



## **Breaking Faith: Disrupted Expectations and Ownership in Stephenie Meyer's Twilight Saga**

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Every reading experience draws from three essential elements—text, author, and reader—that combine to create varied interpretations of individual works. The dynamics of power among these elements, however, has been affected by the wide availability of online media, particularly in the case of literature with large fandoms. Stephenie Meyer's recent Twilight saga, comprised of her books *Twilight*, *Eclipse*, *New Moon*, and *Breaking Dawn*, provides a useful case study for this phenomenon, proving how accessible and instantaneous communication on the Internet transforms interpretation and empowers readers.

The Twilight saga's enormous popularity is closely tied to its author's tense relationship with her fans. Meyer's frequent interaction with fans via online media disrupts their expectations and leads to competing interpretations. In *Fan Cultures*, Matt Hills talks about the "loosening of identification in fantasy" (69) whereby the fantastic elements in fiction allow

the reader to see past self-identification, providing more entry points into interpretation and interaction with the rest of the fandom. I would suggest that, in a similar process, the more fans interact with and read the books, the more the constructed world of the texts becomes collectively defined and anticipated. When the fandom's collective vision of the textual world is undermined, fans personally feel deceived and misled and resist the altered structure. The fandom then turns to the most accessible outlet for its frustrations—the Internet—which gives a united voice to its displeasure and a venue for its action against author and text.

Meyer's saga forms expectations for the way her vampire world works, beginning with *Twilight*. Subsequent books disrupt those expectations and breed fan resistance, while the growing power of the Internet allows fans to assert their resistance more forcefully. The tension between Meyer and her fans thus develops from the gulf between her creation of the Twilight

world and the fans' expectations of it, a tension exacerbated by frequent online communication. The friction between Meyer and the Twilight fandom appears most visibly in feminist responses, which are in turn complicated by a connection to the romance genre, and in disagreements over what is "canon" in the series.<sup>1</sup> Online communities and conversations, then, develop a sense of ownership in fandoms by creating a more shared horizon of expectation that is centred on its fans. As Meyer shows us, the result is that, by engaging with fans, authors actually empower their fandoms in a way that tips the balance of power and the ownership of text toward the reader.

### **A Coven of Fans: Defining Fandoms**

A definition of "fandom" will help limit the scope of my explorations to particular types of readers and authors, thus making a study of Meyer and her avid readership a fruitful way to navigate and to understand evolving fan cultures in relation to online media. Cultural studies distinguishes a fan from an enthusiast by using a few common attributes shared among varying fan cultures. Roberta Pearson, citing help from a conversation with MIT professor William Uricchio, suggests that, rather than being simply and temporarily intrigued by a cultural text and engaging with it on a reflective level, fans actually "incorporate the cultural texts as part of their self-identity, often going on to build social networks on the basis of shared fandoms"

(102). By engaging in activities such as TwiRock and TwiCon,<sup>2</sup> by dressing up for midnight release balls, and by actively engaging in online discussions about the books, Twilight readers cross the line from enthusiast to fan. Twilight fans, like those of other fandoms, are thus characterized by a high level of social interaction and networking; they are a group of dedicated, connected, and actively perceptive readers.

Henry Jenkins's and Matt Hills's concepts of dynamic fan communities illuminate the social interactions of Twilight fans and the extent to which they internalize Meyer's books. Jenkins expands the notion of fandoms as social constructs by arguing that "fan reception cannot and does not exist in isolation, but is always shaped through input from other fans" (*Textual Poachers* 76). Jenkins also suggests that fans do not merely build communities, but that they actively engage in cooperative interpretation, so that the meaning produced emanates from a combined fan psyche. More recently, Hills has extended Jenkins's identification of co-operative fan communities by suggesting that fandoms "become immersed in non-competitive and affective play" (112). Such play can include the appropriation of textual elements for fan fiction, costuming, and even musical adaptations of textual material. In TwiRock, for instance, bands sing about events, characters, and themes found in the Twilight books. Many of the bands, while performing, adopt the personas of certain Twilight characters or

insert themselves into the Cullen vampire family. The Twilight fandom is so large, and the social investment of fans not just in the books but in the friendships formed around them is so great, that the Twilight phenomenon actually helps construct fan identities. The sense of community within and even between fandoms should not be underestimated, because the social aspect of Twilight fan culture influences the reception and interpretation of the cultural text heavily.

In addition to defining “fan” in terms of the construction of social identity, scholars have developed various levels of fandoms, including fanatics, cult fans, anti-fans, kind-of fans, dominant fans, and marginalized fans. For the purposes of this study, however, I will simply use the term “fan” broadly to indicate not just those who laud the text but all those who actively engage with the text in a way that requires careful and repeated reading, that mediates their social interactions, and that helps shape their own self-identity. While many of the topics I discuss involve criticisms of Meyer’s texts and her departures from her established canon, it is important to remember that fans are capable and active critics, notwithstanding their undying love for the Twilight texts. These fans frequently have similar criticisms to those of anti-fans; indeed, with the Twilight saga, it is sometimes difficult to tell the difference. Vivi Theodoropoulou describes “a particular category of anti-fans: those whose status as such is defined by the fact that they are fans” (316).

Cleolinda Jones, an active and well-spoken Twilight blogger, epitomizes this paradox: she scathingly—and humorously—blogs about the Twilight saga and yet still confesses a love of the books: “I enjoyed the first book—and hated the second—more than I expected. The third one just made me scream. Let’s not even get started on the fourth one. And yet I am hopelessly addicted to them, and waiting for *Midnight Sun* as if it were Christmas.” Do Jones’s consistent and sophisticated criticisms outweigh her professed enjoyment of the books, making her an anti-fan? Or does her love of the books outweigh her biting reviews of them, making her a fan in the traditional sense of the term? For the purposes of this study, what matters is that Jones and fans like her are actively engaging with the texts in a virtual environment and in a way that shapes their understanding of, and interaction with, the world around them.<sup>3</sup>

