

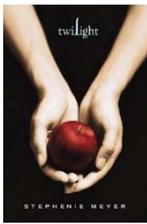
Fans and Feminism within the Twilight Phenomenon

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Never Heard of the Twilight Saga?



A woman wakes up in 2003, haunted by a dream of two lovers in a sun soaked meadow. The girl was blushing, hesitant, the picture of any teenager falling in love for the first time. The boy was impossibly beautiful, fiercely powerful, and undeniably inhuman. The dream follows the woman all day, relentlessly, impossible to forget. Later that night, first time author Stephenie Meyer writes the first words of what will become the *Twilight Saga* (stepheniemeyer.com), the unlikely romance of a human girl and a vampire boy. Four books (*Twilight*, *New Moon*, *Eclipse*, and *Breaking Dawn*) and three movies later in 2011, Meyer's work has become the foundation for what has been dubbed the *Twilight Phenomenon*; one of the most compelling fan movements in recent popular culture history.

Introduction

The *Twilight Phenomenon* has become the object of great debate as Meyer's books have risen in popularity. She describes her fans as the most "exciting, and dedicated fans in the whole world" (Meyer, *Eclipse* 632). However, Meyer's fans are viewed quite differently by those outside the series. USA Today admits that *Twilight Saga* fans are "ravenous" and "in a frenzy" (Memmott 1). Many of the fans themselves admit that they have been "made fun of" and described as "crazy, or 'obsessive'" by non-fans (Twilight Lexicon, "Made Fun of For Liking Twilight?"). One fan observes "never before have I seen so much hatred towards someone—or a group of people—because of a book they like" (madness_falls, Twilight Lexicon, "The Perils of Popularity"). Though popular fan movements in the past (such as Harry Potter) have had their opponents, none of them have incited as much anger and mud-slinging as the *Twilight Phenomenon* has. Many topics have come up in the debate between fans and non-fans of the *Twilight Saga*, but one of the most pivotal and hotly argued issues is whether or not the series is pro- or anti-feminist, and how the series' stance on women might affect its readers.

My interest in the *Twilight Saga* stemmed from the initial question of whether or not the series supports a pro-feminist agenda, however, this question cannot be easily or immediately answered. My efforts to find an answer focusing entirely on the books and feminist criticism led to more questions than answers. I soon realized that my search was too specific. I was only considering the *Twilight Saga* itself, and was ignoring how the series had manifested beyond the books. The *Twilight Phenomenon* is both a literary movement, and a popular culture movement. In order to explore the significance of feminism in the *Twilight Saga*, I would have to study the relationship of the fans to the books within the *Twilight Phenomenon*, and the relationship of the *Twilight Phenomenon* to popular culture as a whole. Only when I had examined both areas, with particular attention to the feminist debates within each, was I able to begin answering whether or not the *Twilight Saga* is pro- or anti-feminist.

In the following papers, my argument is arranged in two sections: "Twilight's Significance to Fans", "Twilight's Significance as a Female Fronted Fan Movement". In the first section, I explore how the books' and movies' depictions of gender and gender relationships are viewed by the fans, and how fans are either affected by or reshape gender issues within the *Twilight Saga*. In the second section, I will discuss the *Twilight Phenomenon's* significance as a primarily female-based fan movement within the history of popular culture fan movements, and the unique persecution *Twilight Saga* fans have faced as a result of their interest in the series. In my concluding section, I discuss how continual dismissals of the *Twilight Phenomenon* and its fans by the mainstream media and individuals serve to undermine its significance as a female-centric creation and movement, and I will argue how it creates a pro-feminist movement from anti-feminist sources.



Are they the foundation of a new feminist perspective in popular culture? Or dangerous, rabid fangirls?

Twilight's Feminist Significance among Fans and Non-Fans



The Twilight Saga is Anti-Feminist

"I truly think Bella is anti-feminist. The whole book is about a teenage codependent girl who can't eat, sleep, [or] live without her man" (eramilos, Twilight Sucks, "Is Bella Anti-Feminist?").

"Bella's and Edward's relationship is abnormal (for obvious reasons) and downright creepy" (Alpha_Wolf, Twilight Lexicon, "Too Much Love?").

