

What dreams may come? And what will they bring?

DO MORMON MOMS DREAM OF MONSTROUS GODS?

STEPHENIE MEYER'S TWILIGHT MYTH AS MORMON HEROINE'S JOURNEY

By Maxine Hanks

THE TWILIGHT SERIES, CALLED “AMERICA’S answer to Harry Potter,” has sold 85 million copies worldwide, been translated into 38 languages, and migrated to the movie screen, grossing \$384 million on *Twilight* and \$570 million on *New Moon* (in the first two weeks).¹ Stephenie Meyer was the bestselling fiction author of 2008, and *Twilight* has exceeded even the Harry Potter series, not in sales (85 million vs. 400 million), but in staying power, on the top ten for five years.² In total sales, *Twilight*’s four-book series rank #16 among all-time bestsellers—six places after #10 *The Book of Mormon* (140 million).³ Meyer has sold more books than any other Mormon except Joseph Smith. Citing *The Book of Mormon* as having “the most significant impact on [my] life,”⁴ Meyer may be on her way to equaling its success.

What is the magic that captivates 85 million readers, 100 million moviegoers, and 20 million video viewers? “I don’t know why I’ve gotten the response I have,” she admits. Meyer’s books have been criticized as “extremely poorly written” and “full of soft, pillowy language,” having “prose [that] was just awful” and “incomplete characters.” Readers consume 2444 pages dominated by teenage small talk for a

compelling plot buried in a narrative of adolescent angst. “The problem here is the story, or the lack of it,” say critics who see little value in *Twilight*.

Similar criticisms were made of *The Da Vinci Code* (“bad writing” and “riddled with errors”), *Harry Potter* (“too popular” and “silly”), *The Lord of the Rings* (“It reminds me of *The Book of Mormon*,” panned Harold Bloom) and *The Book of Mormon* (“chloroform in print” complained Mark Twain). Are millions of people simply being duped by loving such books? Would 200 million crave *Twilight* unless it offers something worthwhile? Successful stories may lack sophisticated style or literary standards, in fact they strain or reinvent genre, as did the Christian gospels, Tolkien, and *The Book of Mormon*. However, what they do have is a mythic power—an emotional, psychological, or spiritual effect on the reader that’s like a religious experience. “Stephenie has tapped into something very deep in her readers, and they respond on an emotional level.”⁵ “I noticed in that first week of reading that I was feeling things I hadn’t been able to feel in a long time.”⁶

Twilight is successful because it touches a universal nerve, answers a psychological need, with symbolic and mythic themes. After all, *Twilight* came from a dream, where the psyche or soul reveals itself, its needs, and its answers. Meyer’s myth resonates because it engages issues in the psyche for a critical mass of people. For readers, *Twilight* is a waking dream, a myth that lives.

MYTHOPOEIA

THE SIMPLEST EXPLANATION for *Twilight*’s effect on fans is “the power of myth” as Joseph Campbell termed it—the



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WILLIAM BLAKE, “NIGHT THOUGHTS—NIGHT VI”

ability of a mythic story to reveal truths, teach us about ourselves and our world, and inform our lives. Meyer's myth possesses readers and invokes their innermost desires for fulfillment. "People do not want to just read Meyer's books; they want to climb inside them and live there."⁷ Rather than lacking in "story," *Twilight* is rich in plot or "mythos."

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle cited plot or mythos as the most important element in drama or tragedy, "the soul of a tragedy" that permeates the story. The ultimate aim of plot is to produce real emotion in the reader or viewer—actual feelings of sadness, desire, love, loathing, fear, pity, or terror. "Fear and pity may be aroused by spectacular means; but they may also result from the inner structure of the piece, which is the better way, and indicates a superior poet. For the plot ought to be so constructed that, even without the aid of the eye, he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes place."⁸

Twilight's power radiates from its plot or myth, of impossible ultimate love between a tragic hero and heroine who pass through traumatic personal tests to find solutions. Meyer follows a classic formula of flawed humans, gods, monsters, and heroes all locked in personal and cosmic conflicts while pursuing love that is often doomed. She uses mythic creatures (vampires and shapeshifters), archetypal struggles (superhuman vs. human, animal vs. divine), and mythic patterns (the quest for immortality or redemption). Her settings are otherworldly—the Olympic Peninsula with its mist-shrouded Mount Olympus, home of gods and mythic creatures; Port Angeles, the landing place of angels; and Forks, a place where choices are made and played out.