### **Meyer vs. Twilights: The Horizon of Expectation**

Given the characteristic boundaries of fandoms in general and of the Twilight fandom (or “Twilights” in particular),<sup>4</sup> a theoretical framework based on reception theory is particularly useful for a discussion of Meyer’s Twilight books. Fan studies that draw on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Theodor Adorno, or Donald Winnicott often fail to focus on interpretation of the text itself and look at the text as a way of producing social and cultural hierarchies or distinctions. The



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use of the work of Roland Barthes in fan studies tends to shift the focus to the fans and their interpretations as the object of study. By removing the text's author from consideration, however, scholars who rely on Barthes miss the increasing flow of information between authors and fans mediated by the Internet. Surprisingly, some fan scholarship rejects reception theory entirely. Cornel Sandvoss, for example, suggests that "fandom as a mode of reading sits uneasily with the aesthetic principles of reception theory" because such theory creates more rigid expectations and a determination to "construct meaning in reference to the function of fandom greater than in other processes of reading" (31). I would suggest that it is precisely these results that make reception theory an important lens through which to study fan cultures. As a branch of literary inquiry that emphasizes readers' processes of negotiating a text and the active rather than passive interpretation of texts, it seems a valuable discourse for considering how fandoms operate.

Hans Robert Jauss's model of the horizon of expectation is particularly well suited for studying the reader-author relationship. For Jauss, the horizon of expectation is an "objectifiable system of expectations that arises for each work in the historical moment of its appearance, from a pre-understanding of the genre, from the form and themes of already familiar works" (22). He suggests that the historical moment we live in and our past reading experiences with similar texts form preconceived notions of what a new text has to offer. While Jauss applies his theory to a broad body of work and considers the way expectations change historically, his model is also applicable to a more condensed body of work, such as Meyer's saga. Using the concept of "the horizon of expectation" provides a nuanced framework and formula for thinking about

what fans anticipate in Meyer's books and the resulting "canon" in the books. As an evaluation of the tension between fans and author reveals, not only are fans able to improve their relationships with the textual canon, but they actually are able to claim ownership of it.

### **Vampire Strength or Human Weakness: Feminism and Romance**

In *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, Pamela Regis defines the romance as "a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines" (14). This story of courtship and betrothal, she explains, is always borne out by eight narrative elements: "a definition of society, always corrupt, that the romance novel will reform; the meeting between the heroine and hero; an account of their attraction for each other; the barrier between them; the point of ritual death; the recognition that fells the barrier; the declaration of the heroine and hero that they love each other; and their betrothal" (14). The emphasis given to these individual elements, Regis suggests, varies from book to book and often times a single element is repeated many times throughout a book. While Meyer's books clearly meet each one of the eight narrative structures, often several times over throughout the course of the saga, the most significant is the betrothal. Bella is not only betrothed, but she marries, consummates her marriage, and bears a child. Despite the clearly mapped romance structure of the

Twilight saga, the books are not marketed as such, and it appears that some fans are not familiar with the genre and thus fail to include such elements in their horizons of expectation. Meyer's own comments indicate that her understanding of the books as feminist in their own right fits into current romance scholarship, which suggests that the genre represents women's freedom rather than their bondage in love (Regis xiii). If Meyer's fandom at large considered the saga a traditional romance,<sup>5</sup> then Bella's weakness, Edward's control, and the depiction of generally archaic gender roles might become part of the Twilight saga's specific horizon of expectation and be reclaimed as acts of freedom or choice, rather than becoming the subject of contention between Meyer and the Twilights.

In addition to accounting for part of the tension between Meyer and her fans, using the romance genre as a reference point provides a valuable lens for understanding the cultish appeal of the Twilight saga. Its adherence to the romance genre predisposes it to an extensive, cultish fandom. Hills suggests that cult texts "are not entirely arbitrary" and that they "share 'family resemblances' such as endlessly deferred narrative, hyperdiegesis, auteurism and contingent denarration" (143). Indeed, the family resemblances of cult texts echo those of genre fiction. Hills indicates that, while cult texts are not a genre in and of themselves, genres often give rise to large, active fandoms. In overlooking the body of romances with "bodice-ripper"

conventions, fans may not expect Bella to react or submit to events and characters in the ways she does, perhaps the reason for accusing Meyer of anti-feminist sentiments. Meyer, ratcheting up the tension between her and her fandom, denies allegations of anti-feminism and, like many modern romance writers, argues for the empowerment of her heroine. Though fans might certainly push back against the romance conventions of the novel even if they understood them as such, the fandom's reading of the Twilight saga as a unique series, rather than as part of a larger genre structure, seems to be part of the fans' claims of interpretive ownership.

Many Twilight readers interpret Bella as an anti-feminist heroine because of her conservative decisions and her complacency in the face of possible bodily harm. Susan Elizabeth Phillips suggests that this is a common feature of the character of the romance heroine, who has a tendency to thrust "her chin up in the air and lay down the law to a towering, menacing, broad-shouldered male" in complete disregard of personal safety, often ignoring "the fact that he can flatten her with one sweep of his arm or crush her head between his hands . . . the fact that he can *kill* her if he wants to" (57). Phillips's new romance heroine is seen in Bella's confrontations with Jacob, who has a tendency to lose his temper and his self-control. Phillips also suggests that the romance heroine will not back down from her stance despite certain retaliation,

"sometimes with harsh, hurtful words, sometimes with aggressive lovemaking" (57). Bella's insistence on sex, despite Edward's crushing, bruising strength and ability to end her life inadvertently in the heat of passion, also suggests her willingness to disregard her own safety and to submit to whatever physical pain he will inflict on her. Whether this is evidence of Bella's strength and courage or of Meyer's anti-feminist agenda becomes a source of hot debate in online discussion boards, blogs, and forums, and serves as a rallying point for fans' appropriation of the interpretation of the novels.

