

Theorising the Monstrous and the Virginal in Popular Romance Novels

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Abstract

This paper considers the question of male virginity in popular romance, particularly, Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight Saga*, in relation to discourses of monstrosity and deviance. In speaking about romance, I draw heavily upon Northrop Frye's theorisations of the genre. Once we have established the definition of genre, this paper argues that male virginity is a deviation from the norms of romance. Thus, when Meyer's hero is presented as a virgin, we are forced to address the question of male virginity precisely because it transcends or defies the generic norms.

Key Words: *Twilight*, Male Virginity, Monstrosity, Defiant Deviance, Popular Romance

The first chapter of Eloisa James' *When the Duke Returns* opens with a declaration followed by brief dialogue:

"He's a virgin."

"What!"

"He's a virgin and -"

"*Your husband is a virgin?*"

"And he won't bed me."

Jemma, Duchess of Beaumont, sank into a chair with a look of almost comical dismay on her face. "Darling, if there ever were grounds for annulment, these are they. Or this is it," she added with some confusion. "Is he some sort of monk?"¹

I open this paper with this example precisely because it gets to the heart of the matter to be considered here: male virginity. When we, as readers, confront male virginity in text, we generally remark as Northrop Frye did when reading the book of Revelation: "[i]t's bloody confusing to read in Revelation that the redeemed are all male virgins."² We are confused by male virginity. It puzzles us. We are, perhaps, at times, incredulous. In Henry

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Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*, Lady Booby asks: "Did ever Mortal hear of a Man's Virtue!"³ and we can list various other examples in popular fiction, for instance, in *Married for a Month* by Susan Mallery we read: "'I can't believe it,' Taylor said. A male virgin in his twenties. She had thought that only happened to priests."⁴ The question that we must consider is why we are so baffled by such a concept as male virginity: why should it be any more perplexing than female virginity? Or, why, in *When the Duke Returns*, does the heroine, after realising that her husband - they were married when she was twelve and he has been away for a decade or so - is a virgin, remark: "I've married a monster!"⁵? Accordingly, I want to speak, in this paper, about the very strangeness of male virginity in popular romance fiction - though, I should imagine that these comments can be extended beyond popular romance to other literary and cultural texts. In what follows, I want to begin to consider why male virginity is positioned and considered as monstrous or deviant in textual examples.

I want initially here to theorise the problems of male virginity as monstrosity or deviance. Cristina Santos and Adriana Spahr write that "defiant deviance" - their term - is "a state of opposition and disposition to resist that deviates from the accepted norm"⁶ and they further explain:

In our case 'deviant' in the sense that it refers to a person or persons that differ markedly - either in intelligence, social adjustment, and/or sexual behaviour - from what is considered to be within acceptable limits of his/her socio-cultural environment.⁷

From my perspective, male virginity would seem to fit within the realm of "defiant deviance" precisely because it extends beyond (or perhaps before?) an acceptable limit that has been established by the socio-cultural environment. Accordingly, I would argue that the virgin male is defiantly deviant when he chooses to maintain a virginal identity. The problem, it would seem, for which we must account is why female virginity is not deemed, at least in most scenarios⁸, monstrous while male virginity is indeed quite monstrous, deviant or anomalous.

In historicising male virginity, the problem of the male virgin is made quite clear: he does not exist. In Anke Bernau's book, *Virgins: A Cultural History*, she opens with a very gendered recognition of virginity as concerning women:

Although people hesitate initially when asked how one can tell whether a woman is a virgin or not, they usually end up remembering the hymen with a relieved smile. ... Female virginity becomes a universally accepted condition⁹.

Likewise in *Virgin: The Untouched History* by Hanne Blank the most untouched history is that of male virginity. Thus, even in books that purport to provide histories of virginity, the male virgin is an anomalous category that cannot yet be given a history of his own.

In popular romance fiction - and the romance as a generic category in general - the male virgin can be explained as deviant precisely because he transgresses from the generic norms. Northrop Frye, in *Anatomy of Criticism*, defines the hero of romance as “mov[ing] in a world in which ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended: prodigies of courage and endurance, unnatural to us, are natural to him.”¹⁰ In contradistinction to this, I would suggest, is the male virgin. Laura M. Carpenter notes that, “boys can be labelled as ‘wimps’ or even gay should they not have sex early in their adolescence.”¹¹ Carpenter’s observation and Frye’s definition do not seem to coincide. Laura Vivanco and Kyra Kramer rightly observe that, “Virginal heroes do exist in the genre” and then they cite a short questionnaire attached to the Mills & Boon edition of Susan Napier’s *Secret Admirer*, which reads, “Many heroines in our stories are virgins, but it is rare for the hero to be sexually inexperienced.”¹² The male virgin is anything but the archetypal, virile, masculine hero of popular romance, and yet, as we shall see, male virginity is central to the success of Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight Saga*.

