

“Safe Sex with Defanged Vampires: New Vampire Heroes in *Twilight* and the *Southern Vampire Mysteries*”

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Abstract: Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* saga and Charlaine Harris’s *Southern Vampire Mysteries* both portray a romance between a human female and a male vampire, borrowing many conventions from romance novels and Gothic fiction. Both series introduce a new breed of vampires that refrain from drinking human blood, betraying the traditional image of vampires as sexually transgressive creatures. The romantic plotlines between the heroines and those safe vampire heroes reflect contemporary women’s lowered sense of danger concerning sexuality and heightened sense of danger in terms of the boundaries of self, yet each of the series shows a completely different development from each other. *Twilight* ends with a fairytale ending free from worries and responsibilities, while Sookie of the *Southern Vampire Mysteries* realizes that her safe hero is not safe after all, and that she has to reconsider her perception of sexuality and self in order to negotiate the risk of contemporary romance.

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Although we are witnessing a surge of vampire novels and movies today, this popularity is not merely a contemporary phenomenon. Many vampire-themed stories have been written since the publication of the first popular vampire novel, *Dracula* (1897), and many TV shows and films have been produced, notably including *Nosferatu* (1922), *Blood*

and Roses (1960), TV series *Dark Shadows* (1966-1971) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), its spin-off *Angel* (1999-2004), and *Underworld* (2003). Of contemporary vampire media, two examples are of particular interest to popular romance scholars, both because of their extraordinary popularity and because of their distinctive deployments of romance plots: the *Twilight* saga, which started as a series of novels and has been made into a series of films, and Charlaine Harris's *Southern Vampire Mysteries* (*SVM*), sometimes also known as the *Sookie Stackhouse Novels*, after its female protagonist, which has been adapted into the HBO TV drama series *True Blood*. Borrowing many conventions from romance novels and Gothic fiction, both of these series portray a romance between a human female and a male vampire; however, in a startling departure from the dominant traditions in vampire fiction, in which vampires signify transgression—excess of sex or deviation from some sexual norm—the vampires do not show any deviation from decency. Edward Cullen in *Twilight* and Bill Compton in the *SVM* usually do not kill humans, and (with one notable exception, for Bill) they do not attack humans sexually, either. Quite the contrary: they display almost perfect control over their “natural” urges. No longer dark or horrifying, these vampire heroes are almost defanged.

In reading these vampire novels, I will take the same position as Linda Barlow in reading romance novels: that is, I will treat them as “psychological maps which provide intriguing insights into the emotional landscape of women” (46). By analyzing the heroes (or hero-villains) of these new vampire romance novels in the context of Gothic novels and romance novels, I hope to explore the emotional landscape of women today. More specifically, I will argue that these two vampire stories reflect contemporary women's lowered sense of danger concerning sexuality as such, yet heightened sense of danger in terms of the boundaries of self. Targeted at young adult audiences, *Twilight* thus ends as a fairytale in which the man makes every effort to talk the woman into sex and marriage by convincing her that the horror stories girls hear about men are not always true. Targeted at a more mature audience, the *Sookie Stackhouse Novels* offer a wariier lesson, as Sookie realizes that her vampire hero is indeed *not* to be trusted, and worthy of being feared. Unlike *Twilight*'s Bella, that is to say, Sookie finds that her safe hero is not really defanged, but that his fangs are merely retracted. This realization is crucial to her acquiring a more mature perception of both sexuality and self, one appropriate to an adult woman negotiating the risks of contemporary romance.

Vampires of the Past and Vampires Today

Vampire stories in the nineteenth century offer us glimpses into illicit desires, allowing the writers to talk about sexuality in a way that otherwise cannot be done. Even in the absence of explicit descriptions of sexual acts, nineteenth-century vampire stories offered their authors the opportunity to hint at, or even revel in, a variety of sexual transgressions. Those celebrations of illicit desires can be seen in some of the earliest examples of vampire story: John William Polidori's “The Vampyre” (1819), for example, in which male-to-male desire comes to the forefront, and then, about fifty years later, Sheridan Le Fanu's story of female-to-female desire in another vampire story, “Carmilla” (1872). In these older stories, the fatal penetrations of a vampire's bite displace/replace

the unspeakable sexual penetrations they signify, a technique still employed in contemporary popular novels, where actual sexual acts might presumably be named or portrayed, perhaps in order to give an air of ominous significance and meaning to them that goes beyond the merely physical. Anne Rice's *The Vampire Chronicles*, for example, plays with vampires' transgressive sexuality, invoking both male to male desire and child sexuality. The *Southern Vampire Mysteries* can also be placed in this tradition, since many of its vampire characters show a variety of sexualities.