Symbols are plentiful in this myth. The Fall of Adam and Eve, as depicted on the book's cover and front pages, are reversed in the story of Edward's and Bella's transformation and redemption. Bella's move from Arizona (desert, sun-

light) to Washington (rainforest, shadows) echoes the journey from known to unknown realms, and earthly to heavenly abodes. Her red truck can be read as a symbol of blood and alchemical transformation. Even the phases of mitosis in her biology class hint at metamorphosis. The symbols speak transition, change.

For fans, the mythic world of *Twilight* is so real it seems to have an independent life of its own. They enter the myth—it becomes real for them, within. As with other popular mythic worlds, such as *Lord of the Rings*, *Star Trek*, or *Star Wars*, fans yearn to live the myth by visiting locations, or dressing like characters they identify with. Thousands of visitors throng to



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Forks, Washington, on a quest to find Bella, Edward, Jacob, Charley, the Cullens, and the *Twilight* environment.

The Otherworldly realms like *Twilight*, *Harry Potter*, and *The Lord of the Rings* "have a freestanding internal integrity that makes you feel as if you should be able to buy real estate there."⁹ This is living mythos, a dimension beyond the ordinary world that a seeker can visit, revisit, and describe in detail.

Tolkien experienced "Middle-earth" this way, as a self-existent realm he entered, experienced, and wrote about. He employed the term "mythopoeia" to describe the mythic quality or world of a literary work that has a living truth of its own.¹⁰ *Twilight* achieves mythopoeia. Meyer confirms this. "I suppose the psychological challenge was accepting that Edward

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and Bella weren't real people. (I still don't entirely believe that.)¹¹ I forget that it's not real. I'm living the story, and I think people can read that sincerity about the characters. They are real to me while I'm writing them, and I think that makes them real to the readers as well."¹²

THE HEROINE'S JOURNEY

TWILIGHT IS A myth about true love, ideal love, ultimate love, "how love changes who you are,"¹³ Meyer says. "I think it's romance more than anything else . . . that's really the strongest emotion."¹⁴ Yet this love story is more than a quest for romantic love; it's a quest for self fulfillment.

Meyer sees *Twilight's* success partly due to Bella's being an everygirl. "She's not a hero . . . she's normal."¹⁵ Meyer describes herself the same way: "Ninety-five percent of the time, I'm just Mom . . . doing the normal thing."¹⁶ Yet it's the ordinary "everyman" who takes the archetypal "hero's journey." Bella, a bumbling introvert, leaves her familiar world and enters an unknown realm of perils where her courage and strength are tested by monsters and death at every turn. She embarks on a personal odyssey. She begins as a damsel in distress then learns to find her own power, survive all dangers, defeat all foes, rescue her beloved, embrace transformation, master her potential, and becomes an immortal. Bella evolves from "fragile human" to superhuman, "from weakest player on the board to being the most powerful one," transcending her own being. This is the hero's quest from a feminine perspective: a woman's metamorphosis from helpless to heroine. While Bella walks this heroic path, Meyer and her readers undertake a journey of their own. Meyer has done for the heroine what Tolkien and Lucas did for the hero. *Twilight* is the heroine's journey.

This myth arose from a woman's dream, the subconscious female psyche. "My 30th birthday was coming up and . . . I didn't feel I had much going for me. I had my kids, but there



PHOTO COURTESY: MAXINE HANKS

Dressed as Bella, Ashley Garber, stands in front of "Bella's Truck" in Forks, Washington, where the Twilight Saga is set.

wasn't much I was doing,"¹⁷ Meyer says. This was the context and cause—the dream of motherhood seemed wanting. Meyer escaped her ennui via another dream where a young, single, childless version of herself meets a godlike man, a glowing immortal male. Perhaps the ideal mate is superhuman. "In my dream, two people were having an intense conversation in a meadow in the woods. One of these people was just your average girl. The other person was fantastically beautiful, sparkly, and a vampire. They were discussing the difficulties inherent in the facts that they were falling in love with each other while the vampire was particularly attracted to the scent of her blood, and was having a difficult time restraining himself from killing her immediately."¹⁸

This godman is conflicted. He is burdened by vampiric urges to consume; yet he yearns for healing and redemption via his missing feminine companion. He is a paradox—half god/half monster, half divine/half vampire, half savior/half devil, half angel/half demon.

One of Meyer's strengths as a writer is utilizing paradox—bringing opposite views into dialogue—about gender, love, identity, marriage, power, and relationship. *Twilight* marries opposites with palpable tension. "It was the combination of desire and danger that drew me in," Meyer explains.¹⁹ This is the power in Edward and Bella's relationship.

