Admitting you like *Twilight* has taken on the same tone as admitting you have committed a mortal sin. *Twilight*’s sales numbers have continued to defy logic. Who wants to read about emotive teenage vampires? The consensus is in a lot of young girls and their mothers. Similar to how a vampire thrives on the blood of others; the *Twilight* series has subsisted on what many believe to be every young girl’s fantasy: a boy who is so devoted to her that he is willing to dedicate the rest of his existence to her and her alone. If this seems like a very superficial plot, it is; *Twilight* and the subsequent novels of the series are based solely on surface images, not depth. Where Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* features a myriad of repressed desires and fears generating a horrific monster, *Twilight*’s vampires leave much to be desired in terms of evoking terror. If *Twilight* is supposed to be a supernatural gothic romance, where is the element of monstrosity in the novel? The vampires certainly are not frightening; oddly enough, they come to represent an ideal family. In a novel where image is everything, the societal anxiety expressed about today’s culture becomes that of the fear of imperfection. Bella is just as culpable in her own consumption by seeking out the “perfect” monster that is doing everything in his power to stay away. Her visual consumption of Edward Cullen, her constant need to look at him, represents a repressed desire to be perfected. Consumption, however, works bilaterally wherein whenever a product is consumed it creates a desire for yet even more consumption. Bella’s desire creates Edward as a product, but through her visual consumption of him, he in turn begins to consume her culminating in her eventual transformation into a perfected vampire. Edward and Bella’s mutual subjection of one another is a reflection of many young adolescent's ultimate desire: for
the world to stay as it is, to remain frozen in an endless loop of teenage clichés, which culminates in Bella’s eventual transformation from average, mortal girl to gorgeous, perfected vampire.

Bella’s desire for a more permanent stability, which later manifests itself in Edward, is made apparent when she is forced to relocate from Phoenix where she has been living with her mother and her mother’s boyfriend, Phil, to Forks, Washington. Immediately, the story is transported from the bright, open air of the desert to the dank, fog-shrouded woods, an obvious mimicry of the psychological shift that is occurring within the protagonist. Adolescence is a time of uncertainty and fear. The reason behind Bella’s move is due to her mother’s boyfriend, who plays for a minor league baseball team, going on the road. Bella’s mother wants to travel with him, so rather than being a responsible parent, she ships Bella off to live with her father, Charlie. It is made clear from the very beginning that there is no strong parental or familial force in Bella’s life; when she gets to Forks she becomes Charlie’s housekeeper and cook, while he continues on with life as if Bella is not even there. With no stabilizing force that most characters get from some form of “family”—either biological or through a close group of friends—Bella simply produces one. Bella produces Edward (and by association, the Cullens) from her desire for stability, love, and acceptance that she cannot receive from her own family. The first time that Bella encounters the Cullen family, it is as if they have appeared out of nowhere. Thus far, the only details the reader has garnered are about the forgettable, boring students who attend Bella’s new school, and her incompetent parents. Suddenly, “sitting in the lunchroom, trying to make conversation with seven curious strangers…I first saw them” (Meyer 18). It is as if Bella’s desire for companions has produced this family prepackaged and ready to order for her. According to Karl Marx, in “Production, Consumption, Distribution, Exchange (Circulation),” only through production is it possible that “members of society appropriate (create, shape)
products in accord with human needs” (Clarke 252). Bella, cast adrift with no anchor, has a need for stability, and it takes shape in her summoning of Edward Cullen.

Edward frequently appears out of nowhere throughout the novel as if conjured out of thin air. Sometimes he materializes just in the nick of time to save Bella, and other times it is to further confuse her by delivering cryptic messages that warn her to stay away from him, yet serve to further entice her to him. It is important to note that it is Bella who initially stalks Edward: “throughout all this conversation, my eyes flickered again and again to the table…as I examined them…I was watching him surreptitiously…I saw him from the corner of my eye…I couldn’t stop myself from peeking occasionally…” and so on (Meyer 21-24). It is obvious that Bella is drawn to the surface appearance of Edward to the point of practical addiction. Bella slowly begins to realize just how much time she spends looking at Edward: “no one else was aware of Edward as I always was. No one else watched him the way I did” (69). Already the emphasis in the novel is on a superficial aesthetic quality that is showcased in the current culture through slick magazine advertisements that serve to show consumers how they should be, rather than a representation of how they actually are. Later, when Bella and Edward are together as a couple, the focus is still on how Edward looks.