The characterization of today's vampires has deep roots as well. The most enduringly influential presentation of the vampire remains Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Building on Polidori's model, this fin-de-siècle Gothic novel molded what used to be a folkloric monster into a dark hero; in the process, it softened, or at least modulated, the figure's transgressive sexual overtones. As Christopher Craft argues, vampire attacks confuse the "gender-based categories of the penetrating and the receptive" (261), but in Stoker's text, the potentially homosexual desires that link Count Dracula and Jonathan Harker are lessened through the novel's deployment of female vampires. What remains, however—giving a model for writers to come—is a novel that plays in memorable ways with the thrills, fears, and pleasures of sex more generally, as though even heteronormative sex were, in the vampire context, shadowed by a deliciously and exotically transgressive quality. Count Dracula's national and class exoticism, as an aristocrat who hails from the backwoods of Europe, serves to emphasize his Otherness: a Byronic, "dangerous lover" figure, in Deborah Lutz's terms, whose erotic allure "represents the paradoxical fascination and repulsion of sex that is desirable because it is dangerous, because it might lead to pain, expulsion, and/or death" (85).

We need not read the fin-de-siècle vampire text in exclusively sexual terms, however. Vampires in these novels might also be said to represent the British Empire's latent fears of the colonized, with the mysterious deaths that vampires cause suggesting the Empire's fears and guilt coming back to haunt it (in this case, quite literally). These cultural and sociopolitical overtones endure in contemporary American popular fiction, although they naturally play out somewhat differently in a nation of immigrants. As Count Dracula represents antiquity and exoticism to the English readers, for example, vampires in the United States are also often associated with something old and exotic—and, in the process, they allow authors to emphasize the antiquity and exoticism, or the sunny modernity, of specific American locations. Anne Rice, for example, sets New Orleans as the capital of American vampires because of its exotic atmosphere, especially in antebellum periods with its aristocracy and slavery, while Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which featured a mix of immigrant and homemade, all-American vampires, played the contrast between these figures and his setting, fictional "Sunnydale," California, for both horror and humor. *Buffy* even has an episode in which Buffy encounters the one and only Count Dracula, and while he manages to exert his hypnotic influence on Buffy, he seems comically out of place in a bright, West Coast suburb.

Both of the series I am considering here offer elaborate negotiations with Otherness, trying by turns to emphasize the alluring exoticism of the vampire characters and to Americanize them. In *Twilight*, for example, the heroine's move from sunny and scorching Phoenix, Arizona, to gloomy and overcast Forks, Washington, a setting that has its own traditions of exotic horror (it recalls the 1990-91 TV series *Twin Peaks*) and which seems a believable home for sun-avoiding vampires, who find the environment quite favorable. The

Cullen children, Edward Cullen's vampire siblings, keep to themselves and stand out as a distinct group in a school cafeteria, rather like an ethnic or racial group in any American high school. However, the Cullens are not exactly foreign; the patriarch of the family, Carlisle came from seventeenth century England but the Cullen children were born, raised, and turned to vampires in the United States. They are, at heart, *Americanized* vampires, a fact that is emphasized when Dracula-like Romanian vampires, Stefan and Vladimir, visit near the end of the series, only to find themselves at odds with both the physical environment and with the other vampires in the New World. In the *Sookie Stackhouse Novels*, as a nod to the influence of Anne Rice's work, New Orleans is the vampire capital of the United States. But although New Orleans retains some of its exoticized, Old World flair, Harris seems more interested in its place within a broader Southern context. Sookie's first love interest, Bill Compton, used to be a Civil War soldier when alive, making him a hundred-percent Southern homeboy, and the first personal favor she asks of him is to talk about his Civil War experience to a history group to which Sookie's grandmother belongs. Harris's vampire heroes are still "Others," yet if they are immigrants, they are primarily immigrants from the past (which is, at least proverbially, a foreign country).

Upon finding habitats in the U.S., then, vampires have lost some Otherness, a natural progression for outsiders in the land of immigrants. Indeed, if the vampires of both series evoke the image of cultural and racial minority inside the United States, they do so not in a mode of guilt or anxiety (as in the fin-de-siècle texts) but in an almost upbeat fashion: these "immigrants" have succeeded in assimilating to American society and values, their acculturation made evident by their success in the stock market or other investments. [\[1\]](#) (Each of the Cullen families, for example, has accumulated considerable wealth, impressing people with their expensive foreign cars.) New vampires maintain an old charm by remaining *slightly* foreign, *slightly* aristocratic, but they are also comfortably Americanized.

Heroes and Hero-Villains

The reduced foreignness and Otherness of vampire heroes in those stories points to broader changes in the "darkness" (in a non-racial sense) of their previously dark heroes. The hero-villain in the Gothic holds mysteries, which normally means unspeakable secrets; for example, aside from being an egomaniac, he could be a wife-beater, a murderer, a demon, and of course, a vampire. It was Mario Praz in *The Romantic Agony* (1933) who coined the phrase, the "Fatal Man," to describe one prototype of main characters of the Gothic. Praz's example is Schedoni in Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian*, and he sees the Fatal Man to be a descendent of John Milton's Satan. He describes the Fatal Man to be of "mysterious (but conjectured to be exalted) origin," marked by "traces of burned-out passions, suspicion of a ghastly guilt, melancholy habits, pale face, unforgettable eyes" (61).