Referring to *Breaking Dawn*, the fourth book in the saga, Lucy Mangan's article in the *Guardian* accuses Meyer of writing "a depressingly retrograde, deeply anti-feminist, borderline misogynistic novel that drains its heroine of life and vitality." Sarah Seltzer's article in the *Huffington Post* claims the Twilight saga is an "allegory perfectly tailored for a (hopefully fading) era of abstinence-hype and hand-wringing about 'hook-up culture'" that sports a "rabid antifeminist message." Newspaper articles and book reviews are quick to accuse the series of anti-feminism in scathing (yet often non-specific) terms, and Twilights frequenting forums, blogs, and other discussion boards are not far behind. It is important to note that Twilight fans are indeed sophisticated readers capable of critical and detailed analysis. The online media through which they share and assert their interpretations expose them to mainstream media interpretations and criticisms such

as those found in the *Huffington Post*, the *Guardian*, *Bitch Magazine*, and other outlets of critical literary and pop culture analysis. It is not uncommon, in trolling through online Twilight forums, to see posts linking and responding to articles in the mainstream media.

In the context of Meyer and her Twilight saga, definitions of feminism revolve around choice. Fans claiming to be feminist or writing on feminist-labelled websites and forums rail against either Bella's lack of choice in a patriarchal system or against the conservative decisions she does get to make when choice is offered to her. One self-described teenage girl of eighteen has a "healthy disdain" for gender depictions in the Twilight books because of the way that "Edward is in control of Bella's sexuality" (applecider10).<sup>6</sup> In *Breaking Dawn* and the books leading up to it, Edward refuses any sort of sexual relationship with Bella until after their marriage, and in fact turns her desire for sex into a bargaining chip to coerce her into an engagement she doesn't want. Another poster's comment that *Breaking Dawn* "blatantly promotes that the only acceptable way for a woman to live is as a mother" (nightingale) is also not without textual basis, as Bella, who never considered having a child before, offers up her life in order to keep Edward's child when she finds herself pregnant unexpectedly. Several more fans accuse Meyer of advocating tolerance of abusive relationships, pointing

to fade-to-black sex scenes in *Breaking Dawn*, out of which Bella emerges unbroken but not unscathed. She finds "a faint shadow across one of [her] cheekbones," her "lips were a little swollen," and the rest of her "was decorated with patches of blue and purple" (*Breaking Dawn* 95), yet she later begs Edward for more of the sex that created both pleasure and bruises.

Meyer characteristically responds thoroughly to fans' feminist criticisms of her books through her website and through interviews to argue that her heroine is in fact a strong, intelligent woman who does not advocate an anti-feminist message. On her own "Frequently Asked Questions" web page for *Breaking Dawn*, Meyer devotes several paragraphs to explaining why Bella is not an anti-feminist heroine. She explains that "in my own *opinion* (key word), the foundation of feminism is this: being able to choose," then goes on to assert that Bella does indeed get to make her choices (a claim that many Twiligheters dispute, particularly in this book). Meyer also uses that space to argue that, even if those choices would not necessarily be the right choices for someone else, they were certainly the right choices for Bella. In an interview with MTV, Meyer admitted to enjoying questions about Bella and feminism because they give her the opportunity to set the record straight by explaining her version, an indication of the level of control Meyer likes to retain over her creation. In the same interview, Meyer criticizes the idea that "to be a strong female role



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model you have to know Kung Fu and the whole line of Prada products from that year," suggesting instead that a female character like Bella "can be a strong person by just being who [she is] and being really strong mentally" (qtd. in Carroll and Stolz). Meyer makes her opinion of Bella and Edward's relationship clear—it is a healthy and natural one, if a bit unusual, and is based on Meyer's understanding and interpretation of the nature of true love. Meyer's rebuttal certainly resonates with contemporary readings of the romance genre. Like Phillips, Meyer seems to believe in a heroine who "possesses all the softer qualities traditionally assigned to women but who has none of a woman's physical limitations because *his strength now belongs to her*" (58). Meyer also turns to choice to define feminism, arguing that she always understood the term to indicate that women had the right to choose how to live their lives. So for Meyer, Bella is not anti-feminist because of her choices, but rather an empowered heroine in that she does make choices, ones that allow her to draw strength from Edward. Clearly, Meyer's horizon of expectation for her own saga is just as firmly fixed as the fandom's alternative horizon of expectation.

Ironically, however, while Twiligheters may not recognize the series as part of the traditional romance genre and criticize it for its romantic elements, they often devour it for those same reasons. Twilight fans swoon over Edward Cullen. Many fans do not feel Bella's space or privacy is violated when, in *Twilight*, he spends every night for months sneaking into her bedroom and watching her sleep.<sup>7</sup> Rather than interpret Edward as a stalker, fans gush about his devotion to Bella. Female Twiligheters do seem to delight in the prodigious care Edward takes of Bella and willingly accept his assertive, domineering character, a common feature in romance

novels. At the same time, however, many of those readers resist the passive elements of Bella's nature. These contradictory responses are, in Hills's view, characteristic of fandoms. We can see that such dualisms abound in the Twilight saga's reception, through the fandom's acceptance of some romance tropes and rejection of others. Meyer attempts to reconcile feminist criticisms with the character depictions in her novel through an interpretation of what constitutes female empowerment that resonates with romance writer and scholar Jayne Ann Krentz's suggestion that romances "defy the masculine conventions" simply because "they portray women as heroes" (5). Meyer's efforts reveal a strong desire to shape her fans' understanding to fit her own. The online media that make it so easy for Meyer to disseminate her own version of Bella, however, also empower the collective fandom and their interpretations, ultimately threatening to wrestle control of the saga from her grasp.

### **The Vampire Canon: Blowing Basic Biology out the Window**

The dispute between Meyer and her fans over feminist interpretations is just the tip of the iceberg: a ferocious competition for control of the text also takes place in the debate over constructions of the vampire world. The publication of *Breaking Dawn* in August 2008 resulted in a feverish backlash against the

Twilight saga and its author, based on her departure from the "fanon," or what the fandom considered to be canon. The first example of fan backlash had to do with vampire biology. In an interview five months before the release of *New Moon*, Meyer explained, "I've had tons of people ask if vampires can have babies. The answer is no." She explains that vampires are frozen in the moment of their alteration and their bodies no longer have the ability to change: if vampires cut their hair or fingernails, these won't grow back. She speaks specifically to the female condition, pointing out that, since vampires' bodies freeze at the moment of change, women no longer have ovulation cycles, thus rendering a pregnancy impossible. Meyer also claims that "most human fluids are absent in my vampires. No sweat, no tears, no blood besides that which they ingest—they don't have their own blood" ("Personal Correspondence #1"). Meyer's explanation of vampire biology, included in the Twilight canon, contributes to a specific understanding, and set of expectations, about the vampire world.

