

**“...it sucked because it was written for *teenage girls*” —  
*Twilight*, anti-fans and symbolic violence**

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**Abstract**

In Western societies, cultural products associated with girls or women, either as the creator or the main audience, have often been positioned at or near the bottom of the cultural hierarchy (Huysen 1986; Modleski 1986:48). Examples of this include romance novels, soap operas and ‘pop’ music. This paper will examine the response of ‘anti-fans’ in on-line communities to the hugely successful *Twilight* series (both the books and the movie), with a view to demonstrating how the feminine nature of the series is central to the criticisms made of it and its fans. The associated naturalisation of the teenage girl as an uncritical, overly-emotional consumer of culture will be analysed as a form of symbolic violence that helps to reproduce power relations between men and women. The paper will demonstrate that the themes that arise in the discussion of *Twilight* coincide in many ways with debates within academia, feminism itself and wider society around the value and effects of popular culture, and ultimately contribute to the construction of a hierarchy of tastes that continues to denigrate feminine culture.

**Key words:** Popular Culture, Youth, Symbolic Violence, Online Culture, Gender

In Western societies, cultural products associated with girls or women, either as the creator or the main audience, have often been positioned at or near the bottom of the cultural hierarchy (Huysen 1986; Modleski 1986:48). Examples of this include romance novels, soap operas and ‘pop’ music. This paper will examine the response of ‘anti-fans’ in on-line communities to the hugely successful *Twilight* series (both the books and the movie), with a view to demonstrating how the feminine nature of the series is central to the criticisms made of it and its fans. The associated naturalisation of the teenage girl as an uncritical, overly-emotional consumer of culture will be analysed as a form of symbolic violence that helps to reproduce power relations between men and women. The paper will demonstrate that the themes that arise in the

discussion of *Twilight* coincide in many ways with debates within academia, feminism itself and wider society around the value and effects of popular culture, and ultimately contribute to the construction of a hierarchy of tastes that continues to denigrate feminine culture.

In this way, examining a cultural phenomenon like *Twilight* is not merely a matter of academic interest. The work of Pierre Bourdieu has demonstrated that taste is not just a matter of personal preference, but is closely tied in with power relations in society, whereby the tastes of the powerful come to be seen as ‘naturally’ occupying positions at the top of the taste hierarchy, whereas cultural forms associated with the less powerful (particularly the lower class) are seen as less worthwhile (see also Bryson 1996; Lovell 1987). Bourdieu sees this as symbolic violence, and argues that:

Every power to exert symbolic violence, i.e. every power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force, adds its own specifically symbolic force to those power relations. (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977:4)

This paper will show that the on-line discussion of anti-fans of *Twilight* constitutes a form of symbolic violence, in that the underlying point of the discussion is not about *Twilight* at all, but about constructing teenage girls as a group not worth taking seriously.

This becomes more powerful as a result of the way cultural items associated with women are often at the bottom of the cultural ‘pecking order’. Romance novels, soap operas and pop music are labels that are often used as shorthand for ‘bad’ culture, yet they also have a tendency to have women as their main audience. Further, in the case of pop music, this is the limited space that is readily available to female performers in the realm of popular music (Davies 2001). This type of feminine culture suffers from attacks on all sides. Proponents of more ‘high brow’ forms of culture such as literary

novels, arthouse films or classical music easily dismiss these 'low brow' cultural items as having no value (see examples in Light 1999; Modleski 1982; Radway 1999), as well as critiques of theorists such as Adorno (1941)). Within studies of popular culture, by those who look to find value in the more low brow culture of our society, the more feminine forms of culture are still undertheorised and still often dismissed as part of a homogenised, bland 'mass' culture (Hollows 2000:26). Feminist theory has also often been critical of these forms of culture and their audience, arguing that soap operas and romance novels in particular are mechanisms through which women are kept in subordinate positions by being fed versions of submissive femininity that revolve around women's position as wives and mothers and send a message that seeking these positions (mainly through the pursuit of the 'perfect love') will keep women happy (Light 1999:372; Modleski 1982:10).