Perhaps underlying all characters, themes and symbols,

the crux of Meyer's myth is an archetypal tension of mutually exclusive realities, the struggle of opposites to know each other and find some harmony or union.

MORMON AND FEMINIST SUBTEXTS

FEMINISTS HAVE CRITICIZED Bella as being a powerless femme fatale ever in need of rescue, or an enabler enmeshed in a codependent relationship with an abusive male. But Meyer considers herself and her books feminist. "True feminism is about choice. It means that a woman can do whatever will bring her the most happiness," she says. Even Robert Pattinson, who plays Edward in the *Twilight* movies, agrees, "Everyone looks at Edward as the hero, and he's continuously saved by the damsel in distress."²⁰

Meyer explores both feminist and femme fatale positions through Bella's contradictory qualities. Bella is both disempowered and empowered. She's independent, tomboyish, self-possessed, studious, a loner, averse to marriage. She's also helpless, vulnerable, afraid, dependent, and consumed by love and need for Edward. Meyer shows us Bella's powerlessness and power, failures and successes, the journey integrating all positions from weak to strong into a wholeness of personal transformation. Bella reveals all parts of the female self, from cipher to superwoman, letting femaleness be what it is. Meyer is engaging the feminist struggle for authentic self. Bella becomes a new creature who wields her own destiny. Meyer takes Bella all the way to hero. She overcomes all limitations, even transcending Mormon theology.

MORMONISM

"I REALLY DON'T write about religion, and my characters aren't specifically religious in any way," Meyer says. But then recants, "Unconsciously, I put a lot of my basic beliefs into the story." Mormonism enters the myth because Meyer's dream and story were shaped by a Mormon psyche.

Meyer is a Mormon and a feminist writing about theological themes, which means *Twilight* can be read as a kind of Mormon feminist theology. She works through theological questions, using Mormon doctrine in unique ways, simultaneously owning and resisting it.

"So the Lion fell in love with the Lamb," is Edward's confession to Bella; this echoes the Mormon hymn, "The Spirit of God Like a Fire Is Burning" where "the lamb and the lion shall lie down together without any ire." Meanwhile the Quileute natives (the wolves) could be read as a *Book of Mormon* metaphor for the Tribes of Israel with Jacob and Ephraim Black inheriting a lineage of power (shapeshifting) like the descendants of Jacob/Israel via Joseph-Ephraim-Manasseh. Meyer includes a girl, Leah Clearwater, in that lineage or priesthood.

Meyer's vampires and wolves are devoted monogamists; they mate "forever" via an "imprinting" of souls, much like Mormon "eternal marriage." Yet Meyer does not portray relationships, even marriage, as secure or eternal, but as prone

to change. Bella does find her eternal soul mate, yet she has to forge her own salvation. She receives the transfusion of immortality from Edward, yet she evolves further, developing her own unique powers and being. Rather than relying on eternal codependency, the real purpose of relationship is self transformation. Also, in *Twilight's* version of eternal marriage, Edward isn't a polygamist; yet Bella seems polyandrist, torn between two soulmates. Edward and Jacob are a polyandrous tension that continues to the end of book three. Jacob and Edward are also a metaphor for Bella's own dual nature, the tension between earthly vs. divine, temporal vs. spiritual, mortality vs. immortality.