In Praz's account, the Fatal Man normally takes the position of the main character in Male Gothic, in which he pursues his insatiable desires—whether for power, for sex, for money, or for knowledge—using all the means available to him. This figure was memorably transformed into an actual *hero* (as opposed to simply a main character) in *Jane Eyre's* hero-villain, Rochester. As Robert Heilman insists, Rochester is not simply a hero or a villain; he is a hero-villain—a hero with some villainous aspect, which must be resolved (or

dissolved away) before the conclusion of the novel. This duality seems linked to Rochester's masculinity: that is, Rochester is the Male as Other, a figure who has never entirely left the genre of popular romance. In their classic studies, both Janice Radway and Tania Modleski argue that sociopolitical conditions under patriarchy produce a psychological distance between men and women, and that romance novels represent this distance by having the heroes' "masculine behavior" (Modleski 60) and their rejection of expressing emotions, as much as their access to power, make them seem "Other" to women. Ontologically alien to the heroine, the hero is difficult or impossible for her to read—until, that is, she finds a way to see through this cold and hard surface and discover that the hero is, in fact, sensitive and affectionate, and not "fatal" after all.

As many critics have argued, in romance fiction since the 1980s this distant hero figure has been supplemented by a new, more emotionally available presentation of man: a transformation in the genre that takes place in part by the addition of the hero's point of view to the romance novel, and in part by an actual change in his behavior. In a study of the "hero's presentation" from the 1970s to the 90s, Dawn Heinecken asserts that the romance hero has become "less silent, more emotional, and more overtly tender and caring" (158). The new vampire hero belongs to this new generation of men. Edward Cullen and Bill Compton express their feelings often enough to avoid major misunderstandings; as Bonnie Mann bluntly puts, "Edward gets it," a sharp contrast both to earlier romance heroes and to real life teenage boys who are clueless about girls' feelings (140). Indeed, both Edward and Bill always try their hardest to understand their girlfriends' emotional lives, often putting concern for them ahead of their masculine code of behavior. Each may go away for a period of time, leaving their girlfriends to interpret physical distances as emotional distances, but on their return, each soon explains himself and clarifies the situation, easing the heroine's anxieties: hardly the behavior of an ontological Other.

Safe Vampire Heroes

Whether they feature the dark alpha heroes of the past or the softer, caring heroes of today, romance novels have to end happily. In the former case, as Jayne Ann Krentz insists, the heroine must conquer or tame the hero to achieve their happy ending; in the case of a softer, caring hero, Heinecken explains, the heroine has to heal him. Theoretically speaking, a vampire love story might fit into either category: after all, vampire heroes are traditionally aristocratic and powerful, and the need to feed on blood gives the vampire hero plenty of reason to be a brooding hero, if he has any conscience at all, or to be sheer, terrifying evil if he continues to indulge his appetite. (Angel, in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, torments himself for what he has done as a vampire before he regains his soul by a gypsy's curse; over the course of the series he is arguably both conquered *and* healed by the heroine.) In the *Twilight* and *Sookie Stackhouse Novels*, however, what has to be solved before the conclusion of the story and the consummation of love is neither the heroes' cold and distant attitudes nor his emotional wounding, because their boyfriends are, on the whole, conscientious, peace-loving creatures.

Edward Cullen in the *Twilight* saga, for example, belongs to a family that feeds only on animals, and he himself exhibits incredible self-control, subduing his desires—for blood

and for sex—to the point that Bella does not have to worry about her safety at all, at least from him. Throughout the *Twilight* saga, Edward keeps trying to make Bella admit that he is a dangerous hero, but he only makes her feel safe, and his repetitious warnings serve mostly to remind us, by contrast, of how unthreatening he really is. As Carrie Anne Platt points out, Bella's physical vulnerability reflects "social anxieties surrounding adolescent [female] sexuality" (80), but Edward behaves like an ideal boyfriend that a girl's parents dream of. Because he sees Bella as easily "breakable" (*Eclipse* 466), he treats her like fine china until her transformation, preaching and practicing "mind over matter" (*Twilight* 300). Bella may find herself in occasional dangers because of her vampire boyfriend, but if Bella is a "magnet for trouble" (*Twilight* 174), this is so that Edward may repeatedly rescue her. The love affair itself is not a flirtation with death. As Bella aptly comments, Edward in fact belongs to a "fairy tale, rather than the world of horror stories" (BD 479). The safe vampire is less a dark hero than he is a knight in shining armor.^[2]