Though overlooked at the time of the interview, the word "most" tacked on before "human fluids" took on crucial meaning for Meyer and her fans and became the clash point for interpreting the plot and character development of *Breaking Dawn*. Feeling convinced by Meyer herself that any sort of pregnancy involving a vampire was impossible, fans were shocked and angry when, in *Breaking Dawn*, vampire Edward

Cullen fathers a child with his human wife, Bella Swan. On her website, Meyer responds to vitriolic fan reactions by explaining that she did not change the rules but had planned the birth of Edward and Bella's child from the moment she decided to do a sequel. In her research on vampires, she came upon an entry for the Incubus, a vampire that fathers children with human females. She did not include this legend in *Twilight*, but knew then that Bella would eventually bear Edward's child. She claims to have been "always very careful when I answered the 'Can vampires have babies?' question, because I didn't want to say anything incorrect, but I also didn't want to make the future super-obvious" ("Frequently Asked Questions"). Surprisingly, Meyer does not let her defence rest there. Her need to pacify fans and to explain herself leads her to a detailed biological explanation of how Edward Cullen fathered a child. Meyer writes that "throughout the vampire's body are many versions of venom-based fluids that retain a marked resemblance to the fluid that was replaced, and function in much the same way and toward the same purpose" ("Frequently Asked Questions"). So, according to Meyer, her male vampires experience arousal in much the same way as a human male, and even have venom-based fluids that closely resemble seminal fluids and that "carry genetic information and are capable of bonding with a human ovum" ("Frequently Asked Questions").

Meyer's defence of the events in *Breaking Dawn*

was bracing. In an interview before the release of *Breaking Dawn*, Meyer told *Entertainment Weekly's* Nicole Sperling that "this is the story the way it should be" and that she's "thrilled with the ending, thrilled with the way it all comes together" ("*Twilight*"). While Meyer anticipated some fan displeasure with the introduction of Renesmee as Bella and Edward's child, her interest in protecting the story from a barrage of accusations of inauthenticity and of a disregard for the established canon reveals her vested interest in controlling the meanings and interpretations of Bella and Edward's world. If her dedication to preserving the world of her characters as she envisions it shows an interest in retaining ownership over her creation by defending her understanding of the canon, then the fan responses to *Breaking Dawn* reveal an equal commitment to poaching<sup>8</sup> text and appropriating ownership of the canon. Jenkins claims that, in a fandom, "previously poached meanings provide a foundation for future encounters with the fiction, shaping how it will be perceived, defining how it will be used" (*Textual Poachers* 45). While disrupting any reader's horizon of expectation will affect the text reception, Jenkins points out that a fandom's largely shared horizon of expectation carries more weight than the expectation of one author and more importance because of the fandom's emotional and social investment in these expectations. Additionally, the fandom's sheer numbers give fans the ability to

inundate each other with interpretive material at a pace with which Meyer simply cannot keep up. Their shared anticipation of how the canon operates and their high level of investment give them a competitive edge in vying with Meyer for creation of the horizon of expectation and textual ownership.

As I mentioned above, a large body of the fan reaction to *Breaking Dawn* was indeed acerbic and accusatory, indicating the personal level at which the fans felt betrayed by Meyer's alleged departure from her canon. The Twiligheters' horizon of expectation had grown so concrete and was so disturbed by the last book that they rebelled against it. J. Martin, voicing a sentiment many fans expressed, pinpoints the perceived ruination of the book to "the moment I read the words 'little nudger,'" a term used by Bella to refer to her unborn child (*Breaking Dawn* 133). As Bella's pregnancy is confirmed and her attachment to the unborn child grows, the fandom's attachment seemed to sever. Instead of leaving the fan community and the books behind to move on to more satisfying reading, however, many Twiligheters continue to participate in the fandom by expressing their disappointment and by focusing on their love of the first three books in the saga. In some online reviews and forums, fans respectfully lament the pregnancy plot twist, wishing that Meyer had been more careful not to "violate the internal consistency of the world" (K. Bray) and suggesting that "all she had to do was stick to the

canon of her world" (Maya Jewel). Other fans chose more forceful language, such as M. L., who writes that "[*Breaking Dawn*] reads like it was stolen from a fangirls [*sic*] wet dream." M. L. is not alone in the suggestion that Meyer copied from fan fiction to write *Breaking Dawn*. In a particularly scathing review, mollywobbles claims that *Breaking Dawn* "reads like SMeyer<sup>9</sup> scoured fanfiction.net for plot points and cut and pasted it all together. SMeyer obviously wrote this with the thought in her teeny, tiny brain that she's writing what the fans want." M. L. and mollywobbles show the intense emotional connections Twiligheters form with the texts and their willingness to defend their own horizon of expectation as the correct one. Most importantly, however, Twiligheters reveal the liberties they permit themselves to take when appropriating the text, in comparison to the strict horizon of expectation to which they hold Stephenie Meyer.

In appropriating Meyer's texts for their own creative spinoffs, fans appropriate ownership of the canon as well. When Meyer disrupts the horizon of expectation, fans take it personally and accuse her of stealing from them. While not specifically acknowledging such accusations, Meyer is aware of them and tries to counter them. In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly's* Alynda Wheat, Meyer said, "well, I don't read fan fiction. I did very early on and it led to some interesting projects actually, because that's why I started writing Edward's story [*Midnight Sun*]. . . . I

have mixed feelings about fan fiction. It makes me kind of sad to see people spending so much time when they could be creating their own stories” (“Stephenie Meyer”). Meyer essentially tells her fandom she had not read the fan fiction that introduced a pregnancy plot prior to her work on *Breaking Dawn* and that the plot of her fourth book is her creation and no one else’s. At the same time, she heightens the tension by countering what essentially amounts to an accusation of plagiarism, belittling many of her followers by suggesting that writing fan fiction is a waste of their time.

