

# (Un)safe Sex: Romancing the Vampire

by Karen Backstein

In the horror universe, the popularity of vampires never seems to die. This makes sense: forever young and beautiful, they are, as *Twilight*'s Edward Cullen points out to his inamorata, Bella, specifically designed to be irresistible to humans. But if the greatest (and most filmed) of literary bloodsuckers, Count Dracula, served as a warning about what would happen to the pure Victorian woman who succumbed to the lure of the mercurial and seductive man, the contemporary vampire often is a very different figure altogether. Just as the eternally living creature within the narrative must adapt to the passing centuries in dress and manner, the fictional construction of the protagonist has had to shift in order to survive as a meaningful symbol for audiences with modern sensibilities.

Across every medium, from books to films to television, today's vampire—at least, that particular type of vampire who serves as the narrative's male lead and the heroine's love interest—has transformed into an alluring combination of danger and sensitivity, a handsome romantic hero haunted by his lust for blood and his guilt for the humans he killed in the past. No bats, no capes, and perhaps just a touch of white pallor to provide a whiff of the grave (the black vampire remains a rarity in mainstream texts)—and so much the better if he shimmers in the manner of *Twilight*'s Edward and resembles an Armani model. He's often courtly, too, in the fashion of another age—the age, in fact, when he was born and lived as a human before “being made.” At the same time, the vampire's power can never be underestimated: the very notion of “devouring” and “eating” someone is redolent of sex (and, in some cases, rape), and he could have what he wants for the taking. “When we taste human blood,” Edward hesitatingly says, “a sort of frenzy begins.”

But he has now become too evolved and moral to engage in that frenzy: “I don't want to be a monster.” In part, the modern vampire story is one about self-control, about man struggling to master his worst impulses—perhaps even his essential nature—through whatever means necessary, be it with synthetic substances (*True Blood*) or by

finding other sources of food (*Twilight*). In an almost Victorian ethos, this “civilizing impulse” is strengthened by the arrival of the heroine, who cements the vampire's determination not to succumb to his bloodthirst. To further stress the point, a “bad vampire” usually throws the hero's chivalrousness into relief: *Twilight*'s vicious and murderous tracker James contrasts with Edward, while *True Blood* juxtaposes the gentlemanly Bill Compton with the imperious and manipulative (but equally sexy) Eric Northman, *The Vampire Diaries* has two divergent brothers, and *Buffy* had Angel and Spike.

But the complex qualities of the hero—his mix of sex and sensibility—is not the only reason women seem to have such an insatiable appetite for vampires today;

## ***Nosferatu* no more, as female audiences swoon over a safely sexual bloodsucker.**

another attraction may be the point of view these texts adopt. They are female-centered narratives that strive for audience identification with the heroine—with her strength, her extraordinary capabilities, her status as an object of desire, or a combination of all these traits. She is the focus of the story, whether she's narrating it (*Twilight*) or the active visual center of the screen image (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *True Blood*).

Apart from the pioneering works of Anne Rice (who a while ago set aside Lestat and company in favor of Jesus, anyway), many of these modern vampire narratives have been directed primarily to teen females and spotlight young heroines—perhaps all the better to stand out against their centuries-old paramours. *Twilight*, *True Blood*, and *The Vampire Diaries*, to name but a few, all have their origins in young adult novels aimed specifically at girls. They then crossed over to capture a huge audience of older women, who lapped up their Gothic atmosphere, dreamy heroes, and romantic focus. *True Blood*, in particular, is pure Southern Gothic that moved into adult mode in its TV incarnation, with its graphic sex scenes and its use of the vampire to signify “the Other.” Imagining a world where an artificial blood allows vampires to live among us

without feeding, the series plays with the idea of “interspecies mixing” as miscegenation—a metaphor that encompasses sexual fear and potency, as well as a social critique. Vampire Bill Compton is literally a refugee from the Civil War, when he was brought over, and the credits feature assorted images from the Old South, including a Klansman.

