Walpole, Stoker, Bronte . . . Meyer?

WHY TWILIGHT IS GOOD FOR YOU

How the Uncanny Can Make Us More Christ-like

By Tyler Chadwick

LAST SUMMER, AS I FLIPPED THROUGH THE five-hundred-plus-page novel my wife and I had borrowed from our sister-in-law, I thought, "A Mormon writing vampire stories? This should be an interesting read." Almost everyone we'd talked to about the book and its sequels—Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* Saga—had nothing but praise for Meyer, a BYU graduate, and her flawed-enough-to-be-human fantasy. Some said, "It's brilliant! Stephenie Meyer is a great storyteller." Others remarked, in words similar to these from one Twihard (as some obsessive fans call themselves), "These books really make you feel like they're happening[;] they're realistic—love happens. And that makes them even more likeable, too."[1]

But the draw to Meyer's world may not simply be likeable characters. The stories also seem narcotic in that they evoke a physiological response that ties readers to the sensual experience of the fantasy. "I feel a little lost now that the series is over and I have nothing left to read," writes one Twihard. "Nothing else interests me except for Bella and Edward[']s story."[2] Yet another confesses, "*Twilight* is my brand of heroin. The first time I read it, I fell in love with the book [...] I became *obsessed* [...] It's definitely addicting."[3]

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I could go on quoting similar comments from any number of websites I've come across in my efforts to understand the *Twilight* phenomenon. But I need look no farther than my own household to observe the gravitational pull of Meyer's world. We were latecomers to Meyer's reception, walking in only after *Breaking Dawn* had come out in 2008. But once my wife picked up the series, there was no looking back. She ingested all four books in five days. Then, after a day or two of rest, during which she couldn't shake the specters of Edward and Bella from her consciousness, she went back for seconds, this time reading the series more slowly, she said, in preparation for the November 2008 release of the film adaptation of the first book.

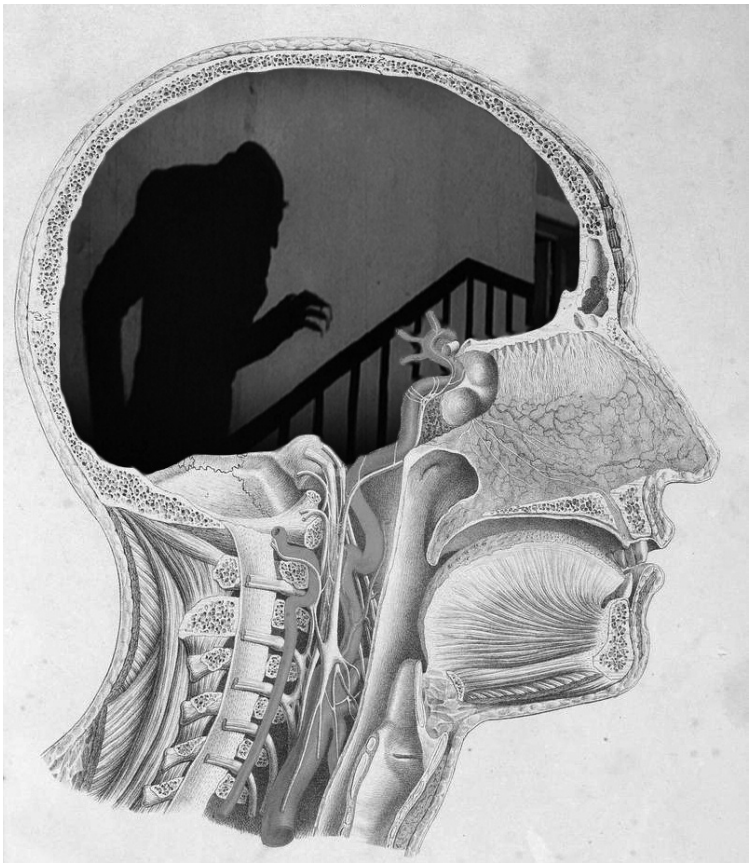
Because Meyer's romantic epic sprawls across 2,458 pages in four roughly six-hundred page tomes, my wife's reading was no small feat. But as many others have, she admits she just couldn't put the books down. She just had to follow Isabella "Bella" Swan and her vegetarian vampire beau, Edward Cullen, as they first meet in Forks, Washington, fall into forbidden love, and, after conquering a series of increasingly threatening obstacles—most of which involve confrontations with vampires of the non-vegan stripe—live happily ever after as immortal husband and wife. My wife and I are active Latter-day Saints, so surely the prospect of seeing Edward and Bella become eternal companions increased my wife's motivation to keep reading. Such a Mormon ideal, as Jonathan Green points out, makes the Saga—particularly *Breaking Dawn*—"a sustained and vividly imagined answer" to some "very Mormon questions," including: "What will it be like to have a marriage continue past death into the

eternities? What does it mean to have a perfected body, or to love an eternal being?"[4]

Despite this apparently unabashed Mormon cosmology and the implicit cultural approval of the fantasy, I was still a bit chagrined at the LDS-vampire combo as I waded into *Twilight*'s cinematic narrative. Considering the book's black cover, I may have even asked myself, "What might this brush with the dark and ungodly realm of vampires do to my soul? Am I giving way to the devil by wading into Meyer's world?"