"Bella has given up everything that makes her her, she's defining herself by Edward and without him she's nobody. That can be dangerous, because what happens when you have your 'New Moon' Bella fell hard because there was nothing left in her life. I never want that kind of relationship" (EbonyCircles, Twilight Lexicon, "Too Much Love?").

Overall Edward, Bella, and their relationship in the *Twilight Saga* contains elements that can be read as antifeminist, an examination of the fan responses to these antifeminist arguments reveals a far more complicated answer. Whether or not readers perceive Edward and Bella as feminist or anti feminist, what seems important about the debate is that fans are challenging the popular arguments of anti-feminism in the *Twilight Saga*. Nonfans of the series were content to simply say it was antifeminist, generally without truly examining why they felt that way. Fans of the series, though generally stating that it was feminist, critically engaged with the saga's message and morals. Thus, the *Twilight Saga* becomes a vessel through which fans can explore and define feminism and value of romantic love in their own lives. This engaging and construction value of the *Twilight Saga* for its fans has been largely ignored by critics in favor of the antifeminist and anti-Twilight arguments, and much of this is because of the larger implications of the *Twilight Saga* as a fan movement.

Conclusion

Twilight's Significance as a Female Fronted Fan Movement

Introduction

The *Twilight Saga* fan, according to many, can only be one thing: a shrieking teenage girl who is overcome by her own feelings. Such descriptions of fans creates a gendered backlash against the *Twilight Saga* and allows the series and its fans to be widely ridiculed while their contributions to the history of fan movements is ignored on the basis that the interests of teenage girls is of no interest or value to the general public, even though many older women and men also consider themselves *Twilight Saga* fans as well (Wilson 1). The *Twilight Saga* fan is ridiculed by mainstream media sources, and individuals alike, and fans of other fandoms at Comic Con 2009 even claimed that *Twilight Saga* fans ruined the event and protested their presence (Ohanesian, 1). So, the question arises, why are *Twilight Saga* fans persecuted while Star Wars fans are not? The answer lies in the fact that while male fronted fan movement are valued by society while female fronted fan movements are not.

The "Other"

Just how the woman has been depicted as the "other" by men throughout history, the *Twilight Phenomenon* has been cast as the "other" among fan movements. Most often, the *Twilight Saga* fan is described as "hysterical," "obsessive," and struck by "madness." Melissa Click observes that these descriptive words are reminiscent of the Victorian-era, a time when woman were not thought of as the emotional, physical, or intellectual equals of men (1). Joli Jensen explains how this "othering" of the *Twilight Saga* fan benefits non fans: "by conceiving of fans as members of a lunatic fringe... we tell ourselves a reassuring story- yes modernity is dangerous, and some people become victims of it by succumbing to media influence or mob psychology, but we do not. 'We' are not these unstable, fragile, and therefore vulnerable people" (310). Jensen demonstrates that, when someone defines an "other," they are defining themselves through what the "other" is not. "Us" and the "other" then become two radically different categories, incapable of being one. With this dichotomy, according to depictions of what the *Twilight Saga* fan is, the non-fan is intelligent, reasonable, and in control of his or her own impulses. The non-fan through this "othering" then must be a normal human being. But ultimately, who or what does this "othering" serve?



"The Rabid Fangirl is a strange species, indeed. She is born a human, then exposed to books with hypnotizing texts, causing the female to develop a strong obsession for certain fictional characters. Some side effects include excessive squealing, wasting money on worthless products, and a convoluted defense system for all things exposing them. Be wary, fellow humans. The Rabid Fangirl is a dangerous thing." (The Anti-Twilight Lexicon, "Rabid Fan Girls")

Conclusion: What "Othering" does for "Us"

It seems probably that the only institution that benefits from the continued gendered backlash against the *Twilight Phenomenon* is that of patriarchy. The *Twilight Phenomenon* is an anthology of female interests and creations. The books are from the point of view of a female protagonist, written by a female author. The fans are predominantly female, though not exclusively teenaged. If we declare that all of that is "other," then we are stating that what defines "us" is male interests and creations. Though society has given women equality in many fields, fan movements are not one of them. The continued effort of society to ignore the power of female fan movements not only demeans the movement and the fans, but is also antifeminist. We are quick to scorn the *Twilight Saga* fan for her devotion to Bella and Edward's eternal love story, yet do we object to how fiction tycoon Dan Brown portrays his female characters as secondary, sexy accomplices? Or to how the woman in most James Bond movies only exists as a love interest and sex object? If we desire to abolish antifeminism in the media, we should not focus our attention on the flaws of female fronted fan movements, but rather ask ourselves why female fronted fan movements are such hotly debated topics in the first place. Only through identifying and understanding the flaws in the history of fan movements will we be able to make the female fan the equal of the male fan.