In one of the most prolific scenes in the novel, Edward takes Bella hiking to finally reveal to her why vampires in Meyers’s universe shy away from the sun:

Edward in the sunlight was shocking. I couldn’t get used to it, though I’d been staring at him all afternoon. His skin…literally sparkled, like thousands of tiny diamonds were embedded in the surface. He lay perfectly still…his shirt open over his sculpted, incandescent chest…A perfect statue, carved in some unknown stone, smooth like marble, glittering like crystal. (260)
Yet again it seems Bella has spent most of her time with Edward visually eating him up in the same way one would visually devour a beautiful piece of art that creates its worth from its aesthetic value. In this way, “production not only supplies a material for the need, but it also supplies a need for the material” (Clarke 253). Individuals create art because there is a need for beautiful things by consumers. Edward, furthermore, is every girl’s perfect accessory down to the very fact that he *glitters*. It is through Bella’s desire to produce Edward, which creates his need to be consumed so that he his continual production is guaranteed, and he can remain real to Bella. Similar to Edward’s statement that Bella is his “kind of heroine” Edward is just as much Bella’s drug of choice (Meyer 267). In the beginning of the novel when she is still confused about Edward’s vampirism, and she visually stalks him in the same way that he literally stalks her, her health begins to deteriorate. She loses sleep, becomes anxious, and wishes she could “stop glancing over [her] shoulder, hoping to see him appear out of the blue the way he always did” (Meyer 150). Bella’s creation of Edward as a product to be consumed has become a double-edged sword that is now consuming her.

The vampires in *Twilight* then represent the epitome of perfect desire made real; it is safe to say that what Bella truly wants is not simply to live forever, but to live forever in perfection, perpetually producing Edward and being consumed by him. Death, sex, and consumption are three forces that work in tandem most potently in gothic novels; vampires embody all three. These forces become complicated and entangled as illegitimate desires for bodies, property, and power struggling against an ever-changing consumerism. According to Fred Botting in his chapter “Romance Consumed: Death, Simulation and the Vampire,” if Edward Cullen could be branded he would “come under the registered trademark of the ‘Death’ brand, which purveyed cigarettes and vodka with black labels bearing the image of a skull and crossbones” (Botting 63).
While it would be easy to recognize that this branding singles Edward out as “bad,” it also makes him more alluring to both Bella and the reader. Death, which used to be the insurmountable final limit, has now through “the taboo which restores the limit of prohibition, thereby invigorating the frisson and the tenacity of desire” been rendered yet another kind of commodity (67). Once divested of its horrifying limits, as Edward clearly showcases through his beauty and his ability to continue to live relatively humanly, death no longer marks “an absolute consumption, a final using up or expenditure of energies” (67). Where gothic novels of the past recoiled from excesses of various human desires, now those vices have simply been incorporated as the norm. Once “naturalized to the point of banality, death’s only value is as artifice,” which perhaps explains why, despite the superficiality of the characters, fans are rabid for more (68). By making Edward non-threatening, the novel neutralizes any anxieties and fears a traditional vampire would have engendered. Instead, the horror of Edward (aside from his unsettling, misogynistic attitude) lies with his visual perfection, which eventually consumes Bella completely.