In his notebooks, Frye writes that in romance there is a “magical emphasis on virginity, the fact that virgins can do things others can’t.”¹³ However, throughout his writings on romance - public and private - these virgins are the heroines rather than the heroes of the narrative. Frye also argues that, “this prudery [about virginity in romance] is structural, not moral.”¹⁴ Given these observations, I want to situate, now, Edward Cullen as virginal hero of the *Twilight Saga* and argue for a two-fold importance to his virginity: firstly, I argue that Edward’s virginity serves a structural purpose, and secondly, contradicting Frye, that it serves a moral purpose.

First, let me establish for those unfamiliar with the novels the fact that Edward is virginal; incidentally, most, if not all, of the major characters are virgins. There are various examples of his virginal nature in the novels but I elect here to highlight only two. In the first, taken from *New Moon*, we find Edward and Bella sleeping together:

[Edward] scooped me up off the bed with one arm, and pulled the cover back with the other. He put me down with my head on my pillow and tucked the quilt around me. He lay down next to me - on top of the blanket so I wouldn’t get chilled - and put his arm over me.¹⁵

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Admittedly, there is no announcement of his virginity, but rather the point to be noted here is that the two - though they are in an amorous relationship - are not sleeping under the same covers. There must be a cover - a metaphorical hymen, if you will, between the two that protects them both from virginity loss. Later, in the final book, his virginity is once again brought to the forefront when readers learn that he has not experienced physical gratification:

He started to pull away - that was his automatic response whenever he decided things had gone too far, his reflex reaction whenever he most wanted to keep going. Edward spent most of his life rejecting any kind of physical gratification. I knew it was terrifying him to change those habits now.¹⁶

At this point in the narrative, Edward and Bella are engaged to be married and they will be married in this, the final, volume of the saga. But, what is remarkable here is that his “reject[ion of] any kind of physical gratification” is pronounced and we can presumably extend this to sexual gratification. He and Bella do wed, and as the romance tradition would dictate, are virginal up until the point of marriage. This is all fine and good and we can note that we simply have a generic romance that has, unlike many others, openly included the male in the virginity discourse of romance novels. Indeed, his virginity has afforded him “magical” strengths that have allowed him to “do things other’s can’t”¹⁷ - for instance, he can read minds (except for Bella’s mind), he can drive at ridiculous speeds without fear of losing control of the car (or, for one reason or another, speeding tickets), and he is able to stop a truck from hitting Bella with his bare hand. He is, in many ways, something of a superhero insofar as his abilities are concerned. Within the structure of romance, everything is in line with Frye’s definition of the hero of romance; we recall here that Frye speaks of the hero being part of “a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended.”¹⁸ But, we are not dealing with the romances that Frye would have been considering in the 1950s through the 70s; instead, we are dealing with a paranormal romance wherein the hero and his family are vampires. Accordingly, we must now begin to account for the problem of the monstrous.

It seems commonplace that a novel about vampires should be considered monstrous or deviant. In her book, *The Vampire as Numinous Experience*, Beth E. McDonald writes:

the vampire represents a character caught on the margins of existence, one who has passed beyond being human but who has not crossed the threshold into death. To be a

vampire is to be in a state of suspended transcendence, caught at the edge of both the physical and the spiritual worlds, an insider and outsider at once.¹⁹

In the *Twilight Saga*, this is certainly the case for the Cullens; they are both “insiders” and “outsiders” insofar as they are able to take part in normal daily life of their community - at least for ten years or so - and ‘outsiders’ insofar as they are often excluded from the community or elect to remain on the periphery, as is the case when Bella sees Edward and the other Cullens in the school cafeteria. But these vampires are not our normal vampires. The vampires we are most often accustomed to meeting in fiction are those who suck on the blood of humans (though there are likely exceptions). In the *Twilight Saga*, we do not find the archetypal vampire; instead, we find very humanised monsters. Edward’s father is a medical doctor, his brother and sisters attend school, and finally, they do not rely on human blood to nourish their thirst. Instead, the Cullens - and the other vampires that appear in the *Twilight Saga* - will hunt animals instead of humans to satisfy their desire for blood.

