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Dr. Prior

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Joseph Smith Sparkles: *Twilight* and Mormon Theology

Few works inspired as much contention as Stephenie Meyer's *The Twilight Saga*, a tetralogy expanded annually from 2005 to 2008. The books, which follow the passionate relationship between Bella Swan, an average human girl, and Edward Cullen, a heavily idealized vampire, boast a somewhat complex critical and cultural history. What began as a popular series among young women turned into a veritable pop culture phenomenon, leading to a tug of war between consumers and critics: the books were instant, record-setting bestsellers with a large, dedicated, and obsessive fanbase. Under critical scrutiny, however, they were deemed low-quality, frivolous, problematic, antifeminist, even dangerous. Many of these criticisms are valid; the *Twilight* books are certainly far from perfect. Much of the prose itself is uninspired. Storylines trudge along as the overarching plot becomes episodic and muddled. The melodrama that makes the books emotionally engaging often crosses over from plainly sentimental to purely absurd. The central relationship does, indeed, display questionable dynamics. However, these criticisms of *Twilight*, valid as they may be, do not necessitate—or even justify—a total dismissal of the *Twilight* series as unworthy of critical attention. The scope of the series' readership indicates that something in the series resonates with readers. *Something* about *Twilight* matters, even if it may be poorly or questionably presented.

This tug of war between consumers and critics is nothing new. In fact, the tension over *Twilight* seems to carry many elements of a long legacy of women's literature—both literature

by women and literature intended for women. The earliest novels, the works of Eliza Haywood, Samuel Richardson, Charles Brockden Brown, Hannah Webster Foster, even Jane Austen, were, like *Twilight*, grounded almost exclusively in melodrama and sentimentality. These works were principally aimed at women and popularly derided as frivolous, immoral, even outright dangerous, morally detrimental to both readers and the social fabric itself. Though the novel has, in both England and America, moved on from its sentimental roots and evolved elsewhere, the melodramatic sentimental novel, overtly grounded in a measure of didacticism and designed for popular consumption, has never left: *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, not particularly known for its literary quality, stands among the most influential novels of the nineteenth century. 1936's *Gone with the Wind* and 1967's *Christy* remain engrained in the popular culture of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Twilight is by no means meritorious literature. Little about the series displays technical or stylistic greatness. Despite this, the series is not completely devoid of value: the work is far from the moral bankruptcy that characterizes much of today's "trash literature." Stephenie Meyer, though she may not be a master of rhetorical precision—or even a master of storytelling—offers through the world of *Twilight* a genuinely compelling mythology and narrative. Within the pages of *Twilight* lurk a very real moral and cosmological worldview. *The Twilight Saga* is, like much young adult literature, a bildungsroman. Unlike other coming of age stories popular within the genre, however, *Twilight* is a coming of age story rooted in religion: Stephenie Meyer, a devout Mormon housewife, injects the moral, cosmological, soteriological, and anthropological assumptions of Mormonism as she crafts what can ultimately be read as Bella's religious journey. Throughout *The Twilight Saga*, Meyer presents Mormon themes through two main avenues: she crafts an internal supernatural mythology allegorically consistent with the

cosmology and metanarrative of the Book of Mormon, and, through the life and development of Bella Swan, she creates an accessible picture of the female Mormon religious journey.

Over the course of *The Twilight Saga*, Meyer presents an internal supernatural mythology that closely parallels the Mormon metanarrative: ultimately, *Twilight*, as a convoluted moral and metaphysical treatise, presents three major philosophical themes: eternity, purpose, and morality. Meyer approaches each of these themes with a distinctly Mormon flair. She does not address these themes directly or explicitly but rather opts to demonstrate the Mormon answers to these questions. Meyer answers the question of eternity with a presentation of immortality, the question of purpose by presenting a reality that strongly emphasizes marriage and family, the question of morality by presenting a noble and countercultural adherence to an external moral code of conduct. Furthermore, Meyer crafts an origin story and existence for her supernatural characters that closely parallels the Mormon understanding of largescale contemporary Latter-Day Saint Identity.

Twilight presents an understanding of eternal existence that closely parallels the Mormon soteriological metanarrative. Meyer accomplishes this primarily through presenting different strata of supernaturals, mortals and immortals alike. There exist within the *Twilight* universe two main worlds: the human world and the supernatural world, which operates almost invisibly and essentially undiscovered within the human world. Three classes of person exist prominently within the muddled magical world of *Twilight*: mortal humans, werewolves, and vampires. Meyer especially establishes an understanding of eternity and Mormon identity through her presentation of both human and vampire mythology. Meyer changes little about the human world: human beings in *Twilight*, like human beings on earth, will all inevitably die. Vampires, however, live forever. Within the Mormon worldview, Christians—members of the Church of

Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints consider themselves a Christian denomination, though few if any Christian denominations accept this—have access to eternal life. The holy texts of the Mormon church espouse a three-tiered understanding of the afterlife that includes a version of annihilationism. Joseph Smith's *Doctrine and Covenants* section seventy-six presents what Mormons understand as the three “degrees of glory.”