Well, one critic writes, Meyer's "novels are truly Mormon novels and could not be anything else"[5]—so surely they're safe reading. But a number of Latter-day Saints believe otherwise.

In an assembly of letters to the *Meridian Magazine* editor in response to the magazine's positive treatment of the *Twilight* Saga, several readers wonder how Mormons, "the [self-avowed] children of [...] Light,"[6] can justifiably indulge themselves by reading literary works situated in supernatural realms of darkness and touching the inherent sensuality of human experience. How have so many Latter-day Saints, "the very Elect" of God, one asks, "been hood winked [sic] and dazzled by the Adversary" into thinking that *Twilight* and its sequels are "harmless" entertainment?[7] For despite *Twilight*'s squeaky clean façade, the story seethes with what Lev Grossman names an "erotics of abstinence": a muted sexual interplay that arises as Bella's hormones and Edward's bloodlust repeatedly interact and their bodies ache to possess one another, often to the point of arousal, though never to climax until after their marriage in *Breaking Dawn*.[8]



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In view of LDS teachings on chastity, Meyer's answer to the question, *How far can we go without going all the way?* may pose valid concerns for those worried about the morality of Mormon youth and Meyer's possible influence on their attitudes toward sexuality. So even if readers don't understand the historical literary connection between vampirism, sensuality, and sex (as many do not), this tension between a hygienic surface and an implicitly "dirty" core leads one letter writer to ask why Mormon readers insist on "glamoriz[ing]" and "splitting hairs with evil" by giving *Twilight* due consideration. For as the writer sermonizes, "The Savior does not split hairs[;] wrong is wrong, evil is evil. Dress it up or slice it any way you want to [...], the Prophets of the Lord [...] are contrary to Ms. Meyer[']s story lines [sic]."[9]

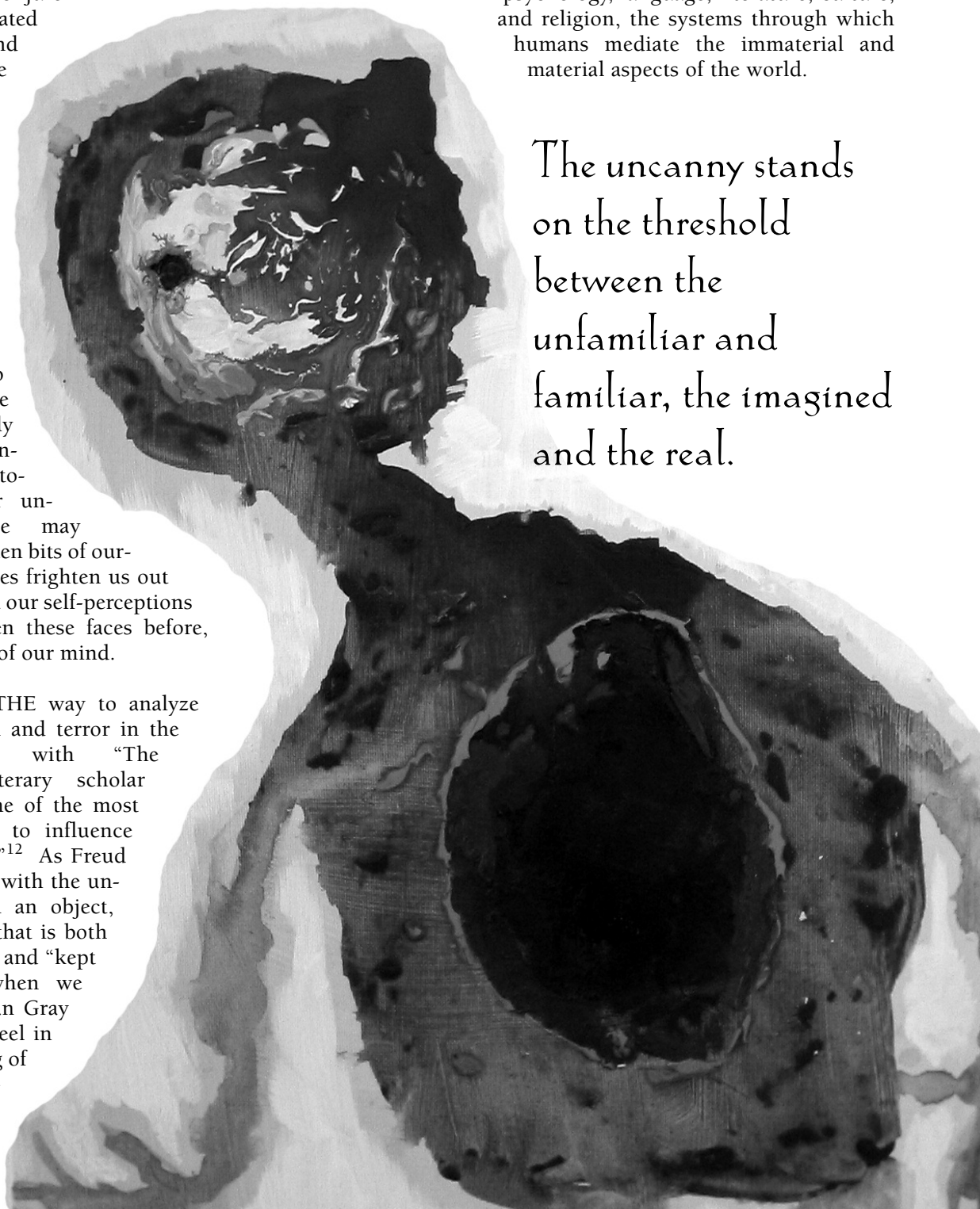
In my efforts to understand and interpret the *Twilight* Saga as a cultural phenomenon, I've found it useful to situate *Twilight* in relation to Gothic literature, that increasingly popular fictional realm sometimes labeled "a literature of nightmare."[10] The first Gothic novel I read was Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), inspired by her vision of a scientist crazed by a desire to re-animate human life. It's a tale that has settled into our cultural consciousness deeply enough that its potential to strike terror into our hearts—as it did to Shelley and her contemporaries—is muted by familiarity and parody. Some time after reading *Frankenstein*, I returned to the tradition's roots with Horace Walpole's dream-inspired, *Castle of Otranto* (1764), considered the first Gothic novel in English. *Otranto* set the generic standard with its haggard castle, animated portraits, unexplained appearances of colossal body parts, twists of identity, and a crazed and incestuous father-king whose lust for power brings death crashing down on his son, ultimately leaving him personally and politically impotent. Then I read William Beckford's *Vathek, an Arabian Tale* (1782), Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), Anne

Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1797), and—probably the most well-known of this list—Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), a tale of passionate yet thwarted love between Catherine and Heathcliff (one of literature's great monsters). The book's characters haunt England's Yorkshire Moors, drifting between the natural and supernatural in their longing, perhaps, to belong.

Something these novels have in common is that, true to the Gothic tradition, they give "form to amorphous fears and impulses common" to humanity. They take up psychological and relational dysfunctions, the depths of passion, and the pain of unrequited love as they conjure up monsters—animated corpses, mad monks, and demons—and invoke venues—the "forbidding cliffs and glowering buildings, stormy seas and the dizzying abyss"—that are significant not just in narrative terms, but contain "the properties of dream symbolism as well."[11] Consciously or not, Gothic fiction writers give shape to phantasms and evils we generally summon only from our sleep's deep unconsciousness. These stories spark to life—or undeath, as the case may be—repressed or forgotten bits of ourselves that can sometimes frighten us out of our wits and disorient our self-perceptions because, yes, we've seen these faces before, lurking in dark corners of our mind.

FREUD OPENS THE way to analyze the place of evil and terror in the human mind with "The 'Uncanny,'" which literary scholar Steven Bruhm calls "one of the most important early essays to influence criticism of the Gothic."[12] As Freud explains, an experience with the uncanny is a brush with an object, image, person, or idea that is both "familiar and agreeable" and "kept out of sight"[13]—as when we watch the sins of Dorian Gray distort his portrait, or feel in our bones the crumbling of the House of Usher beneath a burden of vanity, or as wife after Stepford wife is murdered and replaced by an impossibly beautiful and fawning replica because Stepford insists on perfection. So when we come upon something uncanny, it shows us "nothing new or alien"; it simply reasserts something from which we have "become alienated [...] through a process of repression."[14]

The uncanny comes from a source close to home—much closer, perhaps, than some might care to admit. It stands on the threshold between the unfamiliar and familiar, the imagined and the real. This in-between-ness allows the uncanny to subversively function in psychology, language, literature, culture, and religion, the systems through which humans mediate the immaterial and material aspects of the world.



