Toward a Mormon Gothic: Stephenie Meyer's Vampires and a Theology of the Uncanny

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Stephenie Meyer's Gothic Unconscious

Mormons and vampires—a strange combination, indeed. Stephenie Meyer first brought them together in her epic series of *Twilight* novels,[1] a contemporary literary phenomenon that sprang, true to the classic Gothic impulse (as marked from Horace Walpole on), from the author's vividly persistent dream. The series tracks Isabella ("Bella") Swan and her vegetarian vampire beau, Edward Cullen, as they first meet in Forks, Washington, fall into forbidden love, and, after conquering a series of increasingly threatening obstacles—most of which include confrontations with vampires of the non-vegan stripe—live happily ever after as immortal husband and wife. Indeed, at the end of *Breaking Dawn,* which wraps up the tetralogy and fulfills Bella's desire for perfection and everlasting life, this Edenic (vampire) pair is set to spend their existence locked in an erotic embrace (which is where the story leaves them), raising their half-human daughter Renesmee, and cultivating relational bonds that, Meyer's Mormonism asserts, were never meant "to be limited by mortality." As Jonathan Green comments of *Breaking Dawn,* this "ambitious and interesting" book "is [thus] a sustained and vividly imagined answer" to some "very Mormon questions," including: "What will it be like to have a marriage continue past death into the eternities? What does it mean to have a perfected body, or to love an eternal being?"[2]

Though *Breaking Dawn* seems to taunt readers with its distinctively Mormon take on these matters of immortality, eternal life, and marriage beyond death, there is really very little in the rest of the story that openly speaks to Latter-day Saint theology. Yet, the *Twilight* Saga's cultural reception, most notably among active Latter-day Saints (particularly LDS youth, young adults, and middle-aged mothers), and Meyer's self-avowed Mormonism virtually beg readers to view it as an article of the faith. For some Mormon Twihards (as some obsessive fans call themselves), this response entails adoring Meyer's commitment to her characters' chastity, her apparent affirmation of choice and moral agency, and her infusion of light into the darkly erotic mythology of vampires. For other, less obsessive though still serious readers, this means turning a critical lens to the narrative in the attempt "to connect [… Meyer's] faith to her work in a meaningful way,"[3] one that engages, among other things, how Latter-day Saint being-in-the-world effects and is effected by the processes of literary production and consumption.

As a means to such analysis, I've found it useful to situate *Twilight* in terms of the literary Gothic, that increasingly popular fictional realm sometimes labeled "a literature of nightmare." Gothic fiction, as Elizabeth MacAndrew asserts, "gives form to amorphous fears and impulses common" to humanity, conjuring up monsters—for instance, "mad monks, vampires, and demons"—and invoking venues—such as "forbidding cliffs and glowering buildings, stormy seas and the dizzying abyss"—that aren't just significant in narrative terms, but that contain "the properties of dream symbolism as well." Through this externalized psychology, writers of Gothic fiction (whether consciously or not) thus give shape to phantasms and evils we generally only summon when asleep, and then only unconsciously, concepts of repressed selfhood that get sparked to life—or undeath, as the case may be—on the page and that can sometimes frighten us out of our wits and disorient our self-perceptions because, yes, we've seen their faces before, lurking in dark corners of the mind.[4]

Steven Bruhm ties these concepts of repression and the existence and place of evil in the human mind to the Gothic tradition when he observes that, since "[r]epression is […] essential to [any …] theory of the Gothic, that poor cousin and contemporary to Romanticism," our attempts to understand and interpret the Gothic must necessarily revolve around and may fruitfully center in psychoanalytic theory. Of special interest to such studies, Bruhm continues, are Freud's observations in "The 'Uncanny,'" which serves as "one of the most important early essays to influence criticism of the Gothic," especially since

it's here that "Freud discusses the Gothic as a study in the uncanny."[5] As Freud has it, an experience with the uncanny devolves from a brush with an object, image, person, or idea that is alternately "familiar and agreeable" *and* "kept out of sight."[6] Through the anxiety and disorientation created by such familiarity with unfamiliar or hidden aspects of cognition, identity, culture, and existence, the realm of the uncanny presents us with "nothing new or alien"; it simply reasserts something from which we have "become alienated [...] through a process of repression."[7] Its source is thus close to home—much closer, perhaps, than some might care to admit—standing on the threshold between the unfamiliar and the familiar, the imagined and the real, an in-between-ness that allows the uncanny a subversive function in the systems through which humans mediate the immaterial and material aspects of the world, including psychology, language, literature, culture, and religion.