Over time, some of these assumptions have been challenged as feminine culture and audience interaction with it have been examined more closely. For example, Hollows (2000) notes that some of the assumptions that feminists have made about the effects of mass culture on women and the messages that they receive from it can be criticised on a variety of grounds, including that there has been surprisingly little research done with audiences of these forms of culture, as opposed to textual analysis, which is limited in the understanding it can provide of how messages are received. This ties in to wider criticisms that have been made of mass culture theory that has been handed down to us from the Frankfurt School, and the 'hypodermic model' of media reception that suggests an audience has a message injected into their minds (for a discussion of this, see Strinati 2004:10-15). This has been widely critiqued since the advent of audience studies that have shown how many different messages audiences can receive from the same text (for example see Hall 1999; Hall and Jefferson 1993).

However, despite these advances in understanding the effects of culture, the idea of a mass of gullible and easily controlled consumers (who are themselves coded as ‘feminine’ (Modleski 1986)) survives very strongly in the discourses around culture, as will be demonstrated below.

The subject of the discussion considered here, the *Twilight* series by Stephenie Meyer, is very strongly associated with the feminine as it has a female author, female protagonist, female audience and even (unusually) a female director for the film, as well as being a romance novel. The series consists of four books that follow Bella Swan, the protagonist who narrates the majority of the series, and her developing romance with Edward Cullen. Although in many ways a traditional romance — boys meets girl, boy rejects girl, girl longs after boy until it turns out boy was really in love with her all along, subsequent problems arise that separate or threaten to separate boy and girl but are ultimately overcome — the *Twilight* series is unusual in that it takes place in a world where mythical creatures exist. Edward is a vampire, and Bella’s best friend and rival for her affections is a werewolf. Hence, the romance between Bella and Edward pivots around an unusual focal point. Bella wants to become a vampire as well, to share eternal life with Edward, while he, uncertain as to the moral implications of being a vampire, does not want her to become one.

At this point, a few points need to be made about the form that Edward’s vampirism takes. Edward is a ‘vegetarian’ vampire — he does not kill or feed from humans, but hunts animals instead. He is part of a vampire ‘family’ of seven that has a very traditional nuclear set up. There is a ‘father’, Carlisle Cullen, who has created most of the other vampires in the family in a way that fits in with most vampire lore (he bites them and they become vampires), a mother, Esme, and five ‘adopted’ children, Rosalie, Emmett, Edward, Alice and Jasper. These vampires are cultured,

sophisticated, very well off, polite and the ‘children’ all attend high school. Very little traditional vampire lore applies to them, and most markedly they are not harmed by sunlight as vampires usually are. Instead, when exposed to direct sunlight, Edward is described thusly: ‘...his skin (...) literally sparkled, like thousands of tiny diamonds were embedded in the surface. (...) A perfect statue, carved in some unknown stone, smooth like marble, glittering like crystal’ (Meyer 2005:228). This means in order to take part in day-to-day human life, the family lives in Forks, a remote part of Washington State, where the weather is overcast more often than not.

Despite its immense popularity (the film took US\$382 million at the box office (Box Office Mojo (2009)) and the books have sold 53 million copies worldwide (Schuker 2009), rarely leaving bestseller lists since their release), *Twilight* has not been taken particularly seriously as a cultural item. Examining *Twilight* through the lens of the anti-fan may therefore be productive (while, at the same time, other researchers are undertaking work looking at the fans of the series). The concept of the anti-fan comes from the work of Gray (2003), who notes that while there is a growing body of work examining those who actively and positively engage with popular culture (fans), there is little work on those who either actively dislike a cultural item (anti-fans) or, for that matter, those who know about a cultural item but have no particularly strong feelings about it one way or another (non-fans). He argues that in neglecting these groups researchers are still limited in understanding how media messages are received and used by audiences. One useful application of the study of anti-fans is in examining the role they play in enforcing the dominance of certain taste cultures. Cultural hierarchies are not just created through certain forms of culture being praised, but also by the denigration of other forms. The anti-fan, it would seem, must play an important role in this process, and this paper will extend this research along such lines.