Besides the accusations of stealing from fan fiction, the other common response to the pregnancy plot twist engages with Meyer’s biological explanation of vampire pregnancy, signalling the fan insistence that their interpretation of canon is the correct one. Despite Meyer’s detailed and recurring physiological explanations, these Twilighters persist in the impossibility of Edward Cullen fathering a child. Many fans have immersed themselves in scientific explanations of Edward’s inability to father a child as long and detailed as Meyer’s explanation. Particularly incensed fans claim that Meyer “bitch slapped logic in the face” (skelevengeance) and “blew basic biology out of the window” (Why So Serious?). Most fan explanations of the physical impossibility rely on chromosomal differences. In the world of her fiction, humans have twenty-three chromosomes,

werewolves have twenty-four, and vampires have twenty-five (*Breaking Dawn* 236). Fans are quick to point out the biological impossibility of interspecies mating, suggesting that “it’s not possible for the child [Renesmee] to be viable and pass along the gene—if you know biology, you should know that” (Why So Serious?). Thorough in their explanations, blog and forum posts also rail against previously overlooked biological differences between werewolves and humans. One astute Twilighter notes that the chromosomal impossibilities extend to the wolves and the women on whom they have imprinted. Expressing the sentiment of many fan responses, Why So Serious? writes that, “in fiction, things need to be explained away by magic, rules previously set up in the book, or they need to make sense in the real world. Emily, Claire, and Kim [objects of the werewolf imprinting] are HUMAN. Human rules therefore apply to them. It is humanly impossible for a human with 23 chromosomes to mate successfully with a creature that has 24.” This fan gets to the root of the Twilighters’ problem with *Breaking Dawn*: it fails to follow the rules of the world we inhabit by flouting science, but also falls outside the horizon of expectation established by the first three books. These two features combine to create an alienated and angry fandom.

Besides looking for physical and textual proof of Edward’s infertility, some Twilighters compare Bella’s pregnancy plot to pregnancy narratives in other

vampire texts, films, and television programs to explain their rejection of Renesmee, which underscores how personally fans take a canonical departure. One fan asserts that the pregnancies in Karen Chance and Jeaniene Frost's novels are acceptable because they happen repeatedly and are adequately explained. In these novels, the process of changing from human to vampire takes time, and these newborn, not yet fully changed vampires can father children (vampfan). Another fan, Carmen Ferreiro, turns to the television show *Angel*. She points out that the constructed world of this show establishes that vampires cannot have children, just as Meyer's does. Like Meyer's novel, the television show has the title protagonist father a child with another vampire. While this Twilighter rejects Renesmee, she accepts Angel's child because the television series does not offer an explanation but passes the child off as an anomaly. She claims that "because they don't try to explain it, I suspend my disbelief." Ferreiro's rejection of Meyer's biological explanation suggests a very personal response to information posted on Meyer's website. Whereas simply passing off a canonical breach as an anomaly is acceptable to Ferreiro, Meyer's virtual interaction with her fandom in an attempt to explain away the anomaly seems to suggest an insult to Ferreiro's intelligence. Twilighters' acceptance of deviations from their horizon of expectation in other media juxtaposed to their resistance to Meyer's deviation implies that

it is Meyer's own high level of involvement with interpretation that has made the difference.

An overwhelming fan consensus on Renesmee's birth suggests that Meyer's failure to prepare fans for the possibility of Bella's pregnancy, coupled with her insistence that the vampire-fathered child fits into the established Twilight canon, created a sense of betrayal. Between accusations of stealing from fan fiction, physiological problem solving, and comparisons with other vampire media, Meyer emerges from the *Breaking Dawn* release not as a celebrated author of the final instalment of a saga with a cult-like following, but rather an author accused of unfaithfulness to her own canon—accusations, it should be pointed out, made possible and even forcible through massive online agreement in forums, blogs, reviews, and other such discussions.

### **The Vampire Canon: "Spit in the face of free will, why don't we?"**

The canon of a series, like Jauss's horizon of expectation, is not limited to the physically constructed world from which it emerges and which it creates. Jauss claims that "the interpretive reception of a text always presupposes the context of experience" (23). Interpretations, then, of what is canon, and thus formation of the horizon of expectation, emerge out of and indicate assumptions about morality and behaviour in addition to assumptions about



While Meyer has built a horizon of expectation for fans that includes an emphasis on the importance of personal choice, she disrupts this expectation by denying Bella life-altering choices . . . .



conventions. The inclusion of morality and behaviour exacerbates the friction between Meyer and her fandom over canonical interpretations of the vampire world. Perhaps the most prominent example of the canon dispute over *Breaking Dawn's* interpreted meanings relates to the option of choice. While Meyer has built a horizon of expectation for fans that includes an emphasis on the importance of personal choice, she disrupts this expectation by denying Bella life-altering choices in *Breaking Dawn*. The first three books of the Twilight series revolve around choice, namely Bella's life-altering choices such as pursuing a relationship with Jacob or Edward, getting married, and changing into a vampire, suggesting a privileging of free will in the series' canon. In *Twilight*, Bella chooses to befriend Edward despite his cryptic warning: "what if I'm not a superhero? What if I'm the bad guy?" (*Twilight* 92). Bella also chooses to escape the watchful eye of Jasper and Alice in order to offer herself to the hunter James in return for her mother's safety, assuring the reader that her choice is a good one, that "it was a good way to die, in the place of someone else" (*Twilight* 1). In *New Moon*, Edward chooses to leave Bella, thinking it is for her own good. Bella chooses repeatedly to place herself in danger, recklessly riding her motorcycle and cliff-diving in violent thunderstorms. She also chooses to remain friends with Jacob after learning he is a werewolf and to follow Alice to the Volturi to save Edward, despite her belief in the futility of such an action to reunite them. Even the jacket flap of *Eclipse* tells readers Bella will be "forced to choose between her love for Edward and her friendship for Jacob" and that her approaching graduation will bring "one more decision to make: life or death." Bella chooses Edward and therefore chooses death. Edward does

give her an ultimatum, that they marry before he'll change her into a vampire, but rescinds it in the book's last chapter, telling her she "can have happiness [her] way" (*Eclipse* 617). But, given the choice, Bella chooses Edward's way, opting for a wedding, and sex, before transforming into a vampire. So, in the first three books, autonomous choice plays an integral role in plot development and establishes itself as an important canonical feature of the Twilight saga. The third instalment, *Eclipse*, does a particularly thorough job of highlighting personal choice as a valued element of the saga and indicating the number of life-altering decisions the main characters will have to make in the final novel. The horizon of expectation can be said to be fixed firmly on questions about choice.

