

The Twilight Saga

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Robert Pattinson and Kristen Stewart in "The Twilight Saga: Eclipse" (Summit Entertainment)

The Twilight Saga is based on the hit series of four novels by Stephenie Meyer. The first three books have been interpreted for the screen by directors: Catherine Hardwicke (Twilight, 2008), Chris Weitz (New Moon, 2009) and David Slade (Eclipse, 2010). The film version of the fourth novel, *Breaking Dawn*, is being released in two parts, due out in 2011 and 2012. Bill Condon will direct. All the screenplays were written by Melissa Rosenberg and are mostly faithful to the books.

In Twilight Bella Swan (Kristen Stewart), returning to Forks, Washington to live with her dad when her mom remarries, discovers her new boyfriend, Edward Cullen (Robert Pattinson), is not what he seems. He's strong, fast, cold, and his eyes change color. But she's falling madly in love with him despite the warning of her friend, Jacob Black (Taylor Lautner). Putting all the pieces together, Bella realizes she's in love with a vampire who looks seventeen but is a century old. When the vegetarian Cullen family members fight with a rival vampire group, Edward recognizes he cannot protect Bella.

In New Moon (2009), Edward decides it's too dangerous for Bella to be around him so he leaves, sending Bella into a depressed state. Missing her Edward, she spends more time with Jacob trying to distract herself, even going so far as to engage in dangerous thrills to feel alive. One goes wrong and she almost dies. Edward's visionary vampire sister Alice (Ashley Greene) tells him this, but he doesn't get the almost part. Thinking Bella is dead, he takes steps to get himself killed by the Volturi, a group of Italian vampires. Bella saves him just in time.

Eclipse (2010) sees the love triangle between Bella, Edward, and Jacob intensifies. She's still in danger so Jacob's pack of wolves, who are natural enemies of vampires, enter into an uneasy alliance with the Cullen's in order to protect her. Bella wants Edward to change her into a vampire but he won't, not yet. He wants to marry her and when she pressures him for sex, he refuses, wanting to wait for their marriage. But Bella is still uneasy. Jacob confesses his love for her and forces her to admit that she has feelings for him, too. Yes, she loves both Edward and Jacob, but she has already made the decision to be with Edward.

At its most basic, The Twilight Saga is a love story of the adolescent variety. The films are filled with highly emotive and heated longing expressed through close-ups, hungry gazes and beautiful people. The blogosphere

expresses a variety of opinions on the abstinence aspect of the novels and films. Some bloggers are happy that there is no explicit sex (at least, so far) in the romance and that Edward's 100 year-old morals and virtue form a positive influence on readers and viewers. Others think that Bella is objectified because she is the one who wants sex and is denied. Also she is the one who has to change in the stories; Edward cannot and this limits the possibilities for an authentic relationship. The desire of the three main characters is very explicit. Still others, including older women, seem very engaged in Bella and Edward's journey, anticipating the future relationship between a human and vampire -- and the consummation of their marriage in *Breaking Dawn*.

Author Stephenie Meyers has said that the books are about love, not lust. Audiences can make up their own minds about whether or not the story is about 'holy longing' and if experiencing the films is an opportunity to exercise the moral imagination or something else. The books, while initially attention-grabbing, became somewhat tedious to some readers. The films, so far, are visually appealing, but a second look fails to deliver much insight on character development or significant dialogue except on the idea of fulfilling one's true nature. Edward has the most depth, but then he is much older than all the humans.

Some religious educators have expressed concern about the vampire genre, similar to the apprehension over the Harry Potter series. The classic vampire myth is rooted in religion, however, (see Francis Ford Coppola's 1992 film 'Bram Stoker's Dracula') and the Harry Potter series used a school of wizardry or witchcraft for its landscape for adolescent themes of growth and maturity. On a pedagogical note, both series show benevolence by caring adults for their young characters, an indication that the stories, while dark, are not malevolent in the intention of the authors or filmmakers.

A vampire classic, the first of about 170 vampire films that feature Count Dracula, is the black and white silent German film, 'Nosferatu' (1922), directed by F. W. Murnau. It is the first of about 170 adaptations of Bram Stoker's 1897 Gothic novel and is on the Vatican's list of Some Important Films <http://www.usccb.org/movies/vaticanfilms.shtml> (1995) under the category of art. Here the 'undead' sleep in caskets, feed only on human blood, and rise only at night. The Dracula films belong in the 'supernatural' and horror genres. 'The Twilight Saga' has elements of the supernatural, though not exactly religious, at least in any obvious or substantial way; the violence can engender fear but is a thoroughly modern drama (the Cullen clan is 'moral' and chooses to drink only animal blood) and falls outside the Dracula-style vampire horror legend.

Stephenie Meyer is a Mormon, that is, a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints. As such, she is writing from her reality and worldview, even if her books are not meant to be 'message' novels that convey the Mormon creed. Mormons believe that marriage is eternal and the family is central to God's plan, but then, so do Christians (Mormons do not believe in the divinity of Jesus and therefore are not considered Christian). Angela Aleiss, who teaches film and religion at University of California, Los Angeles, writing for Religious News Service (June 25, 2010), believes that 'Mormon imagery runs deep' in the 'Twilight' films. She says that Bella describes Edward as 'an angel' and she cannot imagine anyone more 'glorious' and thinks this is an allusion to the Mormon Angel Moroni. She says that the saga's theme of free will, while evident in most religious beliefs, has a Mormon flavor in the way that Edward, and by extension Bella, talk about choosing their destinies. These seem to reflect the Mormon idea of 'agency', that is the exercise of a radical free will that lets one determine his fate without succumbing to the influence of circumstance.

At the end of the day, however, if a viewer is not acquainted with Mormon beliefs, these will emerge as themes or visual motifs rather than expressions of Mormon theology per se. The influence of Native American spirituality is evident in Jacob's family's vision of nature and spirit. Although it could be a distraction to imbue either the films or books with too implicit or even intentional theological meaning, there are themes in the film that invite theological inquiry such as the struggle between temptation and choosing and doing the right thing, free will, the symbolism of blood, eternal life, sexuality, and the tension between the human and spiritual.

To the believer and thoughtful viewer, ?The Twilight Saga? stories are expressions of popular culture that deserve critical analysis within the faith community. It is valid to ask what the story is about and why so many people are reading the books and seeing the films. It is probably more important, though, to talk together about what the movies mean, because everyone interprets these personally, i.e., according to age, education, stage of moral and faith development, and life experience.

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