Edward, as a visual product produced by Bella’s desire, slowly starts to consume Bella in turn because consumption is a mutual exchange: “production is consumption. Consumption is production” (Clarke 253). Edward needs Bella to continue not only to produce him from her desires for love and family, but also to consume him if he is to remain real. A “product becomes a real product only by being consumed…a garment becomes a real garment only in the act of being worn; a house where no one lives is in fact not a real house…” (252). Where Bella consumes Edward visually, Edward consumes Bella’s potential. If there is any gothic element to be found within this novel, it is this: Bella’s fear of imperfection manifested by her desire to become a vampire. Edward, through his mutual production and consumption of Bella, has
stripped her of a future; instead, the only future that Bella imagines is with Edward: “mostly I dream about being with you forever...I love you more than everything else in the world combined” (Meyer 498). This sentiment in itself is a cliché emphasizing the “further disneyfication of gothic figures, a double simulation in which the attempt to situate a realm of fear, darkness, and transgression is brought more fully within the orbit of simulation and its lightly disquieting shimmer of strange sameness” (Botting 75). Where Bella has been feeding off of Edward’s beauty, Edward has been slowly stripping her of the potential for future that he now lacks as an immortal.

Few postmodern vampires “have the stamina for immortality,” or at least according to Armand in Anne Rice’s Interview with a Vampire they do not (Botting 80). Perpetually frozen at the time—but of course not the condition—of their death, vampires desire “all forms of their lives to be fixed,” which is strange considering vampires have always been bound up with decadence, corruption, and dissolution, three very destructive forces (80). Vampires are voids that no longer desire anything except for the blood or other life force that continues to drive their undead existence. Without death, “desire roams hopeless and futile, doomed to repetition rather than final satisfaction” showcased in the repetitive plots of the entire Twilight series: Bella wants Edward, who is doing everything in his power to resist her (80). Bella gets into trouble. Edward swoops in to save the day. The plots are only complicated by the insertion of another contender for Bella’s love, Jacob Black, an event that Meyer does not resolve until the end of the series. Where postmodern vampires usually succumb to the overwhelming expanse of time witnessing the corruption and decay of everything they once found familiar until it ultimately disappears from their memory into an existential ennui, Meyer’s vampires seem to find comfort in fixed perpetual perfection.
Everything but the vampire is subject to corruption and distortion. Death becomes the only source of stability and meaning for Bella, and plays on societal fears of imperfection. Frequently, throughout the series, one of Bella’s recurring nightmares is that of her growing old, older than Edward, decaying in front of everyone. She constantly complains that she is getting older than Edward and is angry that he won’t turn her into a vampire, when for her, he is her only future. Edward and the Cullens represent the ideal self in the mirror for Bella. During one particularly snowy day Bella notes that the Cullens look “just like everyone else—only they looked more like a scene from a movie than the rest of us” (Meyer 41). Bella often describes the vampires this way: perfect, like models; human, but better. Bella laments the fact that next to Edward, her mere mortality makes her undesirable. She is a bland, blank slate described as pale, clumsy, and overall nothing special. Why would Edward want her when he could have someone like Rosalie, his “blond and breathtaking sister” and original intended lover (245)? The longer Bella visually consumes Edward the stronger her desire is to in turn be consumed and join their ranks among the living dead.

Finally, Edward has no choice but to change Bella. In Stephenie Meyer’s fourth book *Breaking Dawn*, Bella and Edward marry, go on their honeymoon, and Bella promptly gets pregnant. The hybrid baby develops much faster than the average human child, which means that in a couple of weeks Bella is ready to give birth. Unfortunately, since the baby is a hybrid, it bites its way out of its mother’s womb. Almost too late, Edward bites Bella and begins the transformation from mere mortal to perfected vampire. Strangely enough though, “Bella undergoes almost none of the expected post-transformation struggles or sacrifices; instead, all at once she’s gorgeous, talented, self-controlled, and even more admired than before” (Dalfonzo). At last, it is revealed these vampires are monstrous because they are perfect. While other
postmodern vampires, such as Spike and Angel from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Louis and Lestat from the Anne Rice novels, and Jean-Claude and Alistair from Laurell K. Hamilton’s *Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter* book series, are often similarly physically stunning and sexually voracious, many often get bogged down in an undead depression centering on the pointlessness of their continual existence. However, Meyer’s vampires are monstrous in light of the happily-ever-after motif that permeates the ending of the fourth book. There is no eternal existential crisis that these vampires have to face. Instead, they get to live together, forever, happy with no more psychological trauma to overcome. It is a simulacrum of a human existence and only focuses on the surface of living without true depth. Edward, Bella, and their unfortunately named child Renesmee inhabit a quaint little cottage not far from Esme and Carlisle, Bella’s surrogate mother and father figures. They are a façade of a family. At this point the only person Bella needs is Edward. Even Renesmee is a twisting of family in that as a hybrid child she continues to grow at a rapid rate. By the end of the fourth novel she is at least the equivalent of a six-year-old child. Bella not only gets to look like a supermodel; she gets the guy of her dreams, has a child, and gets to live happily-ever-after in perfected consumptive bliss. Meyer’s vampires have accomplished what Armand states is every vampire’s desire: for the world to remain still with them (Botting 80).