Conclusion

In the end, what is one to make of the *Twilight Phenomenon* and its impact on feminism? Many readers and critics are quick to identify the traditional gender roles and values in the books, and have raised great anxiety over the question of how these perceived antifeminist messages are affecting fans. Yet, when one explores the fan perceptions of these antifeminist fears, it is clear that fans are not accepting the messages within the texts without question. Instead, their discussions about these issues bring to light important feminist subjects such as relationship violence, and the personal nature of what being a feminist means for them. Though ultimately, what these fans realize it that the *Twilight Saga* is a work of fiction, and the issues and situations the characters in the book face are unique to the world they live in. Thus, the anxiety over how the series' antifeminist values may impact fans becomes an empty fear, because fans have shown that they are well aware that the series is a work of fiction.

Yet despite the rationality of the fans, entire fan movement itself is often perceived as a group of dangerous teenage female fanatics who interests are not worthy of serious consideration. This generalization is made in spite of the fact that *Twilight Saga* fans include older women, and men, in sizable numbers. This "othering" of the *Twilight Saga* fan is done at all levels of society; from mainstream media to the tables Comic Con, the ultimate fan paradise. Whole internet communities have appeared solely for the purpose of criticizing the *Twilight Phenomenon*. But a closer look at these non-fans communities reveals that instead of critiquing the *Twilight Saga* itself, the criticism is mostly aimed at the *Twilight Saga* fan instead. What these dismissals and attacks on the *Twilight Saga* fan indicate is that female fans, and female fronted fan movements have no place among mainstream media or among other fan movements. Unfortunately, the gendered backlash against the *Twilight Phenomenon* only furthers patriarchal values. Thus, while people will gleefully attack the *Twilight Saga* for its gender values and argue that it needs to display more feminist attitudes, the denial of the series' merit for thousands of fans is in itself an antifeminist action.

The feminist debates surrounding the *Twilight Phenomenon* are complicated and riddled with contradictions. Through *Twilight* has been on the market since 2005, and movie adaptation of the series will not be complete until 2012, we seem no closer to understanding the popular culture behemoth. It was once a fan of the series myself, but then as the *Twilight Phenomenon* grew and the critics speaking against the series grew louder, I decided that perhaps the books were not for me after all. I began parroting the arguments I heard against the *Twilight Saga* in defense of why I no longer liked it. In an article titled "A Feminist's Guide to Curing Yourself of Twilight Mania", Sarah Seltzer writes "you recognize in your head that the *Twilight Saga* is as un-feminist as it gets. But maybe you still like it. A lot" (1). Seltzer goes on to offer readers a "four step guide to extricating yourself, your adolescent friends, or any other Sparkly Vampire-besotted readers in your life, from the gripes of *Twilight*-mania" (1). Though Seltzer's article (like many of the pieces about the *Twilight Saga*) is written to amuse, it actually portrays something deep and meaningful about *Twilight Saga* fans, or former fans; enjoying the series is a bad thing, and if we consider ourselves to be feminists, we must find a way to stop liking the series.

Denise Riley, discusses in *Am I That Name?* the concept of "woman" and how the definition of that concept has many different meanings, even among women themselves (Riley, 2). I find Riley's approach to the idea of "woman" quite appropriate in the context of the *Twilight Phenomenon*. Rather than attempt to understand the fan movement and its fans in the context of one idea of feminism, or fandom, instead we should allow the sensation to stand for what it is; a compilation of female creations and interests that mean many things to many different people. Only when we accept that feminism is not a one size fits all subject can society begin to accept and appreciate the *Twilight Phenomenon* for what it is.

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