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Cover Page Footnote

Kristopher Broyles recently graduated from the University of Arkansas at Fort Smith with a bachelor's in English. He intends to pursue graduate study in the field of Communication, emphasizing film and television, at the University of Arkansas in the fall of 2010.

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The resurgence of vampirism can be readily viewed within contemporary American media and culture. From a fanatical teenage obsession with the screen adaptations of author Stephanie Meyers' *Twilight* saga to *True Blood*, a television series dealing with vampirism that is aimed at an adult audience, vampires are seeing a revival. By examining these visual works in combination with Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a television series which helped set the stage for the critical analysis of feminism and vampirism within contemporary popular culture, I suggest that the role of the vampire in the visual medium is connected with societal views of gender.

Further, I contend that, because visual media such as film and television often reaches a larger audience than other forms of media, its impact may be more widespread. Therefore, there is a distinction made between the written works upon which *Twilight* and "True Blood" are based and their film and television adaptations. Also, the visual medium facilitates more passive learning than do other forms of media. Therefore, the impact of ideas about femininity and masculinity may be more passively learned, accepted, or integrated into society.

Both femininity and masculinity are explored in each of the aforementioned works. Female and male characters are presented in a variety of ways; some are true to life, and some are very much skewed and unrealistic. Regardless of how these characters and concepts about gender are explored, there are certainly messages about gender included in or transmitted by the works *Twilight*, "True Blood," and "Buffy the Vampire Slayer."

Each of these texts present individual and varied views of femininity. While representation of the feminine seems to be largely positive within "True Blood" and "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," the messages transmitted about femininity within *Twilight* seem to be quite narrow and underdeveloped, which can be seen specifically through an analysis of its main character, Bella Swan. However, "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" presents a clearly feminist title character, and "True Blood" explores femininity in both a compelling and complicated manner through a supporting female character, Tara Thornton, as well as through Sookie Stackhouse, its lead female character. While each of these texts present a different view of femininity, they effectively convey particular messages about gender, both positive and negative.

Twilight presents a very constricted and constricting view of femininity. Bella Swan is characterized as a young woman who has a limited range of interests. Bella does not think for herself. She has little interest in school or other activities, and she does not actively seek relationships with anyone except Edward Cullen, her vampire love interest. Basically, her main goals in the film are to have sex with a vampire and to become a vampire. While the film features brief glimpses of empowering femininity, such as Bella explaining to her friend that she should "take control" by asking a boy to a school dance because she is "a strong, independent

woman,” overall, there is an apparent lack of a positive message regarding women and femininity (*Twilight*).

This is certainly a difficult concept to grasp. How can Bella Swan, an allegedly mature, responsible young woman in the twenty-first century, have absolutely no interest in anything but establishing a relationship with someone she hardly knows? She is willing to completely change her life by leaving home, disregarding the feelings of her family, and putting herself in danger. Bella’s interest in Edward completely consumes her. While this could perhaps be a commentary on how love has the ability to blind one to practically anything else of any importance, Bella is nevertheless a limited character, not only in terms of her femininity, but as a person in general. As anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner argues in her essay “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” a notion exists that the female “consciousness...is evidenced in part by the very fact that she accepts her own devaluation” (358). Bella accepts this devaluation by showing no interest in anything other than her function in relation to a male. This may also express the idea that “woman has always functioned ‘within’ the discourse of man, a signifier that has always referred back to the opposite signifier which annihilates its specific energy” (Cixous 424). By relinquishing her own abilities to learn, to flourish, or to accomplish, Bella supports the archaic idea that the most acceptable and desirable form of femininity requires a female’s submission to a male.

The film differs greatly from the book in terms of Bella’s characterization; in the novel, she is “an old-fashioned heroine: bookish, smart, brave, considerate of others’ emotions, and naturally competent in the domestic arts” (Flanagan). In the film, however, she is not only limited in regards to her femininity, but she is also flat and uninteresting. A cactus would have more emotional conviction. It could be argued that the written adaptation or even the actor portrayal of Bella contributes to this one-dimensional characterization, but, regardless of the cause, the film version of Bella is shallow, self-involved, and dull.

How does this characterization relate to gender issues? Her disregard for everything but her relationship with Edward transmits the message that a young woman should wholly and completely give herself to a male in order to have a successful relationship—a message which obviously should not and cannot be supported or accepted by any reasonable, thinking person in contemporary culture. It could be argued that this film may contribute to the perpetuation of negative gender stereotypes regarding women, such as the concept of the submissive female who is powerless to the effects of male dominance, though this is a concept which may be presented within texts dealing with the controlling, dominating male vampire.