In the *Southern Vampire Mysteries*, we see a parallel to the Cullen family's decision not to drink human blood. Here, vampires have "come out from the coffin" (*Dark* 1) and live among humans upon the invention of artificial blood called "TrueBlood."^[3] Indeed, the vampires themselves are sometimes at risk from evil humans; on the day of their first meeting, Sookie saves Bill, the vampire hero of the series, from the Drainers, people who rob vampires of their blood to sell. Bill is so damaged and battered that Sookie coos, "poor baby" (*Dark* 10). This power inversion, however, is shortly corrected: Bill saves subsequently Sookie from those Drainers, who come back to attack her, and kills them. Since he is "mainstreaming," i.e., attempting to live among humans, he does not kill to eat, but he can kill to protect her and himself. This killing does not disturb Sookie, and the peaceful feeling he can give to her is "priceless" "no matter what this creature beside [her has] done" (*Dark* 50). While witnessing the proof of his ability for violence, Sookie does not believe he would hurt her, "even if [he] were really mad at [her]" (*Dark* 166): a selective and controlled practice of violence, that is to say, establishes Bill to Sookie as a savior and protector. In this series, however—unlike the *Twilight* saga—the heroine's faith that her vampire hero is harmless turns out to be incorrect, a turn that I will discuss shortly in the context of the third of the Southern Vampire Mystery novels, *Club Dead*.

Animalistic Sex and the Significance of Virginity

In both the *Twilight* series and the *Southern Vampire Mysteries*, vampires thus suppress and control their animalistic aspects in order to assimilate into modern American society. These animal aspects include both the thirst for human blood and sexual desire; in fact, the two are linked. Edward refrains himself from kissing Bella because he is worried that his sexual drive triggers his desire for blood, while in the *Southern Vampire Mysteries*, bloodsucking functions as foreplay. Bloodsucking is thus no longer a metaphor for sexual intercourse but a sexual act itself, and, in turn, this suggests that sexual desire, like the desire to feed, is irresistible. Edward's abstinence and the "vegetarianism" in both series paradoxically crystallize the libidinal and hedonistic nature of bloodsucking and sex, and as a result, these novels reinforce the old and traditional view that sex is instinctual, uncontrollable, and potentially fatal. The attraction between the hero and the heroine is

described as comparable terms. Both heroines feel an instant attraction for their “own vampire[s]” (*Dark* 1), while in return, Bella attracts Edward with her smell, and Sookie also possesses special fragrance irresistible to Bill. None of the complex negotiations, ambiguities, or misunderstandings of non-paranormal human relationships are on display in these novels; indeed, we do not even see the preliminary dislike that was once so common between the heroes and heroines of popular romance.^[4] Attraction, compatibility, and true love are all somehow one.

This conjunction of attraction and true love is central to another motif in these series: the heroines lose their virginity to their vampire heroes. Like the construction of sex more generally in the novels, their use of the romantic convention of virginal heroines is curiously old-fashioned. What can we make of it? Romance writers such as Doreen Owens Malek and Brittany Young have defended this motif in the genre, arguing that virginity loss creates more drama and power to a story (Malek 118) and that this motif encodes an ideal of female autonomy and self-possession: as Young explains, the heroine “*makes the choice to give [the hero] the gift of virginity*” (122, my emphasis). From a more skeptical standpoint, however, one might observe that the traditional emphasis on female virginity in popular romance “enlists sexuality under the banner of love” (Cohn, 29), suggesting as it does that sex outside the context of “true love” remains somehow sinful, or at least unfortunate. It is thus notable that although many contemporary popular romance novels, according to Abbi Zidle, acknowledge the difference between love and lust in women, and even the existence of multiple true-love interests (30), in these series, a more traditional view of sex and virginity still seems to hold. In the words of romance author and critic Jayne Ann Krentz, who defends the virginity motif, there are “high stakes involved” (Krentz 112). And if popular romance generally embraces an “idea of selfhood as sexual” (Cohn, 35) those stakes include the selfhood of Bella and Sookie, a psychological issue we can distinguish from the more obvious moral and political issues bound up in female virginity.

Psychological Barriers

If the attraction between hero and heroine is instantaneous and instinctual and if the romance hero does not pose any threats, theoretically speaking, there lies no obstacle in consummating love. Where are the problems to be solved, the misunderstandings to be clarified, the mysterious pasts to be overcome? In their place, these new vampire romance novels offer heroines’ psychological barriers as obstacles. The concept of “boundaries of self,” familiar from critical accounts of Gothic, helps clarify what is at stake. Eugenia Delamotte argues that Female Gothic is concerned with the boundaries of self, signified in negotiations at the thresholds. According to her, Gothic episodes in which a heroine has to fend off an intruder threatening to come in, or struggle to escape from an underground cellar, all symbolize women’s anxieties about the boundaries of self: “terrors of separateness and the terrors of unity,” the “fear of being shut in, cut off, alone,” and the “fear of being intruded upon” (19). These new vampire novels also express the concerns with the boundaries of self of these heroines, who reject men or people in general, raising emotional barriers against them.