Despite their dissimilarities, and varied approaches to the construction of vampire life and rules, all these supernatural stories are driven largely by female desire and the female voice. The virginal Victorian ladies of *Dracula* may have needed Jonathan Harker to tell their tale; no longer. Ever since *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* came on the scene, the ladies have spoken for themselves. This is not to say that vampire narratives are necessarily feminist. Their degree of girl power varies, with *Buffy* perhaps the strongest, rarely in need of rescue and able to

slay multiple neck biters with a single kick and knife thrust—and master them romantically, too. (A point wittily made in a fan-created viral video that juxtaposed shots of *Buffy* at her fiercest with images of a dreamy, clearly smitten, and physically passive Edward from *Twilight*. Rolling her eyes at his persistent advances, the Buffster resisted his charms and killed.) Like *Buffy*, singled out among all girls as the one in her generation to be the Slayer, Sookie in *True Blood* is not quite human; possessing extraordinary skills (including the ability to read minds and a strange kind of electrical energy that sometimes flows from her hands), she sidesteps the many lures that drag down her fellow townsfolk, family, and friends.

But no heroine, and no relationship, seems to have enthralled female readers and spectators like that of Bella and Edward in the *Twilight* saga. Unlike much in the horror genre, *Twilight*—both the book and the film—is the product of women: novelist Stephenie Meyer, screenwriter Melissa Rosenberg, and director Catherine Hardwicke. (Hardwicke was replaced by Chris Weitz for the sequel, *New Moon*, a more male-focused and presumably more action-centered narrative in which Bella cedes some of the spotlight to the Native American



In Catherine Hardwicke's *Twilight* (2008), high-school student Bella Swan (Kristen Stewart) falls hard for fellow student Edward Cullen (Robert Pattinson), who, since he's a vampire, is truly a boyfriend to die for.

character Jacob, a werewolf. The removal of Hardwicke is particularly fascinating for Hollywood watchers given the box-office success of *Twilight*—over \$70 million the first weekend—as compared to the critical and financial disaster that was Weitz's *Golden Compass*.) It would be impossible to overestimate the popularity of the novels. At a time when the publishing industry is collapsing, sales of Meyer's books played a huge role in ensuring the financial health of Little Brown, *Twilight*'s publishing house. As was the case when the final *Harry Potter* tome came out, bookstores stayed open at midnight on its release day, hosting parties to draw in readers eager to get their hands on the next installment as soon as possible. When casting for the movie adaptation was announced, its unknown leads became instant celebrities, and the film not unexpectedly was a blockbuster, too. Despite the fact that *Twilight* is remarkably poorly written and astonishingly repetitive, clearly Meyer has her finger on the pulse of young female America.

*Twilight* tells the story of Bella Swan, a teenager who reluctantly leaves her home in sunny Phoenix to come to the gray and rainy climes of Forks, Washington, where her father is sheriff. The move is nothing less than a sacrifice, prompted by her mother's remarriage; Bella generously gives her mom

the space, time, and freedom to travel with her new husband as he pursues his career. Almost immediately upon her arrival, however, Bella, formerly an outsider, finds herself the center of attention at school, with a group of friends and plenty of male interest. But her eye is drawn irresistibly to Edward Cullen and his four sisters and brothers, all startlingly beautiful and supremely standoffish. Bella is shocked when Edward initially reacts to her presence with pure, overt hostility. The truth will out, however, when she discovers that his coldness was just a ploy: he is so deeply drawn to her, and so scared he might harm her in the throes of passion, that he tried to resist his feelings. For Edward and his entire family are vampires—albeit vampires who wish to live peacefully with humans—and this love appears to be star-crossed. Bella and Edward's relationship grows ever more passionate, but always with Edward attempting to make Bella feel a healthy sense of fear at what he is. The true danger, however, comes in the form of a different group of neck-biters, including a “tracker” who hunts down humans forever until he catches the prey he wants. And he wants Bella.

Why have female audiences of all ages so embraced the series, both on the page and on screen? Why, like the character of Edward Cullen himself, has it proven so

irresistible? And how do both hero and heroine differ from their vampire/human counterparts—and what do those differences mean? First, although vampire stories generally fall within horror—and *Twilight* has its share of blood and violence—in many ways it has just as much in common with the romance novel, except with a paranormal twist. Other than his fondness for the taste of blood, Edward is the perfect dark, brooding, romantic hero; tormented by his past and so protective of the woman he loves that he willingly pushes her away for her own good. Only, he happens to have extra vampire powers to help him safeguard the woman better—and to make him even more compelling to viewers.

As with any romantic hero, Edward's worth has to be established within the narrative, which measures him against both vampire and man (and eventually werewolf) in order to validate him as a singular figure and force in any world. On the human side are Bella's male schoolmates, almost all with a crush on her, and all boyish and immature in contrast to Edward (who of course is many years older than them). Sweet and welcoming, into sports and the prom, they represent a normalcy Edward can never have; they also are roundly rejected as boyfriend material by Bella, who gently guides them instead to more appropriate girls.