Whedon’s “*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*” approaches femininity in a highly different manner than *Twilight*. Buffy is characterized as a competent, forceful young woman. Though she sometimes struggles, she maintains the ability to juggle school with her ever-demanding job as vampire slayer. Her character is defined by remaining fierce and confident in the face of danger, and she consistently proves herself to be a capable female. Whedon presents a character which provides a positive view of femininity. While Buffy maintains typical feminine qualities, she also features qualities which may be associated with masculinity, such as her physical strength. It may be understood that Buffy is not a normal girl and that her literal strength and force may be unattainable, but her successful marrying of both feminine and masculine characteristics certainly allows Buffy to be significant in a feminist analysis of this television series. In this way, “*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*” portrays femininity more positively than other vampire series or films may.

The characterization of females in “True Blood” is similarly strong. This series features powerful female roles in both its main character as well as in a supporting character, Tara Thornton. Tara, Sookie’s best friend, is characterized as an opinionated, strong-willed young woman. She can also be seen as Sookie’s protector, concerned with Sookie’s safety, well-being, as well as with her questionable relationship with a vampire. Tara is also a woman who is not afraid to express her opinion; when confronting her male boss about his request that she wear a uniform, Tara makes the point that he does not care if his male employees wear uniforms. She states that her boss doesn’t “feel the need to sexualize the men in his employment the same way he do the women” (“True Blood”).

The primary female character in “True Blood,” Sookie Stackhouse, is first presented as an innocent but strong-willed woman. Sookie is a human with superhuman abilities; she can hear others’ thoughts, see into the minds of others, and possesses superhuman strength. While Sookie’s physical strength obviously defies typical gender expectations, her other abilities seem to explain why she has trouble with expected gender roles. She is definitely romantically inexperienced for her age, but she knows much about the negative aspects of relationships and love. Because of her ability to read minds, she has not been able to sustain a successful romantic relationship. In a flashback, Sookie is shown on a date with a man who only thinks about having sex with her. Subsequently, she is shown with another man who wonders why he is not attracted to her in the same way he is attracted to Jake Gyllenhaal. These flashbacks certainly display her disastrous experiences with dating because of her supernatural ability, but they could also represent her inability to find love with an average person. Bill Compton, her love interest, fulfills the role of the male who is not just an average person. In fact, he is not human at all; he is a vampire. In this way, the two are connected by supernatural qualities; they find a certain commonality through their individual differences. “True Blood” presents an alternate take on the way in which male/female relationship may begin and progress by creating a space for the outcast to relate to another who has similarly experienced difficulties in functioning in terms of an expected social norm for romantic relationship. By placing Sookie and Bill in very similar places in terms of their past inability to form meaningful relationships, both male and female are presented in equal terms.

In addition, these texts provide specific examples of supernatural elements which both complicate and illuminate the nature of the characters’ relationships as well as the function of gender within such elements. Within *Twilight*, Edward Cullen has the ability to read minds. He finds himself extremely frustrated when he is unable to read Bella’s mind. As he reveals at a dinner which follows Bella’s near-rape by a group of unsavory young men, Edward can read the minds of everyone in the restaurant—everyone except Bella. Similarly, in “True Blood,” Sookie Stackhouse discovers that her clairvoyance is ineffectual on her vampire lover Bill Compton. While Edward Cullen feels a longing to read Bella’s mind, Sookie’s reaction is opposite with Bill. She feels a sense of relief that she does not have to hear and see his innermost thoughts, feelings, and desires. Perhaps this simply fulfills Sookie’s yearning for someone about whom she does not know every detail; maybe this addition of a sense of mystery increases her attraction to Bill; or perhaps it is a combination of these and other concepts.

Through this example, it could be suggested that the ability to read one’s thoughts is interpreted differently by different sexes. Sookie’s happiness regarding her inability to read Bill’s mind could be interpreted as a realization that there will not be a constant bombardment of opinion, criticism, and evaluation presented through the male gaze. Such bombardment is obviously present within Sookie’s past relationships, adding to the ultimate failure of each.

Through this interpretation, it could be suggested that the female yearns not only for the stereotypical mysterious masculine figure but also for a sense of mystery within a relationship in general. While film and television often show female characters as obsessive with their male counterparts' thoughts and feelings, Sookie's situation may propose that allowing such thoughts and feelings to remain hidden or at least not explicitly expressed within every waking moment of a relationship is what the female truly desires.

Conversely, Edward's frustration with his inability to know what Bella is thinking may express a male's desire to know the true feelings of his female counterpart. The stereotypical view of the concept of the bad boy or the aloof male who plays it cool may be turned on its head here. Edward certainly has the bad boy image going for him; he is an object of sexual desire, he just happens to be a vampire, not to mention he has totally awesome hair. However, he cannot help but feel a sense of longing to hear the thoughts of his female love interest. It seems that this problem may indicate Edward's insecurities with his own standing within his and Bella's relationship. What is she thinking? Is she afraid? Does she think I have too much gel in my hair? Edward may be too cool for school to express his true feelings for Bella, but, nevertheless, he desires to know her true feelings for him. Therefore, this particular situation may, at least partially, debunk the stereotype of the bad boy's uncaring nature. On the other hand, perhaps the bad boy's inherent sensitivity is being highlighted, and the stereotypical conceptualization of him is often too limited. While he may appear to be disinterested in the thoughts or feelings of his love interest, deep down, maybe he is a sensitive, caring person. Edward's response to this inability to know Bella's true thoughts and feelings may effectively reveal more about his character as well as the qualities of the type of male he represents.