When we first meet Bella, her emotional barriers seem realistic enough. A social outcast in Phoenix, where the sun shines all year around and is inhabited with tanned blond girls, Bella does not “fit in,” either physically or socially. She does not “relate well to people [her] age,” the novel tells us, or to people in general (*Twilight* 10); even when she finds herself surrounded with admirers and friends in perpetually overcast Forks, Washington, she keeps to herself without finding a friend whom she can truly trust. Because the *Twilight* series is paranormal fiction, however, Bella’s emotional barriers can also be represented supernaturally. Edward, who can read the minds of others, cannot read hers, and other vampires cannot use their supernatural powers to harm her even while she is human, a power that becomes even greater when she turns into a vampire herself.

Sookie’s barrier is likewise literalized in supernatural terms. A telepath, Sookie cannot build any connection with others because their thoughts and feelings are oppressively transparent and overwhelming to her. What she calls “disability” makes her particularly stay away from men, rejecting any sexual advances from them. As a result, she has kept her virginity until the age of twenty-five, and has already given up on having a relationship, thinking that she will just “grow old and die” (*Dark* 56). In order to cope with her ability as a telepath, Sookie has to consciously reject hearing and understanding people’s minds; this training in shutting others off develops into a barrier against vampires’ supernatural intrusion. Thus, like Bella who intrigues Edward because of her blocking ability, Sookie surprises Bill Compton with her immunity to his hypnosis. In effect, these series return to the notion of an unreadable, gendered Other—but this time, it is the heroine who stands aloof and resistant. These heroines’ emotional barriers are the symbols of their isolation and alienation, but also of their obstinate defense of the boundaries of self against romantic approaches. To balance out softened heroes, we have hardened heroines.

In a more literal sense, barriers and thresholds hold a particular significance in vampire lore. On the one hand, DeLamotte argues that vampirism “represents the threat of physical violation—a transgression against the body, the last barrier protecting the self from the other” (21). On the other hand, vampires cannot enter a house unless invited, or so the convention runs. Between these two extremes we find vampires’ legendary propensity for psychological violation. Because they cannot enter houses uninvited, vampires have to have the mental ability to manipulate and intrude upon human minds so that the physical intrusion becomes possible; in other words, a psychological penetration precedes a physical penetration. Although the convention of “no entry unless invited” is not employed in *Twilight*, Edward does have the ability for mental intrusion, i.e., to read people’s minds, and what intrigues him most about Bella is that he cannot read her. In the *Southern Vampire Mysteries*, vampires do have to be invited into a house, and they do hypnotize humans in order to do so—but sometimes in these novels, blood consumption also serves as an invitation into the psychological domain, reversing the trope. When injured, for example, Sookie has to drink Bill’s blood to heal, resulting in the first penetration that prepares their eventual sexual encounter.^[5] Sookie lowers her guard, and then she realizes how she “reveals herself” to Bill (*Dark* 33). Not every blood-drinking incident in this series is as symbolically fraught as this one, but clearly this (inverted) human/vampire bodily penetration promotes the emotional and psychological dissolutions of boundaries, which ultimately leads to a sexual union that combines physical and psychological aspects.

Sex as Psychological Mediator

In these vampire novels, sex becomes a means to “share” feelings, rather than simply to exchange bodily fluids. In the world in which dangerous vampires are not so dangerous, the heroines’ special abilities concerning “penetrability” complement the relative lack, or unwillingness of vampires to “penetrate” in creating a necessary obstacle to be overcome. Before the intrusion and invasion can occur, the heroines have to learn the mistake of their ways by spending time with the patient and conscientious vampires so that the heroines’ boundaries of self stop being a problem. Here, again, we see a role inversion from traditional romance; the one who has to be understood and healed is now the heroine. Bella learns to trust others and to make friends, mostly with the Cullens; Sookie Stackhouse has to be healed by opening up about her painful past, in which she was sexually molested by her uncle. Bill Compton is a perfect healer and avenger who helps Sookie prepare herself to love a man.^[6] Pamela Regis suggests that in the romance novel, “intimacy” is a means to conquer the barrier of gender, both physical and emotional (180). In the *Southern Vampire Mysteries*, this intimacy is achieved in a profoundly literal way, as the “blood bond” established through drinking and being drunk (a mutual “penetration”) establishes a psychic bond. After sex, as well as blood-sharing, the heroines literally can feel the vampires’ feelings. To borrow a metaphor from more traditional vampire narratives, these heroines have opened a door, psychologically and physically, and invited their vampire heroes into their inner place.