Every vampire’s desire consequently seems to be every adolescent’s desire as well. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield realizes that the best thing about the Museum of Natural History is that “everything always stayed right where it was. Nobody’d move. You could go there a hundred thousand times and…nobody’d be different. The only thing that would be different would be you” (Salinger 121). No one is ever more aware of themselves aging than when they are teenagers; nostalgia is keenest when young. Many associate “change” with youth,
yet as Louis Menand states in his essay “Holden at Fifty: The Catcher in the Rye and what it Spawned” this is the last thing that adolescents desire. In fact, “young people don’t want change any more than anyone else does, and possibly less. What they secretly want is what Holden wants: they want the world to be like the Museum of Natural History, with everything frozen exactly the way it was the first day they encountered it” (85). Although Bella tends to internalize this anxiety in a very superficial way, her concerns are still present and manifest themselves in the very fact that by the end of the series she is willing to become a monster before she would be willing to grow up. As voids of pointless desire, the vampire’s unattainable physical perfection also elucidates this sensation of “loss” that occurs in adolescent literature.

Bella’s desire for surface beauty over emotional depth emphasizes this feeling of “loss” that young adult novels propagate. Twilight becomes the readers’ very own brand of heroin. The audience cannot help but want to consume the text again and again, because it reminds them of “when things were truly fine. Youth culture acquires its poignancy through time, and so thoroughly that you can barely see what it is in itself. It’s just, permanently, ‘your story’” (85). Twilight becomes a mirror for adolescents and older women, the core of the fanbase, allowing them to feel that “that’s me” even if it really is not (85). Instead, it is the “romantic certainty, which all these books seduce you with, that somehow, somewhere, something was taken away from you, and you cannot get it back” (85). The desire then, is to preserve it, as Holden wishes to do with the innocence of children: “Certain things they should stay the way they are. You ought to be able to stick them in one of those big glass cases and just leave them alone” (Salinger 122). Bella and Edward through their mutual consumption of each other have accomplished what Holden could not. They have permanently captured their lives as they are, to be viewed forever like a photograph in an album. While an image is ideal for preserving a memory, it is not
the same thing as re-experiencing the memory as it happened. Photographs capture only moments in time, and they cannot tell an entire life story. In the case of *Twilight*, choosing perfection means preserving your life as it stands now, but it also means losing the power of “what could be.”

Edward consumes Bella, and so strips her of any possible future, other than a superficial existence with him, continually producing and consuming each other. There is no what is to come, only now, until the world ends. To some this may seem like the ideal life: never growing old, constant youth and strength, getting to spend the rest of existence with someone you love, but how sustainable would this kind of life be? Voids, like black holes, eventually collapse in on themselves because they cannot continue to produce enough energy to sustain their growth. Similarly, as a perfect vampire, how much longer can Bella continue visually to consume Edward when she finally has everything she has ever wanted? Vampires, as manifestations of unremitting emptiness, are just the continuation of desire ad infinitum. What is a constant life full of eternal desire that can never be sated? Honestly, not much of a life at all. Consumption would become the main preoccupation to the point of frenzy, until any simulation of a life created would collapse in upon itself. Being frozen forever, a photograph, the faded reminder of a fuzzy memory can never compare to the actual adventure of life, even if it means moving forward and growing old; even if it also means changing, for better or worse. Bella and Edward’s mutual consumption will only continue to exist as long as there are readers who are willing to consume them over and over again. Forever.
Works Cited


