marie M. *Sexual Violence: The Sin Revisited*. Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2005.
- Geiger, Thaisha. "Movie Review: Twilight," *Christian Spotlight: A Ministry of ChristianAnswers.Net*, <http://www.christiananswers.net/spotlight/movies/2008/twilight2008.html> (accessed November 28, 2009).
- George, Kimberly. "Normative Restrictions: From 19th Century Victorian 'Ideals' to Twilight." *72-27: A Cross-Generational Dialogue Between Two Christian Feminists*. <http://ewc.com/72-27/2009/12/01/normative-restrictions-from-19th-century-victorian-ideals-to-twilight/> (accessed December 1, 2009).
- . "Feminist-in-Waiting." In *Jesus Girls: True Tales of Growing Up Female and Evangelical*, edited by Hannah Faith Notes, 141-149. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2009.
- Gilligan, Carol. *The Birth of Pleasure: A New Map of Love*. New York: Vintage Books: A Division of Random House, Inc., 2002.

- Hansen, Collin. *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist's Journey with the New Calvinists*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008.
- Harris, Joshua. *I Kissed Dating Goodbye: A New Attitude Toward Romance and Relationships*. Updated Ed. Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2003.
- Isaac, Steven. "The Twilight Saga: New Moon," *Focus On The Family's Plugged In Online*, under "Movie Reviews," <http://www.pluggedin.com/movies/intheaters/twilightsganewmoon.aspx> (accessed November 28, 2009).
- Jones, Beth Felker. *Touched By A Vampire: Discovering the Hidden Messages in the Twilight Saga*. Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2009.
- . "Vampires and Young Female Desire," *The Gospel and Culture Project*, November 14, 2008, <http://www.gospelandculture.org/2008/11/vampires-and-young-female-desire/> (accessed December 12, 2009).
- Jones, Serene. *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.
- Kendall, Jackie and Debbie Jones. *Young Lady in Waiting: Developing the Heart of a Princess*. Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Publishers, Inc., 2008.
- Kidd, Sue Monk. *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter: A Woman's Journey from Christian Tradition to the Sacred Feminine*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992.
- Kobes du Mez, Kristin. "Beyond Knights and Damsels: Evangelicals and Gender," *The Gospel and Culture Project*, March 19, 2009, <http://www.gospelandculture.org/2009/03/beyond-knights-damsels/> (accessed December 12, 2009).
- Leitch, Elizabeth. "The Eternal Romance," *HollywoodJesus.com*, under "Twilight (2008) Preview," <http://www.hollywoodjesus.com/DVDDetail.cfm/i/69061AAF%2D000C%2D110F%2DF0925BD6BA7D1A26/ia/BD8898A1%2DFAFA%2DE05A%2D1CFCCEF177ABC8C3> (accessed November 28, 2009).
- . "When Monsters Love," *HollywoodJesus.com*, under "Twilight Saga: New Moon (2009) Review," <http://www.hollywoodjesus.com/movieDetail.cfm/i/BB0216E7%2DBE4E%2DCBE2%2D46C6976A30013E81/ia/140C441A%2DC3F7%2DCB69%2D48752C4800012DC3> (accessed November 28, 2009).
- Lingle, Stacey. "What Shines in Twilight?" *Christianity Today*, October 2, 2008, under "Campus Life's Ignite Your Faith," <http://www.christianitytoday.com/iyf/advice/mediaqa/twilight.html> (accessed August 28, 2009).

- McClintock, Karen A. *Sexual Shame: An Urgent Call To Healing*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001.
- Meyer, Stephenie. *Breaking Dawn*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2008.
- . *Eclipse*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2007.
- . *New Moon*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2006.
- . *Twilight*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005.
- Newman, Georgia A. “Woman’s Place or Women’s Spaces: Intertwining History Herstory, and Christianity.” In *Religion and Sexuality: Passionate Debates*, edited by C.K. Robertson, 65-76. New York: Peter Lang, 2006.
- Nilson, David. “The Power of Twilight.” *The Evangelical Outpost: Reflections on Culture, Politics, and Religion from an Evangelical Worldview*, entry posted on July 1, 2009, <http://evangelicaloutpost.com/archives/2009/07/the-power-of-twilight.html>, (accessed August 28, 2009).
- Piper, John and Wayne Grudem. Eds. *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991.
- Powers, Kimberly. *Escaping The Vampire: Desperate for the Immortal Hero*. Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009.
- Regnerus, Mark D. *Forbidden Fruit: Sex & Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Roberts, Dave. *The Twilight Gospel: The Spiritual Roots of Stephenie Meyer’s Vampire Saga*. USA: Monarch Books, 2009.
- Robertson, C.K, Ed. *Religion and Sexuality: Passionate Debates*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2006.
- Sahms, Jacob. “Vampire With A Soul,” *HollywoodJesus.com*, under “Twilight (2008) Review,” <http://www.hollywoodjesus.com/dvdDetail.cfm/i/69061AAF-000C-110F-F0925BD6BA7D1A26/ia/5CBA91A7-D5E8-0299-D77D0417D62CE839> (accessed November 28, 2009).
- Schantin, Diane. *Parables from Twilight: A Bible Study*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2009.
- Scorgie, Glen. *The Journey Back to Eden: Restoring the Creator’s Design for Women and Men*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005.

- Seifert, Christine. "Bite Me! (Or Don't)." *Bitch Magazine: Feminist Response to Pop Culture* no. 42 (Winter 2009): 23-25. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 10, 2009).
- Siering, Carmen D. "Taking a Bite Out of Twilight." *Ms* 19, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 50-52. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 10, 2009).
- Strong, Shari MacDonald. "The Slope." In *Jesus Girls: True Tales of Growing Up Female and Evangelical*, edited by Hannah Faith Notes, 129-140. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2009.
- Tanner, Kathryn. *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997.
- Trible, Phyllis. *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1978
- . *Texts of Terror: Literary Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.