Bella’s impenetrability might also be understood in a religious context. The author of the *Twilight* series, Stephanie Meyers, is a Mormon, and the saga can be read as an allegory of indoctrination to Mormonism, in which a non-Mormon “gentile” girl from a dysfunctional family finds faith with the guidance of a Mormon man, who advocates abstinence until marriage, and finally becomes assimilated into a close-knit “beautiful family,” united “forever and forever and forever.”^[7] On the physical level, Bella seems willing to step up her relationship with Edward further, and she even suggests that their roles are reversed; “you make me feel like a villain in a melodrama—twirling my mustache while I try to steal some poor girl’s virtue” (*Eclipse* 453), but unlike Sookie, Bella remains unreadable to Edward even after losing her virginity and being transformed into a vampire. As Penelope Williamson argues about romance and the heroine’s virginity, the “heroine does not lose her innocence along with her virginity” (130), and Bella’s continuing psychological “impenetrability” is a vivid instance of that ongoing innocence and the inalienable power of her separate selfhood. Indeed, when Bella becomes a vampire herself, a transformation required for her to safely give birth to her half-vampire child, her power is amplified. Bella’s impenetrability is no longer limited to herself but expanded to protect her “family” from outside threats. Williamson argues that in late 20th-century romances, “through the hero’s lovemaking” the heroine “discovers the power and potential of her woman’s sexuality” (130). In keeping with the generally conservative ethos of *Twilight*, Bella does not become a sexually powerful or exploratory wife. ^[8] But she does acquire a new, particularly womanly power through her sexual experience—or, to be specific, through maternity. Once Bella becomes a mother, she can protect her family.

In both of these vampire series, then—and in sharp contrast to earlier, more transgressive vampire narratives—sexual intercourse and blood-sharing lead to the

building of the familial bond. Bella gets pregnant immediately after her first sexual encounter, followed by her transformation, and Sookie has her first sex soon after her Grandmother, her only close family member, dies.^[9] Sex is a way to create a family or create a substitute for a family. In other words, these new vampire romance novels uphold the traditional fantasy of emotional bonding and merging of self through sexual intercourse. What were once transgressive acts of sex with (or penetration by) vampires are now safe and morally and socially legitimate. In keeping with the other ways that the vampire narrative has been Americanized, these series present sex with vampires as an expression of what conservative discourse in the United States commonly refers to as “family values.”

Rich Vampires and Poor Heroines

In her 1999 study of “Changing Ideologies in Romance Fiction,” Heinecken links the changing construction of the romance hero, with his newfound emotional accessibility, to a new construction of sexuality. In late 20th-century romance novels, she posits, sex is “no longer a mere physical act” but rather an “expressive form of communication” (168). The heroes and sexual encounters in these new vampire romances—especially in the *Southern Vampire Mysteries*—might both seem to follow this new model, but as we have seen, the ideologies of the series remain remarkably conservative, especially in their construction of the romance heroine’s career prospects or financial situation. In *Twilight*, Bella does not have any future plan other than marrying Edward. She has a chance to get a college education, but she does not seem to take that path at the end of the series. Repeatedly Bella insists that she does not want to be one of the girls who get married and have children right out of high school, but she does exactly that. Naomi Zack insists that the popularity of *Twilight* indicates “what young women aspire to in ‘having it all’” (122), yet Bella has only Edward (and later, Renesmee). He is the “only raison d’être” for her (158), as Abigail E. Myers says, and we can understand this from an economic standpoint, as well as a psychological one. Bella is, after all, a lower-middle class girl marrying into a rich family, without any financial independence. In the *Southern Vampire Mysteries*, Sookie has a job (she is a cocktail waitress), but she too goes out with a rich man, and at one point memorably envies the financial help Bill gives to his descendents while she is struggling financially. The class difference between the heroes and the heroines in these new vampire romance novels looks back to the much older model of romance narratives described by Jan Cohn in *Romance and the Erotics of Property* (1988); it does not correspond to the more feminist worldview Heinecken saw emerging at the end of the twentieth century. Those men in these new vampire novels may have nearly equaled women in their emotional capacity, but women have not correspondingly increased their social or economic power.

Similarly, the reduced Otherness of vampire heroes do not indicate that the codes of behavior for men and for women have become less different, or that men and women no longer live in separate worlds. Quite the contrary: although these safe heroes share more feelings with the heroines—an ideologically progressive development—they do still live in different worlds, a gendered difference that is underscored by the difference between vampires and humans. Only marriage can bring these disparate worlds together. This union

is accomplished in the *Twilight* series, but the *Southern Vampire Mysteries* present a more challenging, adult narrative, lacking this comfortable closure. The poor heroine who does not “want anyone owning” her (*Gone* 98) has to keep fighting to find a more equal relationship with a powerful man—and in the process, she rediscovers the danger that he—as both man and vampire—actually poses to her.