Joseph Smiths presents in *Doctrine and Covenants* that there are three different realms of heaven where souls are sent in the afterlife. There are the telestial and the terrestrial kingdoms—a lower and a mid-tier place for the unsaved but not outright evil. There is also the highest degree of glory, the highest kingdom of heaven, the so-called “Celestial Kingdom.” The Celestial Kingdom is a place whose inhabitants get to exist with a glory equal to God's: “These are they who are just men made perfect through Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, who wrought out this perfect atonement through the shedding of his own blood. These are they whose bodies are celestial, whose glory is that of the sun, even the glory of God, the highest of all, whose glory the sun of the firmament is written of as being typical” (*Doctrine and Covenants* 76:69-70). Those in the Celestial Kingdom are those who live forever, with perfect, glorious bodies. Within the world of *Twilight*, Vampires are granted, upon their conversion to vampiricism, physical perfection: inhuman beauty, godlike super strength, super speed, heightened senses. The most prominent characteristic of these vampires is their beauty, what Bella describes as “devastatingly, inhumanly beautiful. They were the faces you never expected to see except perhaps on the airbrushed pages of a fashion magazine. Or painted by an old master as the face of an angel. It was hard to decide who was the most beautiful” (*Twilight* 19). This comparison kicks off a series-long pattern: repeatedly throughout the series, Meyer overtly likens the vampires' appearance to that of angels, that of celestial beings.

Stephenie Meyer seeks through the mythology of the vampires she creates—a race of creatures of beauty, power, knowledge beyond comprehension—to provide an answer to questions about human mortality and afterlife. Within the world of *Twilight*, there exists a race of individuals who live forever, displaying a new, godlike nature, radiating a glory all their own with godlike presence. Bella remarks of her appearance next to Edward that “he looked like a god. I looked very plain and average, even for a human, almost shamefully plain” (*New Moon* 65). Interestingly, *Twilight* presents no cohesive concept of God: there exists no supreme being within the world of *Twilight*. Rather, vampires exist as small-scale gods all their own, just as citizens of the Celestial Kingdom, whom Smith describes in *Doctrine and Covenants* as “gods, even the sons of God—wherefore all things are theirs, whether life or death or things present or things to come” (76.58b-59a). Furthermore, Meyer presents that their immortality is accessible; it is possible for a human to become a vampire. A vampire is not a creature all his own, but a human who has been at some point converted or “turned.” Meyer essentially uses *Twilight* to allegorize the Mormon understanding of immortality and the afterlife: there is a race of gods, originally human, who live forever in glory.

As she allegorizes the Mormon faith in *Twilight*, Meyer also seeks to answer questions of purpose, demonstrating through *The Twilight Saga* a teleology riddled with Mormon influence. Central to the Mormon metanarrative is marriage and family, sex and reproduction. Though the Book of Mormon and subsequent holy writings of Joseph Smith fail to expound upon this idea in any detail, underpinning Joseph Smith’s early teachings is the concept that each individual has, alongside Heavenly Father (God) a “Heavenly Mother.” According to Susan Young Gates in an early historical account, “Zina Diantha Huntington Young recalled that when her mother died in 1839, Joseph Smith consoled her by telling her that in heaven she would see her own mother

again and become acquainted with her eternal Mother” (Gates 15-16). Marriage is so central to Mormon teachings that it is an important component of the nature of God the Father—the creator of all things—himself. The Mormon Church interprets Genesis 2 together with *Doctrine and Covenants* 49:15 (“Whoso forbiddeth to marry is not ordained of God, for marriage is ordained of God unto man”) to mean that marriage is absolutely central to the human existence (even called “central to the gospel” by some). Marriage is arguably the most important aspect of in the life of the Latter-Day Saint. One could even easily argue that marriage is the ultimate purpose of the life of the Latter-Day Saint.

What sets apart the LDS conception of marriage is its eternal nature. Both the Book of Mormon and the subsequent teachings of Joseph Smith place a heavy emphasis on the doctrine and practice of eternal marriage, also called “celestial marriage.” According to *Doctrine and Covenants*, marriage is an eternal bond. Not only marriage last forever, eternal marriage is absolutely necessary to gain access to the Celestial Kingdom. Joseph Smith writes, “In the celestial glory there are three heavens or degrees; And in order to obtain the highest, a man must enter into this border of the priesthood [meaning the new and everlasting covenant of marriage]; And if he does not, he cannot obtain it. He may enter into the other, but that is the end of his kingdom; he cannot have an increase” (131.1-4). When members of the Church of Latter-Day Saints are married, they participate in a sacred ceremony “sealing” them as man and wife in the afterlife. This is why Mormons place such a heavy emphasis on the trope that “family is forever.” Per Joseph Smith, family is, indeed, forever.