Expressing sentiments similar to those voiced in the responses to Bella's pregnancy, fans rebelled against *Breaking Dawn*, accusing Meyer of robbing Bella of the free will to make consequential adult choices about her life. When Bella ends up pregnant, she does choose to keep the baby, but the decision to carry the child to term is truly the last choice of her life. In choosing to carry the baby, Bella sacrifices her health. In the end, as the fetus struggles in a detached placenta, Bella's spine cracks and she slips toward death. To save her, Edward changes her into a vampire. Twilighters argue that the choice to live a human life or to become a vampire to which three novels and over fifteen hundred pages lead is essentially taken away from Bella by the

dire circumstances of the situation. "Spit in the face of free will, why don't we," said one upset *Breaking Dawn* reviewer in response to Bella's change (MPA), indicating the degree to which free will had become a part of the fandom's horizon of expectation.

Besides being angry about Bella losing control over her physical change, fans also feel led astray by the fairy-tale ending Bella gets after her change: the horizon of expectation included a belief in pain as the price for true love. Bella suffers excruciating pain after many of her choices in the first three novels. In particular, when Meyer sets Bella up for a choice between Edward and Jacob, she also sets Bella up for intense pain at the loss of whomever she does not choose. In *Breaking Dawn*, however, Bella's pain seems to end. Bella essentially skips the blood lust of the newborn stage for which Meyer prepares her fans. Married to Edward and reconciled to the entire Cullen family, Bella loses no friends or family in the confrontation with the Volturi and even retains Jacob Black as a friend. There is a strong feeling in the Twilight fandom that besides taking the final choices away from her, Meyer rendered her previous choices less meaningful by the happy ending to the saga, in which she gets everything and everyone she wants. J. Martin believes that "intense, obsessive, passionate love—a love of the Wuthering Heights variety [to which Meyer compares her own story], anyway—demands an exacting price. Bella cannot have Jacob

and Edward, just as Catherine cannot have both Edgar and her beloved Heathcliffe,” a sentiment shared by many fans. Mollywobbles agrees, calling Meyer a “cop-out” and accusing her of being afraid to put her “characters through actual pain and give them real consequences to their decisions.” Summing up these common fan responses, K. Bray writes that “*Breaking Dawn* betrays the story of *Eclipse* and makes Bella’s struggles and difficult choice almost meaningless—she doesn’t have to sacrifice anything after all.” While online discussions offer a multitude of different views on how the saga should have ended and what exactly Bella should have been forced to give up, the common thread that ties them together is the feeling that she should have given up at least something. All these reactions in their many and varied forms, from respectful to flaming and biological to comparative, show how closely fans adhere to canonical precedent and the horizon of expectation and how such adherence fuels ownership claims throughout the fandom.

### **Newborns in a Vampire World: “Everyone is now in the driver’s seat”**

Even though the saga ended with *Breaking Dawn*, Meyer has since been hard at work continuing to build her own interpretation of what is canon. *Twilight: The Graphic Novel*, released in March 2010, is “illustrated by Korean artist Young Kim with input from Meyer on

every pane” (Flood). *The Short Second Life of Bree Tanner: An Eclipse Novella*, released in June 2010, is a parallel to events in *Eclipse*, and tells the story of a newborn army raised by Victoria from Bree’s perspective. Meyer also began a full-length book project, *Midnight Sun*, which tells the events of *Twilight* from Edward Cullen’s point of view. Finally, after more than a two-year delay, Meyer plans to release *The Twilight Saga: The Official Illustrated Guide* in April 2011. While these projects promise to build on the world and rules established in the four Twilight saga books, the purpose of each of these projects seems to stem not from a desire to continue the story but rather to control the horizon of expectation, to define the canon, and to retain ownership of her characters.

Meyer’s most obvious project in asserting her ownership and control as author is the *Official Illustrated Guide*, which is advertised as “the definitive encyclopedic reference to The Twilight Saga. Produced with Stephenie Meyer, it includes new material, character profiles, genealogical charts, maps, extensive cross-references, and more” (“The Twilight Saga”). The project had an original release date of December 2008, but the publisher pushed the date back in order to include “more of the exclusive material that you all have been asking for over the past several months, which will require additional time” (“Hey Fans”). *The Short Second Life of Bree Tanner* was initially intended to be included in *The Official Illustrated Guide* as “a

nice complement to *Eclipse*; it explains a lot of the things that Bella never knew" ("March 30, 2010"), though the story's eventual length necessitated its publication as a stand-alone book. By offering back stories and explanations of the vampire world, Meyer continues her efforts to define the Twilight canon and to reinstate fan expectations under her interpretive control. Marketing the *Guide* with superlatives like "official" and "definitive" lends credibility to the information it contains and attempts to endow Meyer with authority and ownership.

While *The Official Illustrated Guide* is an obvious attempt to define boundaries and control content, Meyer's *Midnight Sun* project—which she calls "an exercise in character development that got wildly out of hand" ("Midnight Sun")—more subtly seeks to control the Twilight canon by exploring the existing plot through another character's focalization, and perhaps best exemplifies Meyer's counterproductive attempts to control reception of her intellectual property. She originally intended to post the entire project online for fans to read, but after completing nearly three hundred pages of the manuscript she decided to publish it as a book instead. She posted excerpts online, asserting her own interpretation of Edward and explaining that she couldn't "wait out the years it will take to reach publication for people to begin to understand Edward" and that she was "convinced that Edward *deserved* to have his story

told" ("Midnight Sun"). By retelling *Twilight* from his point of view, Meyer fills in many gaps about the events and solidifies control over interpretation of his character, especially his love for Bella. Besides expanding her control over interpretations of Edward, Meyer also uses *Midnight Sun* to cement characterizations of other figures that appear in the saga. In an interview, Meyer told Wheat that "when you're writing Edward's story, you're writing everyone's story because you're hearing everything everyone else thinks" ("Stephenie Meyer"). Edward's ability to read people's minds and hear their thoughts allows Meyer to develop further not only the other Cullens, but also Charlie and Bella's schoolmates. Although *Midnight Sun* is not meant to continue the Twilight story but to add another dimension to it by reimagining the existing storyline and characters through his point of view, it nonetheless allows Meyer to assert her control over her creations.