In terms of Gothic fiction, this repressed familiarity is manifest (among other places) in the classic monster—the vampire, the werewolf, the mad-scientist, the ghost, etc.—beings that are neither dead nor alive, human nor animal, sane nor completely clinical. Barbara Creed suggests that the uncanny "permeates" these textual/visual monstrosities, imbuing them with a "sense of ambivalence" that readers can't easily dismiss, though not because they're merely "meaningless beast[s]" meant to "run amok, incite terror, kill indiscriminately," and, since Creed is dealing with matters of the uncanny in the cinema, "do well at the box office." No, she continues, "[t]he identity of the monster, male and female, is inseparable from questions of sex, gender, power, and politics."[8] By demanding our attention and, by extension, our identification with their being, these monsters thus confront us with questions about our existence as cultural beings, provoking our sympathies—most often out of pity and/or terror—and persuading us beyond ambivalence and anxiety such that we might be more willing to expose and explore our recesses of mind and to unsettle the cultural assumptions embedded there. And all this to the end of making space in which to allow the abject and objectified Other to expand our being-in and influence over our personal, social, and rhetorical worlds.

The Peculiar Case of Meyer and the Cullen Coven

At the center of this movement as I'm considering it in terms of Meyer's Gothic unconscious stands Edward, Bella's beloved, the prototype of a principled vampire, an angelic monster who sends his textual and extratextual worlds reeling with a mere nod of the head. (Cue screaming Twihards.) It was

Edward who came to Meyer in dream; Edward whose "fantastically beautiful, sparkly" body[9] sparked her "white heat"[10] dash to publication. Edward who caught and keeps Bella's fascination from her "first sight" of the Cullens in the Forks High School Cafeteria,[11] who evokes Bella's—and many a Twihard's—"pity" and passion with his presence as an "outsider" in Meyer's flawed-enough-to-be human fantasy.[12] And it's Edward and coven, with their unique and paradoxical blend of compassion for humans and burning, yet restrained, lust for their blood, who have stepped from the shadows of vampire mythology into the cultural limelight, marble skin ablaze, where they draw attention to Meyer's revisionary rendition of the Gothic, which offers a much "more nuanced" reading of vampirism than may come through other pop culture channels.

Speaking to this less edgy vampirism, Stacy Whitman observes that, because "Edward chooses to abstain" from his insatiate appetite for human blood—especially for Bella's—he initiates "an intriguing situation of denial and passion,"[13] a romp through sexual repression (as through realms of the uncanny) choreographed by "a proudly Mormon author"[14] whose commitment to chastity, in word and in deed, makes her and her monsters, in a word, *peculiar*. The ethics of this peculiarity hearken back to Ancient Israel, a people and a culture Jehovah claimed as his "peculiar treasure,"[15] his "special possession or property" meant,[16] Peter extrapolates, to honor that God who had called them "out of darkness into his marvelous light."[17] Meyer and coven, though caught in the riptide of popular culture, thus stand apart from the zeitgeist, the vampires as a function of their distinctively moral monstrosity and the author as a function of her faith.