No Longer Safe

As the *Southern Vampire Mysteries* progress from novel to novel, Sookie learns that the safe vampire, Bill, is not as safe as the reader has come to believe. Normalized for us through his profession (he is a computer programmer and vampire census worker), Bill remains both male and a vampire, and the dangers posed by both of these natures become painfully clear when, in a momentary loss of self-control under physical stress, Bill forcefully sucks blood from Sookie and rapes her. The novel handles this assault in an interesting way. As a rule, Sookie turns a blind eye to Bill’s violent tendency; from quite early in the series she has known his nature, which makes him lose his personality with the scent of blood. She is, in fact, less wounded emotionally by this assault, based on presumably uncontrollable urges, than she is by learning that Bill originally approached her with an ulterior motive, under orders from a vampire boss who wants to exploit her telepathic ability, a fully conscious decision. In effect, she regards his emotional encroachment of her boundaries—her blind trust and emotional attachment—more seriously than his physical encroachment. It is the emotional betrayal that makes her feel a pain that is “tied up with a rage so profound” (*Definitely* 185) that she has never felt before because the “structure” that her emotion is built upon since she has met him is “torn down” (*Definitely* 187). Rather than flee from this risk into a safer, more secure relationship, Sookie moves on to romances where the risk is more clearly visible, right from the start: first a brief affair with the weretiger, Quinn, and then another vampire lover, Eric Northman, a man who looks “kind of like the guys on the cover of romance books” (*Dark* 105). “Blond and blue-eyed, tall and broad shouldered,” (*Dark* 105), Eric is a thousand-year-old Viking with an accent occasionally peeking through. Arrogant, narcissistic, power-hungry, emotionally inaccessible, Eric is thus more exotic than Bill, and a more traditional romance hero.

With this invocation of “romance books,” the *Sookie Stackhouse Novels* step into the realm of metafiction—in fact, there are many references to popular romance fiction in the series. Sookie and her grandmother read romance novels in their spare time, and there is another character, in addition to Eric Northman, who not only looks like a romance hero but also competes for “Mr. Romance” (well-known a cover model competition) at a romance readers’ convention.^[10] Like a romance reader gazing at attractive cover models, Sookie turns a fetishizing gaze on naked weretigers and shapeshifters; she mentions that she wants to “remember the sight” of a man’s naked body because she wants to “recall it at [her] leisure later” (*World* 251), and her distant cousin Claude is such a “treat for the eyes” (*Doornail* 20) that every time he appears, Sookie and all the other women stare appreciatively at him, despite his conspicuous lack of interest in women. More importantly, however, the series’ turn from Bill, who seems like a “new model” romance hero, but is not

really safe, to Eric, the “old school” arrogant romance hero, suggests that the gender negotiations in romance novels, especially of the older, more traditional variety, remain a useful model to keep in mind when confronting the dangers of adult sexual relationships. Sookie’s growth as a woman entails learning that a safe man does not exist, that to be a woman is to learn how to manage a difficult man, and that it is a dangerous illusion to believe that one’s own emotional barriers are a woman’s only obstacle to full sexual happiness.

As the series progresses, Sookie’s love life becomes more and more complicated. Bill’s vampire obligation comes before his romantic interest; Quinn, a weretiger, is bound by his family obligation; and Eric’s priorities lie in the political power game he pursues in the vampire world. Sookie treads more carefully with Eric, since “trust [has] gotten [her] burned in the past” (*Family* 17), a clear reference to her experience with Bill. She may have opened up her barriers to accept Bill, but now she has to lift up her guard again to protect herself; indeed, in one novel, *Dead Reckoning* (2011), she goes so far as to cut off her “blood bond” with Eric, an attempt at restructuring and reestablishing her boundaries of self. Eric softens to Sookie to the point that his subordinate worries that he is not practical when it comes to her, but he never unequivocally puts her before his political ambitions. Even when the two marry, in *Dead and Gone* (2009), the marriage fails to stabilize their union, in part because Eric tricks Sookie into marrying him, and in part because their vampire-style marriage, as with all the other marriages in the vampire world, is of a matter of ownership, not of idealized emotional union.^[11] Occasional appearances of Bill tangle up her love life still further, for he always has a “special place in [her] heart” (*Family* 33). It is Bill, not Eric, who comes to rescue Sookie when her life is critically in danger, and she confidently states that he still loves her even after her marriage to Eric (*Gone* 224). Refusing simplicity, the series refuses to present Sookie’s original psychological obstacle as the only barrier between her and a happy and safe relationship. No man she is involved with is ever free from other obligations that complicate their relationships, whether their vampire customs or political considerations, and the vampire world remains dangerous, in multiple ways. In short, in this series, romances are never simple or straightforward, and for a woman who believes that marriage is not, in fact, supposed to be “like a settling back in a La-Z-Boy” (*Gone* 98), exciting but never-comforting romance adventures may continue to unfold.