Gray (2003:66) discusses the methodological issues that arise when trying to find anti- or non-fans, in that they can be harder to identify than fans. However, one way to find such groups is to look in on-line chat rooms and forums. There are entire websites dedicated to anti-fans of certain forms of popular culture, including *Twilight* (for example, see The Anti-Twilight Movement (undated)). In this instance, however, due to considerations of space, I have chosen to analyse the discussion of *Twilight* in one 'thread' only on the discussion boards of comedy website Cracked (2008). This is a forum that I am a member on, and occasionally contribute to. The discussion on these boards is wide-ranging, but for the most part deals with popular culture — movies, music, online culture, games and television, as well as current affairs. Despite being attached to a comedy site, the nature of the discussion is, for the most part, a step above many other discussion boards. Incorrect spelling and grammar are severely frowned upon, if not deleted, as are smilies, 'leetspeak' and posts that don't contribute to or advance the discussion in some way.

The discussion that is the subject of analysis here (Cracked forums (2008)) comes from the 'Hollywood' section of the forum, the place where movies are discussed. Despite being located here, the thread deals with the books as much as the movie, with the two often being conflated together, which is unsurprising given how faithful the movie was to the book. Most plot points being discussed could be from either book or movie. As of 17 June 2009 this thread had 386 posts in it, from 148 unique posters. Seventy-seven of these posters made only one comment in the thread, meaning just over half the participants in the thread did not actively engage in discussion on the topic, but just posted an opinion about an aspect of it and did not comment further. The highest number of posts by any one participant was 18, so there was not a lot of interactive debate as such in this thread. However this is not

surprising, given this high level of agreement that *Twilight* was neither a good book nor a good movie.

The main criticisms that appeared during the discussion were:

1. *Twilight* sends a 'bad' message to teenage girls
2. *Twilight* is written for teenage girls and is therefore 'bad' culture
3. *Twilight* misrepresents vampires / does not deserve to be considered alongside vampire literature

This paper will mainly focus on the first and second themes. While I do not have the space to elaborate too much on the misrepresentation of vampires (however, see Benefiel 2004; Gelder 1994), this is relevant to the discussion of feminine culture as the problem most posters had with how vampires had been portrayed was that they had been over-feminised — in the words of poster Something Clever, “She [Meyer] has managed to turn vampires from unholy abominations into non-threatening, idealized fantasy lovers. Seriously, they’re not even vampires anymore...they’re more like blood-sucking My Little Ponies. They *sparkle* for christsakes.” The threat of the vampire has been removed from Edward, as much as he might try to convince Bella that he is in some way a threat to her.

### **The ‘bad’ message of *Twilight***

In association with this, the feminist critique of romance stories and the roles ascribed to women in relationships and marriage is echoed in the comments in the thread. The romance portrayed in *Twilight* is seen as sending a 'bad' message to teenage girls in a number of ways. One aspect of the story that is focused on particularly is where Edward reveals to Bella that in the months leading up to them becoming involved with each other he has been coming into her bedroom every night and watching her

sleep (Meyer 2005:256). During the course of the sequels Edward also restricts Bella's movements at certain points, always with the excuse that he is trying to protect her in some way (it is, however, noteworthy that Bella never passively accepts these restrictions but always finds a way around them, in the end getting what she wants).