Also human are the men who try to rape Bella one evening in town; in the book, which is actually scarier than the film's depiction of it, they slyly "herd" a lost Bella to an abandoned cul-de-sac where she has no hope of escape. In the movie, Bella first glimpses two young men at the end of an alleyway after she emerges from a bookstore at night; apprehensively, she heads in the opposite direction, but the pair chase her to a clearing. There, they and a group of drunken friends surround and menace her; as the camera turns slowly around the leering circle of men, a series of nervous jump cuts follows the tormentors' movements as they close in on Bella. Just as she finally tries to defend herself, Edward zooms up in his car, wheels squealing, to act as her savior. The implication is clear: not all dangers come from the paranormal. That the scene is lit to have the same gray-green mistiness as ones featuring several vampire-caused murders further links the human and the undead.

Additionally, this almost-rape by flesh-and-blood males acts a mirror image to James's even more sadistic abduction of Bella, both in its elaborate entrapment and Edward's rescue operation. Both these sequences stand out in this otherwise romantic movie for their terror, explicit threat to Bella's body, and dependence on male physical violence. After luring Bella in, James presses up against her stroking her hair, adding a sexual element to the kidnapping. Unlike the earlier sequence, a long time elapses before Edward arrives and the brutalization is visualized. When Bella tries to escape, James flies to intercept her, using techniques familiar to fans of martial arts films. The surface grace of his airborne trajectory contrasts with Bella's body, which goes into flight in a different way: by being thrown. The crack of her "fragile little human" bones is audible. And James films it all to torment Edward, in what is one of *Twilight's* several interesting and negative references to still and movie cameras in relation to women.

While the vampire, in almost every artistic incarnation, symbolizes impossible desire and transgressed boundaries—the romantic idea that sex = death—*Twilight* shifts the paradigm in interesting ways. *Twilight's* operative equation is love = death, which Bella reaffirms in a voice-over at the start, a ghostly reference to a later point in the story when she expects to die. The gentlemanly Edward not only refuses sex because of the danger to Bella, he also swoops in to pluck her out of sexually threatening situations. In fact, as we've seen, whenever someone in *Twilight* does want sex, or cannot control his desires, he is evil. *Twilight* makes an argument for abstemious love, no surprise given that the story sprung from the pen of a Mormon writer. In a day when the romance novel is packed with explicit semipornographic depictions of bedroom activities far beyond the old-fashioned bodice ripper, *Twilight* harks back to a time when sexual



**Jessica (Deborah Ann Woll), a vampire in HBO's *True Blood*** (photo courtesy of Photofest).

attraction was implied, not acted upon. In this regard, Bella stands apart from such heroines as Buffy and Sookie who consummate both human and vampire relationships. There is a perhaps a touch of Heathcliff and Catherine in Edward and Bella, an affirmation of a powerful love that transcends the limits of human life. For young readers especially, there may be a kind of safety in a story that steers clear of perilous sexual territory and that suggests gazing into one another's eyes and holding hands are the most sublime joys.



**A high-school girl (Nina Dobrev) is torn—well, not literally—between two vampire brothers in the CW series *The Vampire Diaries*** (photo courtesy of Photofest).

At the same time, however, the narrative is packed with sexual substitutes, so the vampire retains his potency even if he pulls back. It is always clear that when the time comes (and it does, in later novels) that sex is permissible, he will be the perfect lover. Perhaps the book, a little more than the film, overtly emphasizes the power of Edward's vampiric touch and kiss, which induces an almost orgasmic reaction in Bella (who faints). Nonetheless, the film finds its stand-in for Meyer's intricately physical descriptions in a soaringly romantic cinematic style. Manipulation of motion becomes one of the movie's hallmarks, a slowing down or hastening of time, most notably to capture Edward's vampire super-speed, but also to indicate perceptual awareness, self-consciousness, and even grace. In lengthy wordless and lushly scored sequences, cameras circle the Pacific Northwest landscape from up high, flying with Bella and Edward as he carries her up trees and cliffs, or looking down upon them lying in the grass. His near-magical powers, and his speed, his ability to bring her into a different world, imply sexuality, skill, and thrill, enhanced by the vertiginous patterns traced by the cinematography. And a large percentage of the audience comes armed with a knowledge of the written text, which will influence their reading of the cinematic images.