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ANNA WASCHKE

In Gothic fiction, this repressed familiarity is frequently manifest in the classic monster—the vampire, werewolf, mad scientist, or ghost-beings neither dead nor alive, human nor animal, sane nor completely clinical. Barbara Creed suggests that the uncanny "permeates" these monstrosities, making it difficult for readers to dismiss them, because they're not just "meaningless beast[s]" meant to "run amok, incite terror, kill indiscriminately." No, she continues, "the identity of the monster [...] is inseparable from questions of sex, gender, power, and politics."[15] In other words, we sometimes see ourselves in these grotesqueries—in Frankenstein's monster's longing for, and later rejection of, love and family; in Manfred's destructive lust for power and success in *The Castle of Otranto*; in Heathcliff's passion for Catherine, which turns into emotional violence toward everyone after she marries another man.

By nudging us into identifying with these monsters, by exciting our pity or terror, Gothic fiction authors subtly confront us with questions about who we are and persuade us to step beyond our ambivalence and anxiety in order to expose and explore the recesses of our minds and unsettle our embedded assumptions. All this nudging makes space in which to expand awareness of our personal, social, and rhetorical worlds.

In the *Twilight* novels, Edward initially stands as the uncanny monster. He inhabits the gray area of being a principled vampire, an angelic monster who sends textual and extratextual females reeling with a mere nod of the head. (Cue screaming Twihards.) Like her literary predecessor Mary Shelley, Meyer first encountered this monster in a dream. His "fantastically beautiful, sparkly" body[16] sparked her dash to publication. Edward catches and keeps Bella's fascination from her "first sight" of the Cullens in the Forks high school cafeteria. As an outsider, he evokes Bella's—and many a Twihard's—"pity" and passion.[17] And with their unique blend of burning, yet restrained, lust for blood, Edward and his coven, marble skin ablaze, have stepped from the shadows of vampire mythology into the cultural limelight to draw attention to Meyer's reworking of the Gothic tradition. This reworking offers a much more nuanced reading of vampirism than the usual products of pop culture channels.

Though caught in the riptide of popular culture, Meyer and coven stand apart from the zeitgeist, the vampires as a function of their distinctively moral monstrosity and the author as a function of her faith.

But that is easier said than shown. As Caitlin Flanagan writes, Stephenie Meyer's Mormonness is something "every reviewer of [Meyer's work] has mentioned," though none has really known "what to do with it."[18] Well, that's not true anymore. In his master's thesis,

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"Mormon Vampires: The *Twilight* Saga and Religious Literacy," Edwin Arnaudin ferrets out several Mormon tenets, including agency, marriage and family, and chastity, as they arise in the series. He argues that these were layered into the narrative in an effort to "foster [...] greater religious awareness in popular culture" and lure potential initiates into the mysteries of Mormonism.[19] He warns readers to engage Meyer's fictions carefully lest, "uninformed" as to what they're "actually receiving" (i.e. Mormonism "cloaked" in a clever vampire tale), they fall down "the rabbit hole" of her faith.[20] Thus, when he concludes that her "novels are truly Mormon novels and *could not be anything else,*"[21] he is not praising her for being true to her faith. He's arguing that Meyer's vampires and their fans are being pulled toward Mormonism, even as worried *Meridian Magazine* readers lament that *Twilight* is pulling their children and Mormonism toward darkness and the devil.

The uncanniness of Meyer's world thus spills over into the varied reactions to *Twilight*—from praise for her creatures' virtues to condemnation of her monsters' sensuality, from accolades for a story well-told to Arnaudin's fears that Meyer means to cram her beliefs down the world's unsuspecting throats.

But these reactions miss the point—they're too literal. They're refusing to let the uncanny do what it does best: place us in an area where we can withhold judgment as the story moves us to confront the many-faceted issues of physical desire and the nature of the "evil" that flows beneath our consciousness. By learning to dwell nonjudgmentally with such moral terrors, we become better able, as Edmund Burke suggests in his treatise on the sublime and the beautiful, to "enter into the concerns of others"; to be "moved as they are moved."[22] In other words, readers of the uncanny aren't indifferent spectators; no, they are vicariously soaking in and empathizing with a fellow being's pains, afflictions, temptations, sicknesses, infirmities, and sins, a small reflection of an infinite act once carried out in a garden called Gethsemane.

If in our ventures toward eternity, we deny ourselves the vitality of such vicarious experience by refusing the uncanny a place in our personal and cultural theologies—especially as this refusal relates to gaining (or not) an un-

derstanding of sexuality, sin, and evil—we may miss the soul-expansion that can arise from a brush with alternate, rhetorical, even terror-ridden and ungodly, lives. And through her rearticulation of the Gothic aesthetic, Stephenie Meyer summons us into this revisionary reading of terror and the ungodly. That is, by coaxing the vampire novel into the light, she gives readers the opportunity to confront and come to terms with the implicit humanness of the uncanny as they grow into a fullness of knowledge, compassion, and community.

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