These plot points are seen as very sinister by posters:

The message ("abusive relationships are fun!") is deplorable. Seriously, he watches her in her sleep? Without her knowing? For months on end? How is that even remotely romantic? (Pippa)

Anyways all of my cousins read them and I made the mistake of saying in front of their parents that I would never let my teenager daughter read the books. You would have thought I said I ate babies. I explained that I don't think it's healthy for girls who haven't experienced real relationships to read about a boy who cuts a girls car wires when he doesn't want her to go somewhere, and then to be told that's love. (Tallie)

The message of the movie is that Bella as a character is a blank with no ambition or interests of her own, who wraps her entire existence around a co-dependent, emotionally abusive stalker. Yeah. I call that a bad message. (DBB)

While certain aspects of Bella and Edward's relationship are perhaps not ideal, these posters are presenting an understanding of the effects of culture that can be best equated to the 'hypodermic' model — a suggestion of an unproblematic cause and effect relationship, whereby teenage girls who like *Twilight* will uncritically take on board 'the message' of the books and will go on to live their lives according to this message. This is contrasted with the posters' own 'knowing' positions whereby they are able to see through and critique the message of the books in a way teenage girls are presumed to be unable to do.

The assumption that girls are taking on the 'message' of *Twilight* as though it were reality is sustained despite suggestions made during the thread that perhaps these girls are not quite so gullible. For example, one poster describes her roommate's response to the book in mocking tones, but then adds:

I then asked her what she'd do if her boyfriend snuck into her room and watched her sleep. She said she'd cut his balls off, but she wouldn't mind if it were Edward because he's 'OMG' (14|v1)

This type of concern about the bad effects of the book can also be seen as a type of moral panic, the likes of which periodically occur in regards to youth cultures. One thing that is interesting in the critique of *Twilight* is that the concern posters have is that young women will be disempowered by Bella's supposed passivity and reliance on Edward. This suggests that in some way the feminist critique of feminine culture has become part of wider discourses; however, contrary to its intentions it is here being used to further the attack on teenage girls.

### **Teenage girls' culture is 'bad'**

In a somewhat circular way, the posters in the thread argue that since teenage girls like *Twilight*, it must be bad culture, because teenage girls like bad culture:

Pretty much the only people who can enjoy *Twilight* exist solely within its target audience [teenage girls], which pushes it basically as close to worthless as it can go. (St Even)

Adolescents, especially adolescent girls, love stupid things, everyone knows that. But rarely do they love something so delightfully stupid, so hilariously inept as *Twilight*. (Billy McGlory)

However, central to the connection being made between teenage girls and 'bad' culture is the characterisation of teenage girls throughout the thread, which is almost universally disparaging. They are described as 'squealing', 'screaming', 'squeeing', out of control and undiscerning, as can be seen in the following quotes:

I felt sorry for [*Twilight* star Robert Pattinson], from now on he won't be able to go anywhere without 14 year old girls trying to rip his hair out while shrieking. (MindBullet)

I was absolutely lost as to why the entire theater of 14-to-20something year old girls were shriekgasming every five seconds over what was essentially a giant talking forehead. (The Other Ninja)

This type of characterisation of teenage girls is hardly confined to this thread, and these comments are in many ways reflecting stereotypical ideas of how teenage girls behave — and how they can, in fact, behave. However, the loop that is created between teenage girls liking ‘bad’ culture and *being* ‘bad’ (or at least behaving badly), and in being bad not having opinions that are worth paying attention to works to deprive this group of any authority.

### **Conclusion**

The discussion of the *Twilight* books and movies in the forums of Cracked.com can be read as a form of symbolic violence perpetrated on the purported main audience of *Twilight*, teenage girls. Such discussions naturalise the position of feminine culture at the bottom of the cultural hierarchy and reinforce the idea of the powerlessness of this particular group. Teenage girls are portrayed as unable to separate fact from fiction, as being uncritical receivers of media messages and as being somehow inherently attracted to ‘bad’ culture. All of these discourses help to maintain hierarchies of both culture and cultural competency, with teenage girls becoming the ‘Other’ that is inferior and in need of protection (mostly from themselves). However, it must always be remembered that these girls are not as powerless or as stupid as they are portrayed, and as popular culture is a site of contestation there are places where these ideas and images are challenged. The above discussion of *Twilight* anti-fans is necessarily a preliminary foray into this field. To fully understand what is happening here, the comments of the posters need to be further contextualised in terms of how *Twilight* is discussed more generally in the media, other messages that are circulating, and in particular in comparison to the voices of the fans, the teenage girls themselves.

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