In a surprising twist, while rubbing against Meyer's characterization of Bella and her imposed understanding of Twilight canonicity, Twilighters do not rebel against *Midnight Sun*'s attempts to force Meyer's characterization of Edward and other more minor characters, but rather seek out this guidance. Eager for more Edward, Twilighters so persistently inquired after the status of *Midnight Sun* that in a June 2008 update on Meyer's official website, the webmaster responded to what he called "the outrageous number



Fan reaction to the leak and to Meyer's response divides down a line, representing a rift in the fandom over the relationship of fan to author . . . .



of emails" by reassuring fans that Meyer remained hard at work and reminding them that "we all need to put a lot of effort into being patient for a while longer" ("Midnight Sun"). The fans could not be patient, however, and the partially finished *Midnight Sun* manuscript leaked on the Internet shortly after the release of *Breaking Dawn*. Devastated by the leak, Meyer posted a long response on her website in which she lamented the "huge violation of my rights as an author, not to mention me as a human being" and tried to impress upon fans the necessity of "copyright and the importance of artistic control." Furthermore, she promised to put the project "on hold indefinitely" ("Midnight Sun"). Then, in an effort to control the leak and discourage fans from searching out the illegal manuscript, Meyer posted the draft version of *Midnight Sun* on her website, for all fans to access without guilt. Though upset at the situation that required such actions, in this case Meyer effectively clinched control over both the leak and the world of the saga.

Fan reaction to the leak and to Meyer's response divides down a line, representing a rift in the fandom over the relationship of fan to author and over who has a right to access Meyer's intellectual property. On one side, fans sympathize with Meyer. Many fans, considering themselves writers, try to understand the situation from her point of view. A few Twilighters, like Kaleb Nation, who runs the website "Twilight Guy" and speaks as a fellow writer, support her decision wholeheartedly. Nation defends Meyer's decision to suspend work on the project, explaining that "many of us write with emotion, and when our emotions are affected, the writing will inevitably suffer." However, far more fans and writers responded like Katie K., who wrote that "as an amateur writer, I know that I'd be gathering nuclear weapons if this had happened to me. I think she

handled it maturely enough, though I wholeheartedly disagree with her decision to indefinitely postpone *Midnight Sun*." On the other side of the line, fans express little regret at viewing the illegal copy and accuse Meyer of venting her anger and disappointment on fans. Expressing a common sentiment, one fan wrote, "I can't believe she isn't going to put [*Midnight Sun*] out now because of this, I feel as a fan that we are the ones being punished" (Megan). Excepting the rare fan like Kaleb Nation who supports Meyer's right and decision to stop working on *Midnight Sun*, both fans supporting Meyer and reacting against her display a perceived ownership of the Twilight saga by demanding that Meyer finish and publish the project. Innumerable petitions have sprung up online, and they take the form of official petitions collecting cyber-signatures, websites, Facebook pages, Myspace pages, and YouTube videos.

While many petitions express respect for Meyer and regret of the leak, nearly all show a sense of entitlement on the part of the Twilighters in their demands that *Midnight Sun* be completed and made available to them. One petition, adroitly capturing the popular sentiment of petitioning Twilighters, reads, "I respect Stephenie, but the truth is we're all hungry for *Midnight Sun*" (Staines). The website SaveMidnightSun.com, creatively employing playlists of songs to express fan distress, a forum for discussion, and a letter to Stephenie Meyer written from Edward's

point of view, boasts over ten thousand signatures on its petition page, all dedicated to letting Meyer "know how much it would mean to her devoted fans to finish *Midnight Sun*" ("Petition"). While fan fiction from Edward's point of view already exists, Twilighters, promised a particular type of narrative by Meyer, expect and desire that narrative to be delivered. Derek Johnson claims that fans, especially antagonistic fans, must negotiate "positions of production and consumption" (298). Fans must alternate between producing their own meanings and consuming the original texts that inspire interpretation. Seemingly by definition, then, Twilighters rely on Meyer's authorial production in order to legitimate their own interpretation and appropriation. Though the voices of dissent, like Kaleb Nation, make themselves heard, a far more overwhelming number of fans respond to Meyer's suspension of *Midnight Sun* by asserting their right to her intellectual property, and through such action they extend their claim of ownership beyond interpretation and into the very material world of textual production.

*Midnight Sun* underscores the increasingly active role that technology plays in changing the face of reader reception and response. The *Midnight Sun* leak itself, made possible by the Internet, and the number of fans who did succumb to the temptation to read it before Meyer posted a legal copy on her website, reveal the fandom's more flexible definition

of copyright and intellectual property. While fans previously poached meaning from Meyer's saga for their own interpretive and creative productions, the leak revealed fans literally poaching the text itself and disseminating it as if it were theirs. The Twilighters, grieving over Meyer's promise to put *Midnight Sun* on hold, use the Internet to collectivize and make themselves heard. They have made their voices loud enough that Meyer, in an *Entertainment Weekly* interview, complained that "everyone now is in the driver's seat, where they can make judgment calls. 'Well, I think this should happen, I think she should do this.' I do not feel alone with the manuscript. And I cannot write when I don't feel alone" ("Stephenie Meyer Talks"). The Internet paved the way for a game of tug-of-war over interpretation and ownership of the Twilight saga. The emotional investment of the fandom pitted against Meyer's position as creator turns the game into a fervent battle, one that neither party can win. Meyer clearly demonstrates her willingness to withdraw from the game, if only temporarily, to avoid relinquishing all control. The fandom shows a determined and stubborn insistence on its own position as makers of meaning and determiners of canonicity.

