

## The Twilight of Teenage Risk

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*Twilight*, the film, was released this summer, building on the popularity of Stephenie Meyer's series of novels for teenage girls. Parents worried about the vampire hero should be less troubled by fantasy figures that have been the stuff of children's literature long before C S Lewis's *Narnia* stories, than concerned, and deeply so, by the risk-taking culture of teenage girls that underpin the popularity of the series.

The film and books which are incredibly popular with younger teenage girls also have a besotted following among older teenagers and adults. That following however is almost entirely female. Scarcely a man, and certainly no boy, will be seen viewing the film or reading the books. Or that has been the prevailing condition overseas, but here in New Zealand it is not uncommon to see numbers of boys watching the film, which says something about the way New Zealand boys are being nurtured for manhood.

However it is a mistake to call the series, as some do, the teenage girls' *Harry Potter*. For all its strengths and weaknesses, *Potter* was popular with boys and girls, and in the pattern of the Enid Blyton stereotype it follows, the boy hero is ably assisted by girl heroines. Not so in *Twilight*, where the hero is unmistakably the boy and the heroine, if she can be called that, is a besotted, sexually driven moral, emotional and physical wimp who can only find meaning in life by abandoning herself at great risk to her man.

The fact that there is no premarital sex is lauded by some bloggers as a virtue commending the books for Christian girls. But both the heroine, Bella, and the vampire Edward are driven by desire, a desire that is entirely self-centred in gross perversion of biblical sexuality. Worse, in Edward we have a stereotype of a man as a stalker who can barely control his sexual appetites in contrast to the innocent vulnerability of girls such as Bella.

He spends the night, secretly, in Bella's bedroom watching her: "I wrestled all night while watching you sleep, with the chasm between what I knew was *right*, moral, ethical, and what I *wanted*. I knew that if I continued to ignore you, as I should ... someday you would say yes to [someone else]." p265 But the moral tension he describes is not between the rights and wrongs of saying "yes" to someone but that if she says "yes" to him, she will lose her life and become a vampire. The lust itself is entirely acceptable: "I know that love and lust don't always keep the same company." p271 Make no mistake, lust features in these stories for girls. When Bella tells, "His fingers touched my lips lightly making me shiver again," Edward confesses "There are other hungers [besides the one for blood]. Hungers I don't understand." p243

Her desires are just as intense, but being feminine are portrayed as pure despite driving her to lie, deceive, discard restraint and ultimately abandon her very humanity (foreshadowed in *Twilight* and fulfilled later in the fourth book in the series). As for their pashing in *Twilight*, it is described in such graphic detail as to plunge episodes of the book into the category of soft porn, calculated to provide vicarious gratification to young (and perhaps not so young?) readers.

The fourth book in the series, *Breaking Dawn* goes much further than *Twilight* in its stimulating the reader to fantasise about sex, and in the demeaning of sex itself. The series has been building to the first sexual encounter between Bella and her vampire Edward. Some have praised the series for Bella's refusal to have sex until she and Edward are married, but this first sexual encounter on honeymoon is portrayed graphically, with only descriptions of their genitals and actual copulation missing from the erotic narrative. In this encounter, Bella is badly bruised as Edward's physical powers are too great for the still-human Bella, but she nonetheless finds having sex with Edward so satisfying she does not want to stop even though it will endanger her life. Thus sex, even within marriage, is portrayed as not only a matter of self-gratification and violence, but of such importance to self-realisation that all other considerations of safety and propriety are to be discarded.

Once Bella has been transformed into a vampire, now able to match Edward's physical powers, the reader is regaled with accounts of an ongoing series of night-long rampages of self-gratification and violence. Thankfully, these encounters are observed only from outside of their house in which the furniture and house itself can be heard being smashed as their sexual appetites are fulfilled. The final denigration of purity arises as the family discuss these encounters with teasing humour in the daylight hours. In short, the series' portrayal of sex is diabolically perverse.

For an excellent examination of the moral issues, see Beth Felker Jones' [\*Vampires and Young Female Desire\*](#), a review of *Breaking Dawn*.

The real evil of *Twilight* however is the place it gives extreme risk-taking as a way of validating young women. The popularity and danger of the books and film lie not in teenage fantasies but in reflection and confirmation of the values to which contemporary teenage girls cleave. Bella becomes a person in her own right when she takes risks in defiance of her parents (separated of course) and her friends, in denial of morality and rationality, in contempt of life and safety.