The problem for us to resolve then is if Edward Cullen, this century old virgin who drinks not human blood but that of animals, is really all that monstrous. He hardly seems terribly threatening. If we look at one book written for fans, we actually see Edward described in very *human(e)* rather than monstrous terms. Lois H. Gresh explaining the vampire characters writes: “first and foremost, there’s Edward, who was gorgeous even when he was a human with his emerald eyes and bronze-auburn hair;”²⁰ she continues,

Naturally, vampire teeth are perfect and very white, unless the vampire has just consumed a large meal of blood. Vampires never seem to have cavities, rotting brown teeth, chipped or missing teeth. ... Regardless, Edward, of course, has perfect teeth that are brilliant white. And, as with all vampires, he has perfect teeth despite the fact that he died *a really long time ago*.²¹

Gresh ultimately and unsurprisingly concludes, after describing various other physical attributes, that “Edward is gorgeous”²² and she then moves to what might be seen as the rhetorical negative in vampires, she explains:

So Edward sucks blood. So he lives on blood. So he kills people. No wait, unlike vampires in most stories, Edward doesn’t kill people, does he? Edward confines himself to animals in the woods. He never kills any humans, and he never hurts their pets. He’s a good vampire, with a soul.²³

This is perhaps the most apologetic moment of her argument in favour of Edward, but it is a moment that I think is quite telling. Edward is barely monstrous at all; indeed, quite the opposite would seem to be true. If anything, he is merely immortal and he is apparently quite gorgeous. It seems to Gresh and her readers that he shares more in common with superheroes than he does with villains and other monstrous beings. This becomes, I want to contend, our site of investigation: if Edward is the least monstrous of vampires, how then is he monstrous? Indeed, we might go so far as to call Edward a defiantly deviant vampire; Gresh calls Edward a “reformed vampire.”²⁴ There is, it would seem, very little danger in Edward, aside, perhaps from getting to live forever.

The entire narrative is dependent upon some level of monstrosity and deviance and so far the only deviance we have found is that Edward and his family are “reformed vampires” which essentially means they live forever and hunt animals for nourishment. By my estimation, this sounds an awful lot like, well, humans (outside of living forever in the same earthly body). It is for this reason that I opened this essay with Eloisa James’s novel, precisely because of the line, “I’ve married a monster”²⁵ after the heroine realises she married and continues to be married to a virgin. It is not Edward’s vampirism that makes him monstrous or deviant, rather it is his virginity that makes him monstrous, deviant, anomalous. Moreover, he is defiantly deviant in his virginity and perpetually denies Bella the pleasures of the body. To these ends, I provide one final consideration from the *Twilight Saga* by focussing on a scene in which Edward and Bella are alone in Edward’s bedroom in the third volume of the Saga, *Eclipse*. Edward and Bella have just become engaged and now Bella is pushing Edward to have sex with him, she says, “Edward ... There’s something I want to do before I’m not human anymore”²⁶ which is to say, she wants to experience the carnal pleasures. Edward responds, “He grabbed my wrists and pinned them to my sides. ‘I say we’re not,’ he said flatly.”²⁷ Bella, naturally, says to herself, “[r]ejection washed through me, instinctive and strong.”²⁸ Everything about this scene demonstrates that it is Edward who wants to maintain his virginity rather than Bella. He later says to Bella, “[i]t’s not possible now. Later, when you’re less breakable. Be patient, Bella.”²⁹ In this instance, the general notion of female virginity as breakable is re-affirmed but it would also seem to suggest that there are times when one is more breakable than other times, for instance, once they are married. The narrative that unfolds shows the strangeness of male virginity mostly because it would seem to contradict the stereotypes of male sexuality:

This is unbearable. So many things I’ve wanted to give you
- and *this* is what you decide to demand. Do you have any

idea how painful it is, trying to refuse you when you plead with me this way.³⁰

Edward is clearly the one who is demanding that virginity be maintained rather than Bella, indeed, Bella goes so far as to ask, “[g]ive me one good reason why tonight is not as good as any other night.”³¹ From the perspective of the critic, this is an interesting inversion of the generic norms, here it is Edward who must maintain his virginity and it is Bella who longs to lose her virginity, which in romance would generally render her the deviant. Instead, in the *Twilight Saga*, male virginity becomes something of a deviation from the norm.