Examining the central relationship of *The Twilight Saga* with these LDS conceptions of marriage as the key step to ultimate eternal fulfillment, the very purpose of the earthly—and, ideally, the eternal—existence in mind casts Bella and Edward’s dynamic in a slightly different

light. Bella's obsession, Bella's obsessive declarations that losing Edward would mean "life, love, meaning... over" (*New Moon* 57) shift a bit. When contextualized by the Mormon understanding that marriage is a central, sacred eternal bond, necessary for full salvation, the obsessive ramblings of a lovesick teenager suddenly become, in their desperation, sacred. Critics shred Bella Swan for her single-minded devotion to her romantic relationship with Edward. To the non-LDS reader, who sees marriage as important but not necessarily the highest calling of man, this is fair. Bella's obsessive dedication to Edward seems immature at best, unhealthy even. To the LDS reader, however, Bella's focus, though perhaps exaggerated and melodramatic, is perfectly understandable: a picture of the Mormon girl on a teleological quest.

Meyer further emphasizes both the importance and permanence of marriage in the fourth book of the series, *Breaking Dawn*, wherein 18-year-old Bella finally marries her supercentenarian beau. Meyer presents a measure of teleological accomplishment in this marriage through Bella's passionate musings. At her wedding, Bella discusses a sensation of peace, of homecoming:

"The march was too slow as I struggled to pace my steps to its rhythm... And then at last, at last, I was there. Edward held out his hand. Charlie [Bella's father, to whom she almost exclusively refers by first name] took my hand, and, in a symbol as old as the world, placed it in Edward's. I touched the cool miracle of his skin, and I was home... In that moment, as the minister said his part, my world, which had been upside down for so long now, seemed to settle into its proper position." (*Breaking Dawn* 49)

Within these ramblings, Meyer emphasizes several important aspects of Mormon theology of marriage: marriage is as old as the world, the very center of human design and existence. More importantly, marriage is home, the central component to a fulfilled human existence.

Furthermore, Bella and Edward, as immortals—*Breaking Dawn* sees much of the weirdest, most compelling, action of the series as Bella is transformed by her new husband during the chaotic birth of their half-human, half vampire daughter whom she ridiculously names “Reneesme,” pronounced as a portmanteau of ‘Renee’ and ‘Esme’—enter into marriage knowing that they, and their marriage, will exist for eternity. Meyer emphasizes the centrality of marriage to human purpose in the very last line of the series, where Bella proclaims that “we continued blissfully into this small but perfect piece of our forever” (*Breaking Dawn* 754). Bella has found her purpose and perfected her existence in eternity through marriage.

Also woven throughout *The Twilight Saga* is a distinctly Mormon presentation of morality, sanctification, and salvation. Considering vampires to be immortal, glorious beings—beings saved through a magical stand-in for Joseph Smith’s gospel—initially seems incompatible with a vampire’s naturally violent tendencies, chief among them a thirst for blood. However, when contextualized by sacred Mormon teachings, which preaches that one must hear Joseph’s Smith’s gospel to be saved as “it is impossible for a man to be saved in ignorance” (*Doctrine and Covenants* 131.4), and holds that eternal life is accessible—though less desirable—even to those who do perfectly fulfill Smith’s gospel, it makes sense that vampires, who have received eternal life and a level of glory, would continue to wrestle with a sin nature. Edward consistently wrestles with vampiric inclinations to drink blood, as do the rest of the Cullen’s adoptive “family,” headed by vampiric patriarch Carlisle.

Carlisle stands as the moral center of *the Twilight Saga*, and, in Carlisle’s characterization, there lies perhaps the series’ most overt narrative parallel to the LDS metanarrative. The Cullen clan, despite their desire for human blood, feed exclusively on the meat of animals, demonstrating on the most basic, carnal level, incredible moral strength and

self-control. Edward describes Carlisle, the oldest member of the clan, transformed into a vampire centuries before the others as “the most humane, the most compassionate of us... I don’t think you could find his equal throughout all of history” (*Twilight* 288). It is Carlisle who first—long before the start of the series—developed the ability to conduct himself against his vampiric instincts, who learned to conduct himself morally by eating animals. It is Carlisle who “saves” the other members of his family by transforming each of them and granting them a vampiric nature when he finds them already dying from other causes. Carlisle, bringer of morality, saver of lives, builder of the family, serves at the moral center of the series, the prophet, consistently bearing resemblance to Joseph Smith, founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The Twilight Saga is not necessarily great literature. It is not even the most seriously or well-presented work of moral fiction. However, despite these flaws, the series carries on a distinct legacy of women’s literature. The books are certainly—tiresomely—driven by emotion. However, even amid absurd supernatural plotlines and overdramatic, uninspired, lovesick ramblings, *Twilight* still presents something of substance. As Stephenie Meyer spins the tale of *Twilight* through Bella Swan, she presents something else, a religious worldview seeking to answer some of life’s deepest questions. As Bella learns and embodies these truths herself, growing as she progresses on a spiritual journey through her involvement with Edward and the Cullen clan, she demonstrates what is, for Meyer, the ultimate fulfillment of purpose: attaining a godlike status through eternal marriage and adherence to the law of the prophet.

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