The exploration of masculinity within *Twilight* is interestingly similar to that in "True Blood" as well as in "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," which could be a testament to the idea that works involving vampirism, specifically in recent pop culture, feature common views of men and masculinity. Each work provides two key male characters: the one who vies for female attention yet tends to fall into the friend category (or the non-vampire), and the love interest who is typically strong, mysterious, and highly masculine and who fits the bad boy image (or the vampire).

"Sookie is mine" ("True Blood"). "I'm going to do what any man would do about it...something damn manly!" ("Buffy the Vampire Slayer"). "What if I'm not the hero? What if I'm the bad guy?" (*Twilight*). These are just a few lines uttered which represent masculinity in these three works. "True Blood" sees vampire Bill Compton as Sookie's protector from the threat of other vampires, though Sookie is clearly physically able to take care of herself. In "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," Xander expresses his desire to perform something which would prove his masculinity. Edward Cullen further establishes a sense of mystery with Bella Swan by asking her to think differently about her perceptions of him. Each of these lines help to establish what masculinity means within their respective texts.

In "True Blood," Bill is portrayed as a traditional masculine figure. He is courteous, kind, and thoughtful of others. He exercises exceptional control over his emotions, and he establishes his desire to both love and protect Sookie. He represents the typical, desired male common to the vampire genre. Conversely, Sam Merlotte, Sookie's boss and long-time friend, is a male character who desires affection from Sookie but who cannot attain it. While he is handsome and relatively successful, he is considered a friend and someone with whom Sookie believes she cannot have a romantic relationship. He is literally a puppy who follows her around, for Sam is a shapeshifter who transforms into a dog to help protect Sookie from danger. While the metaphor

is obvious, it helps to further establish Sam's inability to be with the woman he loves, thereby damaging his feelings about his own masculinity.

Similarly, "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" presents these two types of characters. Xander Harris is Buffy's first male friend at Sunnydale High School. He shows romantic interest in Buffy, yet he does not receive reciprocation for his feelings. Xander represents the typical male who cannot reach the level of intimacy with the female to whom he is attracted. Instead, Angel, a vampire, who exemplifies the qualities of the male love interest is able to win Buffy over. Mysterious and dangerous, Angel is, ultimately, the type of male with whom the lead female character wishes to have a relationship.

Twilight also works within this system of masculinity. Edward Cullen is definitely the male who Bella finds desirable. Other males within the film represent the ineffectual character who shows a weaker form of masculinity. Bella encounters two males at school who both show interest in her, though she reciprocates no feeling. Both Eric Yorkie and Mike Newton, Bella's male friends, find her attractive and immediately attempt to vie for her attention. However, she is disinterested in both of them, and she ultimately discards their feelings and seeks the attention of Edward.

What does this say about masculinity in these works concerned with vampirism? The vampire is sometimes aloof, seemingly uninterested, at least at first, in his female love interest. He may not explicitly state his feelings for her. He may be hesitant to enter into a relationship with her. He features an ability to have power over her on some level. Though the texts *Twilight*, "True Blood," and "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" see males who do not exercise direct domination over their female love interests, remaining in control is certainly an issue for these male characters. This control is often checked by the vampire himself. He tends to be able to repress his desires to dominate, rule over, or even harm the female. Perhaps this need to repress may represent the necessity for the male to restrain himself from typical masculine traits such as aggression and domination in order to maintain a romantic relationship with the female. This may show that these texts deal with the idea that the male is in conflict with his own masculinity. He may find it difficult to reconcile his need to both spurn and accept his love interest in order to protect both her and himself. Perhaps he finds his own masculinity a problem which he must keep controlled and balanced, thereby transmitting an interesting view of what masculinity means within contemporary society. If the male must repress certain feelings, thoughts, or desires, perhaps these texts are suggesting a broader notion that the traditional construct of masculinity is shifting into something different, something which must be altered in order to retain any value within contemporary pop culture.

Twilight, "True Blood," and "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" each present interesting views of both femininity and masculinity. These and other texts in popular culture concerned with vampirism portray the changing views of gender within society. The visual medium serves as an invaluable source for transmission of such views and concepts, though such transmission may not always be positive. Regardless of the messages being sent, it is certainly clear that gender plays a key role within texts involving vampirism in contemporary pop culture.

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