The ultimate exaltation of selfishness, the moral (or rather, immoral) climax of the series, comes toward the end of *Breaking Dawn*. Having insinuated her former boyfriend and werewolf Jake into their family while still maintaining a wifely relationship with her husband Edward, and having betrayed *everyone* and *everything* to satisfy her own desires, Bella enthuses, "I was amazing now – to them and to myself. It was like I had been born to be a vampire. The idea made me want to laugh, but it also made me want to sing. I had found my true place in the world, the place I fit, the place I shined." (p524) She now has the adulation of everyone, an adulation that is outshone only by her adulation of herself.

The message is unmistakable and, gift-wrapped in Bella's happiness, powerful: use and discard everyone and everything to achieve self-fulfilment. At whatever cost, become the glorious centre of your own universe. Yet even here Bella does not stand alone. She does not achieve independent self-actualisation, for she is in reality only satisfied when she has Edward's unstinting devotion and body. Bella's ultimate attainment is to become a selfish pleasure-addict, dependent upon the worship and service of others whose only value is what they give her.

Today's teenage girls and young women are risk-takers. It is what validates youngsters who have every material gratification at their finger tips (or credit card swipe) and have been schooled to strive for self-fulfilment. These youngsters are reported to be outstripping boys in promiscuity, in drinking and party-pill binges, and seeking admiration from peers in putting their character, their lives and their eternities at risk. Bella enables young readers to vicariously take risks the lack of real-life vampires makes impossible even to today's gratification groupies. In this it reinforces the contemporary cultural norm of validation through risk and encourages girls and women to value themselves by the risks they take.

Feminism is dead to these youngsters: Bella nurtures her pathetic dependency, unable to do anything to be a person of value without her rescue by her "saviour" Edward, her "Adonis", her perfect manly man to whom she will abandon herself and in whom she will willingly lose all individuality. Even Edward's adoration of her beauty offers Bella no assurance that she is anything: her validity is in Edward, and his admiration for her is simply a means by which she can lose herself in him. Ask 14 year-old girls if this was what they really desire, and 9 out of 10 are likely to swoon in confession, especially if they are in a group of peers when you ask!

It is just as interesting however to note that a minority of teenage girls just cannot stand the books; not, as a rule, because those girls hold to a feminist perspective, but more often because they see the books as sentimental fluff. That's not a bad assessment: the books do have some literary merits, but they are insufficient to redeem them as works of lasting literature. The plots, while adequately predictable as is necessary in children's literature, have sufficient twists and surprises as to keep interest. Settings are realistic and enticing, and characterisation has more depth than many teenage novels. But the story-telling itself is shallow, with vast tracts (and I mean vast tracts) of gossipy description of character development and thinking with little opportunity for the reader to make judgements and inferences from the story. This no doubt appeals to teenage girls whose dominant discussion topic, after shopping, is gossip, but it hardly makes for mind-stretching literature.

If risk-taking reflects and reinforces contemporary culture, the endorsement by other Christian bloggers of the concept of commitment that pervades the novels reflects and reinforces a perverted theology so dominant in contemporary Christianity. Bella's commitment and faithfulness to Edward, no matter what it will do to her or to him or to others, is lauded as a Christian virtue. It is not. There is nothing Christian or biblical in making or maintaining a commitment that is wrong in its foundations. This is of course a peer-pressure thing: teenagers' lives are built around intense commitments to (or against!) each other, and there is no greater sin than to breach a commitment no matter how virtuous the reason or evil the commitment. But it is also a concept encapsulated in an ill-defined touchy-feely concept of love that fails to understand or give expression to the Bible's definition of love as giving up your self-fulfilment for the genuine good of others, and above all of Jesus' call to perfect love by submission to his transcendent standards and values. (John 15:12-14)

There should be no mistake that these stories are directed at undermining biblical concepts of sin, morality and salvation. The cover of *Twilight* now carries an image of Bella and Edward from the film, but the original version had a pair of girl's hands holding an apple as an Evisch temptress. When Bella weighs right against self

gratification she declares to Edward, “I would rather die than stay away from you.” His response is to declare his infatuation with Bella with the words, “So the lion fell in love with the lamb.” p240 The imagery throughout the book is unmistakable a perverse parody of the biblical story of the Saviour’s sacrificial redemption of sinners.

Should parents allow their teenage daughters to read the books or view the film? That is the wrong question. If their daughters like the books and want to read them; if girls want to watch the film and like it; they do so because they are already committed to, or at least vulnerable to, the sexuality, risk-taking and selfishness *Twilight* provides vicarious experience in, validation of, and encouragement for. Banning *Twilight* is likely to confirm those values, encouraging girls to seek validation in peer rewarded loyalty and risk-taking. Better for parents to read the books and view the film *with* any girls who like them and discuss the stories, analyse the techniques by which their values are being manipulated, in the light of transcendent biblical truth critique the belief systems espoused, and show their girls that their personal integrity lies not in self-gratification or in a fantasised Adonis, but in a true Saviour.