In many regards, to return to Eloisa James, we are forced to deal with the question that “perhaps [he] is just too intelligent to have interested himself in carnal matters”³² and moreover that the male virgin is a monster. It is important to emphasise the word carnal in this citation which bears a double meaning with respect to Edward and Bella, for Bella desires both the carnality of sexuality and she is the only carnal subject in the scenario. Likewise, not only is Edward not interested in the carnal act of sex, he is also not interested in possessing the carnal human being of Bella.

To conclude, the male virgin simply should not exist precisely because trying to understand the male virgin is, as Frye would have it, “bloody confusing”³³ and I fear that this has become something of a horrendous pun at this point. The male virgin is most monstrous and deviant precisely because he “deviates from the accepted norm”³⁴ as Santos and Spahr would have it. While Frye argues that the central image of romance is one in which the “the monster [has been] tamed and controlled by the virgin,”³⁵ I would contend that precisely the opposite is true here. Ultimately, it is Edward’s virginity that makes him deviate from the accepted norms, thus rendering him monstrous, rather than his vampirism, which oddly enough renders him rather human.

Notes

- ¹ E. James, *When the Duke Returns*, Hodder, London, 2009, p. 11.
- ² N. Frye, *Northrop Frye's Late Notebooks, 1982-1990: Architecture of the Spiritual World*, R. D. Denham (ed), University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2000, p. 348.
- ³ H. Fielding, *Joseph Andrews and Shamela*, D. Brooks-Davies and M. C. Battestin (eds), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, p. 35.
- ⁴ S. Mallery, *Married for a Month*, Pocket Books, New York, 2001, p. 306
- ⁵ James, op. cit., p. 16.
- ⁶ C. Santos, A. Spahr, 'Introduction' in *Defiant Deviance: The Irreality of Reality in the Cultural Imaginary*, Peter Lang, New York, 2006, p. 1.
- ⁷ Ibid., pp. 1-2.
- ⁸ Cristina Santos in her paper, 'Sacrificing Virginity, or Taming (Im)Potency in Contemporary Women's Fiction,' to be presented at the Monsters and the Monstrous conference (September 19-22, 2010) considers the question of female virginity and monstrosity, ultimately arguing that, the woman who chooses to remain virginal is monstrous precisely because she denies male definition.
- ⁹ A. Bernau, *Virgins: A Cultural History*, Granta Books, London, 2007, p. 1.
- ¹⁰ N. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, R. D. Denham (ed), University of Toronto Press, 2007, p. 31.
- ¹¹ L. M. Carpenter, *Virginity Lost: An Intimate Portrait of First Sexual Experiences*, New York University Press, New York, 2005, p. 12.
- ¹² L. Vivanco & K. Kramer, 'There are Six Bodies in This Relationship: An Anthropological Approach to the Romance Genre'. *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2010, n.p., viewed on August 15, 2010, <http://jprstudies.org/2010/08/there-are-six-bodies-in-this-relationship-an-anthropological-approach-to-the-romance-genre-by-laura-vivanco-and-kyra-kramer/>
- ¹³ N. Frye, *Northrop Frye's Notebooks on Romance*, M. Dolzani (ed), University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2005, p. 219, 236.
- ¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 187.
- ¹⁵ S. Meyer, *New Moon*, Little, Brown and Company, New York, 2006, p. 50.
- ¹⁶ S. Meyer, *Breaking Dawn*, Little, Brown and Company, New York, 2008, p. 25.
- ¹⁷ Frye, *Notebooks on Romance*, p. 219, 236.
- ¹⁸ Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 31.
- ¹⁹ B. E. McDonald, *The Vampire as Numinous Experience: Spiritual Journeys with the Undead in British and American Literature*, McFarland & Company, Jefferson, 2004, p. 36.
- ²⁰ L. H. Gresh, *The Twilight Companion: The Unauthorized Guide to the Series*, St. Martin's Griffin, New York, 2008, p. 18.
- ²¹ *ibid.*, 25.
- ²² *ibid.*
- ²³ *ibid.*, p. 27.
- ²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 42.
- ²⁵ James, op. cit., p. 16.
- ²⁶ S. Meyer, *Eclipse*, Little, Brown and Company, New York, 2007, p. 442.
- ²⁷ *ibid.*, p.443.
- ²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 444.
- ²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 446.
- ³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 448.
- ³¹ *ibid.*, p. 450.
- ³² James, op. cit., p. 14.
- ³³ Frye, *Late Notebooks*, p. 348.
- ³⁴ C. Santos, A. Spahr, op. cit., p. 1.
- ³⁵ Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 188.

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