Conclusion

The *Twilight* and Southern Vampire Mystery series both show a new breed of vampire heroes, and they both locate the obstacles to true understanding and the consummation of love, at least initially, not in those new heroes, but in the heroines. Things develop quite differently as each series goes on, in part because of their contrasting audiences. Aimed at a Young Adult readership, Bella’s story is a traditional story of a woman who transforms from a daughter to a mother and a wife—a regression, politically speaking, from the feminist outlook of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* a decade before, and one that depends on readers’ willingness to commit to the series’ fairytale ending, in which the heroine and the hero end up eternally free from adult obligations (in addition to freedom from mortality). Sookie Stackhouse, by contrast, does not get a fairytale ending. After

suffering disappointment and betrayal with her first love, she finds herself married to a vampire who is explicitly compared to a “romance hero,” a man who is, and remains, both attractive and terrifying, with a world of his own outside of their relationship. (Where Bill had to confront Sookie’s “Otherness,” Sookie must negotiate Eric’s.) Awakened from the dream of a safe, “defanged” vampire lover, this romance-reading heroine has to face the numerous, ongoing, unromantic problems involved in adult love, including the crucial issue of keeping her own integrity and owning her own life while in a relationship. Safe vampire heroes, that is to say, are young women’s fantasies, but safe vampires may not be able to stand the test of more mature readers, especially when they are readers of popular romance.

[1] Natalie Wilson argues on the implications of race and ethnicity in her article, “Civilized Vampires Versus Savage Werewolves: Race and Ethnicity in the Twilight Series,” pointing out the use of stereotypical “savage” image of Native American in representation of the Quileutes. I agree with this reading, and I have to point out that the Cullens as new immigrants do not necessarily contradict her reading, for they do seem to acquire their “ultra-white, ultra-privileged” lifestyle through their assimilation efforts they have made in the United States. In the *SVM*, too, these two contrasting images are clear, too. As opposed to “aristocratic” vampires, weres and shapeshifters, especially a clan of werepanthers, who are mostly construction workers and mechanics, evoke the image of working class people who live under deprived conditions.

[2] Some critics offer various analyses of Edward both in positive and negative lights. For example, Edward can be read as a self-sacrificing savior and Christ figure, according to Sandra Gravett. Yet more important is the argument that Edward is not a caring tender boyfriend, but a controlling and overbearing stalker. Rebecca Housel goes as far to say, “In any world other than the fantastical one created by Meyer, Edward would be jailed” (188). For more detailed analyses of the power issue between Edward and Bella, see, for example, Platt’s “Gender and Sexual Politics in the Twilight Series,” Melissa Ames’ “Twilight Follows Tradition,” and Abigail E. Myers’s “Edward Cullen and Bella Swan: Byronic and Feminist Heroes...or Not.”

[3] As one can tell by the phrase “come out,” the vampires and shapeshifters (who come out in the ninth book, *Dead and Gone*) are evocative of minorities, especially sexual minorities. Harris consciously uses this analogy to take up the issue of the civil rights of vampires and shapeshifters occasionally. Characters sometime react with “I am Christian” statements in denying the accusation of being vampires or shapeshifters, suggesting these supernatural characters represent people with unChristian lifestyles. However, the main character Sookie is unhesitatingly straight, and her love interests respond to her as traditional heterosexual heroes.

[4] In *Twilight*, the view that a marriage is based on an animalistic and instinctual bond is further confirmed with the werewolves’ habit of “imprinting,” whereby they instinctively find their future mates.

[5] This process is repeated in her second union with Eric. After sharing each other’s blood, they form a “blood bond,” which enables them to understand each other’s feelings and thinking, and that bond eventually leads to their vampire marriage.

[6] However, Bill Compton's solution to Sookie's pain—to have her uncle killed—gives her the first moment of hesitation regarding the safety of Bill. And she does regret her decision later. Sookie wonders if she “should have cut and run” when she found out he was capable of violence (*Family* 33).

[7] Some critics offer analyses of *Twilight* in the contexts of Mormon teachings. Marc E. Shaw and Margaret M. Toscano both point out the ending with the happy vampire family is a supernatural version of the Mormon teaching of an eternal marriage, “forever and forever and forever.”

[8] Sandra Gravette points out that Bella “shows herself as the model of a timid virgin” (41) once she becomes a wife, contrary to her former sexually-curious self.

[9] In a later development, Sookie discovers and unites with her lost (non-human) family members while she goes through various troubles and disappointments in love.

[10] To a lesser degree, especially in the movie adaptations, *Twilight* also offers the objects of female gaze with always half-naked Jacob and other werewolves, suggesting the way in which the movies are consumed.

[11] Their marriage becomes more strained in *Dead Reckoning*, when she learns that Eric may have to fulfill an arranged marriage with another vampire, set up by his superior.

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