Wading as she does through a vampiric history ripe with violence and lust, this peculiarity further sets Meyer apart from Mormons and non-Mormons alike. It distinguishes her from the latter in the sense that, as Caitlin Flanigan suggests, though Meyer "is a practicing Mormon," something "every reviewer [of her work] has mentioned," none have yet "know[n] what to do with" that fact; "and certainly," she continues, "none can relate it to [*Twilight*],"[18] though not because it hasn't been attempted. In his master's thesis, "Mormon Vampires: The *Twilight* Saga and Religious Literacy," Edwin Arnaudin cautiously traces several tenets of Mormon doctrine as they arise in the series "milk before meat" style,[19] having been "faithful[ly]" and by degrees layered into the narrative, Arnaudin argues, in order to "foster [...] greater religious awareness in popular culture and culture as a whole," especially as this increased awareness pertains to a reader's potential initiation into the

mysteries of Mormonism.[20] Indeed, he continues, because Meyer has allowed "her religion [to] limit her art" to religious propaganda at best and proselytizing material at worst, readers should engage her fictions carefully lest, "uninformed" as to what they're "actually receiving" (i.e. Mormonism "cloaked" in a clever vampire tale), they fall down "the [endless] rabbit hole" of her faith.[21] Thus, when he concludes that Meyer's "novels are truly Mormon novels and *could not be anything else,*"[22] he's not praising her for being true to her faith. He's suggesting that her depiction of "model Mormon behavior," her placement of "core LDS values [...] throughout [her] characters['] lives, is merely a compulsion derived from her lifelong commitment to Mormonism and its apparently restrictive and mysterious ideology.[23] In other words, because she has bound herself in word and deed to the LDS Church (which he earlier glosses over as a cult), if she wants to remain in good standing with the institutional religion, she has no recourse but to "ceaselessly abide by the tenets of Mormonism in *all* of her actions, including writing."[24] Hence the unrelenting Mormonness of her fantasy.

Flanigan herself tries to relate Meyer's Mormonism to the *Twilight* Saga by briefly discussing Meyer's "attitude toward female sexuality" in terms of Bella's decision to save sex for marriage (though this is really Edward's doing), her choice not to have an abortion even when Renesmee's gestation threatens her life, and, through it all, her increasing commitment to her maternal responsibilities. This is, however, simply a piecemeal gloss of Latter-day Saint teachings about chastity and sexuality. But at least Flanigan, as Arnaudin, attempts to connect Mormonism to *Twilight*, something that can't be said for other critics. Eric W. Jepson points out, after relaying Flanigan's comment, that "some [reviewers] dismissively call [Meyer] 'a young Mormon girl who had to sublimate like mad with thoughts of vampires'" in order to divert her unconscious into something on par with her Mormonness. Still others, Jepson goes on, "imagine her Mormon identity must somehow now be lost, saying 'she *was* a 29-year-old Mormon housewife'" before she gave in to her vampiric fantasies and in the process (supposedly) had to leave her faith in the psychological morass.[25]

Observing this movement safely from the shores of their (self-) righteousness, some orthodox Mormons hold that the uncanniness of Meyer's world completely misses the mark of LDS theology. In an assembly of letters written to the editor of *Meridian Magazine* in response to the magazine's positive treatment of the *Twilight* Saga, several readers wonder how Mormons, "the [self-avowed] children of [...] Light,"[26] a modern iteration of God's

peculiar treasure, can justifiably indulge themselves by reading literary works, as *Twilight,* situated in supernatural realms of darkness and touching the inherent sensuality of human experience. How have so many Latter-day Saints, "the very Elect" of God, one asks, "been hood winked [sic] and dazzled by the Adversary" into thinking that *Twilight* and its sequels are "harmless" entertainment?[27] For despite *Twilight*'s squeaky clean façade, the story seethes with what Lev Grossman names an "erotics of abstinence,"[28] a muted sexual interplay that arises as Bella's hormones and Edward's bloodlust repeatedly interact and their bodies ache to possess one another, often actively to the point of arousal, though never beyond sexual climax until after their marriage in *Breaking Dawn*.

