Twilight Follows Tradition: Analyzing "Biting" Critiques of Vampire Narratives for their Portrayals of Gender & Sexuality

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Abstract
Vampires have dominated print literature since the 18th century, eventually becoming more visible as they crossed mediated boundaries and genre divides. Now flourishing in neo-gothic realms like science fiction and fantasy, in print genres like chick-lit and young adult, and in the visual realm (from Hollywood’s big screen to daytime television’s sudsy small screen), vampire narratives are finding increased popularity. Stephenie Meyer’s Twilight series has shined a new spotlight on the all-encompassing umbrella genre that is “vamp lit,” and with it has come renewed attention to the so-called anti-feminist messages present in such narratives, such as the perceived negative characterization of the female protagonists and the problematic representation of female sexuality.

Concerning the latter, many scholars have issues with the supposed abstinence themes present within the books and some claim that the main character is not in control of her own sexual awakening. The widely publicized debate over whether Meyer’s books should be classified as friends or foes of feminism exists as a foundation for this chapter. This essay examines the Twilight series as part of the longstanding tradition of vampire narratives — many seeped with contradictory gender portrayals and diverse depictions of sexuality. This article analyzes Twilight historically, as a product of its time and as a product of its textual predecessors. In doing so, it draws upon literary critiques of canonical texts like Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1897) and of best-selling books like Anne Rice’s The Vampire Chronicles (1976-2003), both of which have been made into Hollywood films. It also analyzes Twilight in terms of its target audience by comparing it to a popular young adult vampire series that predated it, L.J. Smith’s The Vampire Diaries (1991-1992), as well as to the television cult-phenomenon, Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997-2003), both of which have also appeared in different mediated formats.

Recommended Citation