

Twilight: Undead Sock-hop

“How old are you?”

“Seventeen,” he answered promptly.

“And how long have you been seventeen?”

His lips twitched as he stared at the road. “A while,” he admitted at last.

“Okay,” I smiled, pleased that he was still being honest with me.

Upon learning that her aloof love interest is indeed immortal and drinks blood, Isabella Swan remains thrilled just that he’s paying attention to her. Swan, the teenaged heroine of *Twilight*, is Stephenie Meyer’s foremost triumph as a writer. Self-absorbed, impulsive, and almost completely blind to the consequences of the world she discovers, Bella is depicted with the sort of authenticity that allows everything around her—even vampires and werewolves—to seem credible.

The *Twilight* film will be released this Friday, and whatever the demographic of its audience, the monumental success of Ms. Meyer’s four *Twilight* novels is not to be underplayed. Vampire fiction is rife, and coming-of-age romances involving the supernatural have been a generational fixture since long before *The Lost Boys*. Ms. Meyer has not merely found a niche with the *Twilight* novels, but has transcended classifications of both age-group and genre. *Twilight*, *New Moon*, *Eclipse*, and *Breaking Dawn* are an amalgam of Fantasy, Horror, Romance, and Chick Lit; they may be found in the Young Adult section of bookstores, but women of all ages may be spotted reading them. The gender wall is likely the one boundary these novels will not crack, and while it cannot yet be said that Ms. Meyer is strictly a girl’s writer, the perspective she affords on the world first shown in *Twilight* is one that is utterly hers.

Bella is, by her own admission, an unremarkable seventeen year-old. She comes from a broken home, calls her parents by their first names, and spends a great deal of time silently judging everyone around her. She is slender, “but soft somehow, obviously not an athlete,” and hates gym class. Above all she seems to prefer reading, and because literary works represent some of *Twilight*’s only allusions, it’s difficult not to detect Stephenie Meyer’s English degree. The crowning element of Bella’s credibility, however, is that she dwells in the moment almost entirely, rejecting both past and future as the troughs of the present. Day-by-day and episode-by-episode, her life in a small town in the Pacific northwest seems dedicated to milking an assessment out of everything she encounters, dropping it, and moving on.

When Bella meets the profound mystery that is Edward Cullen, her psychological conveyor belt slips a pulley. He is impenetrable, and resists her read as much—we later learn—as she does his own. With Edward, Bella’s compulsive thoughts fall into orbit, and the narrative of *Twilight* proceeds as a sort of waltz—moving about in space, but always with the two characters facing. A sock-hop is perhaps the better analogy, however, as Bella’s adolescent perspective keeps things closer to *Degrassi High* than to *Romeo and Juliet*. Ms. Meyer is not a pretentious writer, and avoiding the loftier contemplation of love and immortality is what makes *Twilight* so charming. There are real dangers in the novel, to be sure, but by the time James and his evil band of bloodsuckers appear, the violence seems as abrupt and surreal to the reader as it does to Bella herself.

Comparisons to Anne Rice have been as common as they were predictable for Ms. Meyer, but the two writers are as different as the vampires they invent. There are no fangs in *Twilight*, and Edward avoids sunlight because he glitters conspicuously, not because he’ll be burned to a crisp. Ms. Rice’s *Vampire Chronicles* have a traditionally gothic atmosphere,

whereas Ms. Meyer's seem almost comic-book; you would never catch Louis, Lestat, and Armand engaging in a game of baseball, which is what Edward and his family like to do whenever there is a thunderstorm to mask the ruckus. Though both writers eroticize their adopted Draculas, Ms. Meyer is not—unlike Ms. Rice—a writer of erotica. *Twilight* has only a couple of kisses—closed-mouthed—and marriage is brought up before sex. The s-word itself does not come up until the third novel of the saga. Whether one wishes to attribute Bella's good-girlness to age marketing or, as is often done, to Ms. Meyer's own Mormonism, carnality in *Twilight* is something beyond the narrative pale. Ms. Rice, who returned to the Catholic Church only after her Vampire Chronicles were completed, is both creative and unflinching when it comes to the flesh, and mere sex is too mundane for her immortals.

That Ms. Meyer does not gaze Rice-like into the sorrows of an undead existence is again to her advantage in *Twilight*, as Bella appears to know much less about vampires than even your average Goth-girl. For her, it all seems like a private fantasy, and like any good fantasy novel, *Twilight* elicits a great many metaphors. Adolescence and the Otherworld are synonymous for a good reason, one which needs elaborating neither for teenagers nor for those who have been them. Bella's obsession with a seemingly perfect boy, her boredom with school, her problems with her parents and girlfriends, and her preoccupation with her own thoughts are all transparent issues, but they have their own context. To imply that Meyer's readers are directly concerned with real life is to treat the supernatural as window dressing, and not as an immersive element of the novel's experience. Fantasy is not reality's puppeteer, however convenient the interpretation may be.

The adaptation of *Twilight* to film, the success of which will concern the remaining three novels, is sure to provoke the usual debates over casting and narrative accuracy. Likely the most controversial element will be Edward Cullen himself, who is only ever described in the novels in shades of perfection. Actor Robert Pattinson, who plays Bella's love interest, appears a little ghoulish in the posters and trailers, more like a vampire proper than a slightly pale male model. The verdict, however, will belong to the millions who have already imagined him through Bella's eyes.

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