*Twilight* the novel is told almost exclusively from Bella's perspective, which the film to some extent replicates, through her voice-overs placed throughout, as well as through the use of point of view. It is Bella who first sees the Cullens, through the slats of the school windows, moving in graceful slow motion, outdoor light falling on them. "Who is that?," she asks. Edward's glance only later meets her originating gaze; with him, she is rarely the "looked at," but the one doing the looking or an equal in an exchange of glances—except at night, when Edward sneaks in simply to watch her sleep. (But we only see that when she wakes suddenly and catches him, so we never share his point of view of her vulnerable body.) And not only does the camerawork emphasize Edward as visual object through lingering shots, but actor Robert Pattinson, a former model, assumes the photographic poses and runway walks of a self-aware performer. Even when we know he is looking at her because of an eyeline match, he stays the visual object for the audience. The usual paradigm of female viewed/male viewer has shifted thoroughly, especially as Bella makes clear how much she despises being the center of attention when under the curious stares of her fellow students.

In one of the most telling scenes, students mill about in front of the school and Angela, a photographer and Bella's friend, aims her camera at something we cannot see; "Oh my God," she exclaims, lowering it, and we cut to a classy sports car from which Bella and Edward emerge. Pattinson plays it



Edward (Robert Pattinson) and Bella (Kristen Stewart) are involved in an exciting but potentially dangerous love affair in *Twilight* (photo courtesy of Photofest).

with the enigmatic smile of a model or movie star on the red carpet who knows all eyes are on him. “Well, everyone’s staring,” Stewart’s unsmiling Bella points out, and we cut to her point of view. As the camera moves forward into the crowd, the scene alternates between normal and slow motion as if emphasizing the sense of unreality Bella feels.

In fact, Bella is defined through scent more than look, a more difficult quality to convey visually, hence the constant verbal allusions to her smell. But when she walks into her science classroom—where she will be seated next to Edward—she steps in front of a fan, again as slowly as the Cullens strode into the lunchroom where Bella first glimpsed them. The wind ruffles her hair, and the film cuts to Edward as the paper on the desk in front of him sharply blows as her *bella aroma* reaches his nose. His body quivers and his hand reaches up to cover his nose and face. When the scene cuts back to Bella, still standing in front of the room, her smile fades. This scene repeats, to more ominous effect, when the wind blows through her hair when James and his more vicious vampires meet Bella; hiding among Edward’s family, the breeze alerts him to a human presence.

The vampire’s effect on his victim has always been one of transformation, but a negative one: the draining of blood, the draining of energy, the draining of life. *Twilight*, unlike its predecessors, tells a story of transformation in a more positive sense. While it has elements of horror, particularly near the end with James’s attack, it more closely resembles a fairy tale—Bella and the Beast, if you will, with elements of Cinderella. At the start of the story, Bella comes to the

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town of Forks without ever having had a boyfriend, and indeed having had few friends at all. But in this new territory, she turns into the central object of desire for every man, and finds her “beast” who is really a prince in disguise. Like a fairy-tale heroine, her qualities are innate, not just the beauty that’s de rigueur, but even her smell, which shocks Edward into submission and draws the deadly attention of James. And, as in a fairy tale, all females are secondary to her: help-mates whose own interior lives remain obscure.

Given this generic shift, it is logical that the vampire hero is moved out of the night and into the light, not just able to see the sun but also to sparkle brilliantly in it. *Twilight*, as a film, rejects Expressionist or neo-noir style: it is not a film of jagged angles or darkness, but of fog and the mossy, hazy green of the Northwestern forest. Water, mountains, and majestic trees form the backdrop for Bella and Edward’s intimate talks, substituting for the moors that Heathcliff and Cathy wandered. The vampires have homes, not coffins, and because they are not limited to sundown, the night is no more threatening than the day. Bella, though a figure who can articulate her desire, becomes an object in need of protection, this time by the vampire rather than from him. Edward rescues his princess from careening cars, a roving band of human rapists, and a vampire who hunts his prey without cease. Ultimately, what Edward would most like to save her from is himself, the one task where he cannot succeed. ■

*Twilight* and its sequel, *The Twilight Saga: New Moon*, are distributed by Summit Entertainment, 1630 Stewart Street, Suite 120, Santa Monica, CA 90404, phone (310) 309-8400, [www.summit-ent.com](http://www.summit-ent.com).

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