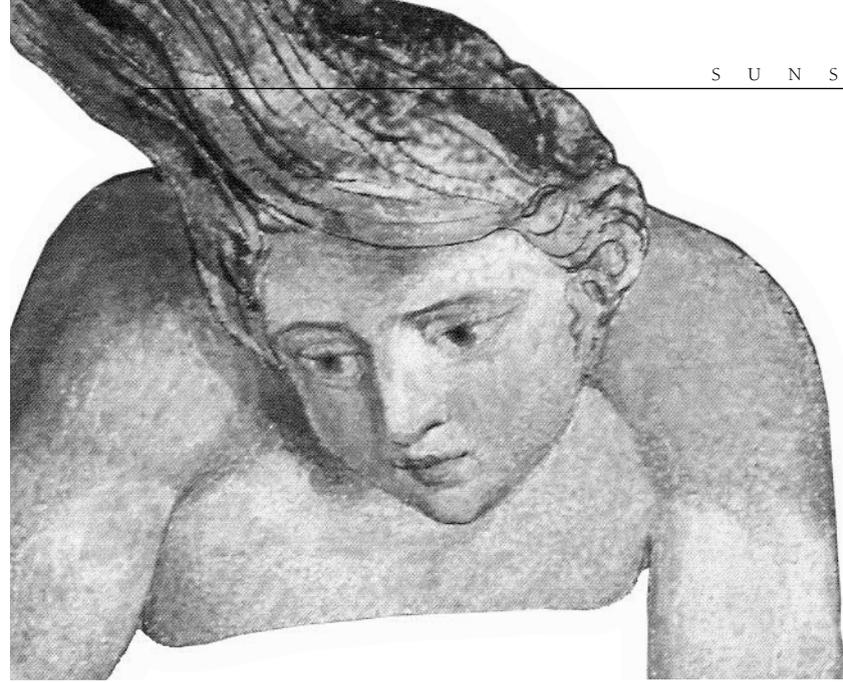
The *Twilight* world has "Mormon vampires" who resemble the LDS idea of a "translated" being—a transmuted mortal body of impervious flesh, undying but not yet eternal, skin that shines, veins without blood, supernatural but not yet god, a temporary immortal. Eternity is uncertain, final salvation isn't sure, they are still working out their redemption in fear and trembling, with possible failure, still vulnerable to sin or death. Also, the Mormon notion of "the Fall" (from immortal to mortal) is answered by a vampiric version of reversal from mortal to immortal, the vampire as metaphor for Mormon translation or half-redemption.

Free agency drives *Twilight's* plot, as true power in every situation to renegotiate tragedy, choice is the mechanism of success. "I really think that's the underlying metaphor of my vampires,"²¹ said Meyer. "You always have a choice to be better, no matter your circumstances."²² Yet the reverse is also true—a vampire can be a metaphor for lack of choice, being trapped by circumstances, drained by responsibilities, living in the death of one's dreams.

All along, Bella rejects both marriage and motherhood, then finally makes the choice for both. Delivering a baby is nearly fatal (a statement about risks and sacrifices of child-bearing?) yet results in a godchild, both mortal and immortal, the result of union between a godlike father and human mother.

Family is central in *Twilight*; yet Bella leaves her family of birth for an immortal family, like being called by Christ to forsake the world, live a higher law, and join a spiritual family. The Cullens transcend both the human world and the vampire world; Carlisle is a Christ figure who overcomes the world then calls others to follow him. Redemption in *Twilight* is found via relationship—humans, vampires, and wolves are not saved in isolation.

What else might the vampire symbolize? Meyer's vampires are godlike beings, half-divine, so "vampire" might be read as "god" or "religion." The vampire can symbolize the shadow of religion, which has both darkness and light. The Cullens evoke an American religion whose founder Carlisle echoes Joseph Smith, while the Volturi are ancient Italians, seemingly Catholic. Could Edward himself as godman symbolize Meyer's religion, a metaphor for Mormonism or the Mormon god? Does religion itself have a dual personality, human and divine, offering salvation and seduction? Meyer's vampires are Mormon, but is Mormonism vampiric (in the subconscious



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mind)? The vampire metaphor captures the paradoxical human nature of religion and god—the whole creature both flawed and ideal, good and bad, animal and divine.

Meyer's myth came from a dream, a night vision of an angelic being. This set her life on a course of pursuing that vision to its conclusion, resulting in a book about immortality and redemption, read by millions around the world. This has echoes of Joseph Smith's story, whose first book was world-changing too. Oddly enough, it seems both books were written from the middle to end, the first part written last. After losing his first 116 pages (25%), Joseph apparently dictated from Mosiah to Moroni, then dictated 1st Nephi to Words of Mormon to finish.²³ Meyer did the same thing. "I wrote from the middle through to the end, and then went back and wrote the beginning until the two pieces matched up. To be honest, I feel like I was guided through that process."²⁴ Meyer, like Smith, entered a visionary process, a very Mormon practice. To have a vision is to be a seer of otherworldly realms and beings.

Ultimately, *Twilight* is not an allegory or allusion to one specific theme—vampirism or Mormonism—it's a modern myth, original and self-existent, arising from the subconscious mind. Meyer's dream is revelatory, conveying the unconscious, transcendent, archetypal, and symbolic. The word "twilight" itself means shadowland between light and darkness, known and unknown, where mysterious images, figures, and messages are not distinct or exact, but encountered and interpreted individually. *Twilight* takes readers on a journey to find their own monsters and gods, losses and love, tests and triumphs, myth and meanings. ☞

NOTES

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