If *Midnight Sun* represents an instance in which Meyer, at least tenuously, prevails as the primary constructor of Edward's character, then *The Short Second Life of Bree Tanner* provides an example in which fans succeed in bending Meyer to their will and

illustrates their own contribution to the continuing Twilight saga narrative. As mentioned earlier, one of the plot points many fans object to in *Breaking Dawn* is Bella's impossibly happy ending. *Bree Tanner* actually provides the newborn blood lust that many fans found missing in *Breaking Dawn*. Though Meyer half-heartedly attempts a romance for Bree in the form of a slightly older newborn, Diego, the focus of the story is not on love, but on blood. Bella's admirable level of self-control on her first hunting trip as a vampire, in which she consciously decides not to attack a hiker, stands in stark contrast to Bree's overpowering thirst and unmitigated, borderline frenzied killing. Instead of self-control and propriety, Bree gives readers an indulgence in the forbidden elements of Bella's world, and even goes so far as to describe in detail the graphic disposal of human bodies sucked dry by vampires. Additionally, the one instinct that Bree identifies as stronger than thirst is her sense of self-preservation, while Bella, on the other hand, clearly lacks any sense of self-preservation. Bree endures fellow newborn Fred's repulsive "talent" to protect herself from the rest of the coven, and even manages, though just barely, to resist attacking Bella based on the knowledge that it would bring her certain death at the hands of the Cullen clan. Bella, much to the fandom's chagrin, most noticeably disdains self-preservation in *Breaking Dawn* when she subjects herself to a life-ending pregnancy. Though *The Short Second Life of Bree Tanner* neatly

fulfills the same purpose as Meyer's other peripheral texts, that of imposing Meyer's own construction of the Cullen world onto her fans, the novella simultaneously reveals the fandom's influence over textual production by providing them with elements they found missing in *Breaking Dawn*. Despite Meyer's protestations that her constructions and interpretations are the right ones, she clearly internalizes fan interpretations as well.

The constant scuffling and ensuing stalemate between Meyer and the Twilight fandom encourages us to consider the Twilight saga as a model for thinking about how online media has changed horizons of expectation and equalized textual ownership. In *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins argues that "fans operate from a position of cultural marginality and social weakness" (26) and that, in inhabiting such a weak position, "fans are peasants, not proprietors" (27). In his more recent study, *Convergence Culture*, he admits that

fandoms have grown into a more participatory culture, rather than remaining in a culture of isolation. While he certainly captures the essence of online fandoms with the term "participatory culture," he still fails to recognize the real power to influence ownership that fandoms have garnered through co-operative Internet use. The Twilighters certainly do not exist as "peasants." Full-fledged "participants," they enact a constant tug-of-war with Stephenie Meyer for proprietorship of the Twilight saga. The ease of communication provided by the Internet and by Meyer's own inclination to defend her work against a very real ownership threat creates a kind of limbo where the Twilight saga exists between competing fan interpretations and prescribed authorial intent. The fandom's engagement with Meyer through feminist responses, canon interpretations, and changing horizons of expectation demands notice, even if it has yet fully to gain the control it seeks.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The term “canon” is used by fans to refer to the constructed world of a particular text or sequence of texts. It includes all elements of the text(s) and generally includes paratextual material provided by the author through interviews and online postings of unpublished work, though these inclusions tend to be more controversial.

<sup>2</sup> A descendent of Wizard Rock, where fans sing about the Harry Potter books, TwiRock is a do-it-yourself genre of music akin to fan fiction where bands compose music inspired by the Twilight novels. TwiCon is a specific example of a number of fan and scholarly conventions that have been scheduled recently.

<sup>3</sup> For a nuanced evaluation of the difference between Twilight fan and Twilight anti-fan, see Sheffield and Merlo.

<sup>4</sup> Fandoms tend to self-identify with a chosen name or names and, as Meyer’s fandom shows, often these names become a badge of pride and a label to assist in locating other like-minded fans. Meyer’s fans have dubbed themselves “Twilighters” or “Twiards.” There is some contention in the fan community over the use of these terms. In March 2008, an MTV blog asked fans to vote on which one they preferred. After over 2,500 responses, “Twilighters” emerged as the clear winner (Carroll). While both Twilighters and Twiards are certainly Twilight fans, each name evokes a different type of fan, reminding us of Hills’s assertion that fandoms are often contradictory. Though Twiards would certainly disagree, “Twilighter” appears to be both the more commonly used and commonly preferred term for the fandom, and so my study will use “Twilighter” to refer to the general body of Twilight fans.

<sup>5</sup> On 16 July 2009, *USA Today* reported that Harlequin (the publisher of popular romance novels) plans to roll out a new imprint: Harlequin Teen. Harlequin spokesperson Natasha Wilson reported that “these will be titles specifically developed for readers of *Twilight*” (Memmott), which suggests that in the coming years, fan exclusion of the Twilight saga from the romance genre may shift if readers become more familiar with its conventions.

<sup>6</sup> Throughout my study of fan responses to the Twilight saga, I consulted many fan sites, forums, and blogs. Some of the fan responses I include, however, come from websites not specifically linked to the Twilight books. While the fan-run sites provide a valuable look at various lively conversations and fan opinions, often specific and developed fan arguments can also be found through such venues as Amazon reader reviews and Yahoo Answers. These posts still fall into the Twilight fandom as their acutely emotional responses imply a very personal involvement with the texts, and their own comments reveal the Twilight saga to be a mediator in many described social interactions. Furthermore, including such responses reveals the fan tendency to transgress otherwise prescribed fandom boundaries by reaching out to Twilight newcomers, whether it is to welcome them or to warn them.

<sup>7</sup> In the cult television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), Angel watches Buffy sleep in a way similar to Edward watching Bella, raising questions about the horizon of expectation being generated across texts. While the Twilight fandom, like most others, freely extends beyond the Twilight texts to engage in other fan communities, it also seems to resist incorporating other texts

or media into its understanding of what should be in the Twilight canon, as will be evidenced in the following section on vampire biology.

<sup>8</sup> In his influential fan study *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins draws on an analogy by Michel de Certeau and turns the word “poaching” into

a term to explain the process by which fans appropriate meaning, terminology, and imagery from an author’s work in an ongoing struggle for textual possession.

<sup>9</sup> SMeyer is a common online abbreviation for Stephenie Meyer.

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