In light of LDS teachings on chastity, this unconscious answer to the question, *How far can we go without going all the way?,* may thus pose valid concerns for those worried about the morality of Mormon youth and beyond and Meyer's possible influence on their attitudes toward sexuality. Hence, even if readers don't grasp the psycho-historical connection between vampirism and sexual perversion (as many have not), this tension between a self-consciously hygienic surface and an implicitly dirty core leads one letter writer to ask why Mormon readers insist on "glamoriz[ing]" and "splitting hairs with evil" by giving *Twilight* due course. For as this writer sermonizes, "The Savior does not split hairs[;] wrong is wrong, evil is evil. Dress it up or slice it any way you want to [...], the [teachings of the] Prophets of the Lord [...] are contrary to Ms. Meyer[']s story lines [sic]."[29] Having thus stood behind the institutional religion and its Messianic theology, a witness-bearing I (as a practicing Mormon) respect, this writer also reveals something of the pervasive influence Meyer's work has had in Mormon culture with a grammatical construction that privileges Meyer's storylines over the teachings of Mormon Prophets. And though I'm confident this was an unintended rhetorical move, it nevertheless implies (among other things) a repressed familiarity with what this writer obviously considers the more unseemly aspects of Meyer's world, the erotics of abstinence included.

Toward a Theology of the Uncanny

As to the Mormon Gothic I've begun sketching out here, this repressed and subversive familiarity—as expressed through this letter writer's language and the spiritual unsettling it subsumes, through the Cullens' peculiar brand of vampirism, and through Meyer's Mormon-zested tango with her Gothic unconscious—suggests that we can and should confront the psychologically or

linguistically or metaphysically repressed aspects of our psyches (as represented by the Gothic monster) if we desire to move through the "silence, solitude and darkness"[30] of terror and estrangement into a genuine state of at-one-ment with self and others, including God. For those strictly raised into repression and social taboo, this dynamic ultimately means confronting the physical desire and curiosity about the nature of sin and evil that flow beneath the individual and the collective consciousness. And that means, in one sense, learning to accept the role an artist—even an LDS artist—can play in laying bare the deeply human experiences, emotions, and sensations that we've successfully tucked away beneath shaded memories and normative attitudes and behaviors.

Because language, as art, is essentially compressed or refined experience, it offers the perfect medium through which to absorb, expand, and complete one's life experience to "the nth power" and to fulfill the obligation and opportunity to progress initiated by a theological and cultural relationship with Mormonism—but only if readers are willing to vicariously explore alternate, rhetorical lives. Tory C. Anderson explores this particular conception of literature and its potential to get at "the heart of the meaning of life without ever [overtly] talking about it" by leading us through Gustav Flaubert's *Madame Bovary,* which is not Gothic fiction but that employs a similar psychological machinery as Gothic fiction to draw readers into a self-interrogative mode. In his gloss of the story, Anderson illustrates how the skilled and conscientious artist can use aspects of the uncanny—in Flaubert's case, Emma Bovary's familiar but repressed reality—to help readers feel and understand how another feels and understands by moving them through a fictional life, a "refined life." In this way, Anderson says, readers can "understand something like the ugliness of unchastity without experiencing it"[31] and, by gaining experience with such moral terrors, become better able, as Edmund Burke suggests in his treatise on the sublime and the beautiful (which necessary takes up terror as provoked by experience with the sublime), to "enter into the concerns of others;" to be "moved as they are moved." Such readers thus become anything but "indifferent spectators" of the things their fellow beings physically (or textually, as the case may be) "do or suffer."[32]

And much as Christ can vicariously understand everything we've felt and done and to "succor" us in and through our pains, afflictions, temptations, sicknesses, infirmities, and sins,[33] by facing literary terrors and evils—as literary pleasures and good—"we are put into the place of another man [and woman]," to borrow from Burke, "and [are] affected in many respects as he [or

she] is affected." In this view, both physical and psychic pain—as evoked by the sublime terror of having "the mind [...] so entirely filled with its object [of perception]," as with repression laid bare, "that it cannot contain any other [object], nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it"—can bind humans together through the increased "admiration, reverence, and respect" ushered into the psyche as terror "hurries us" into an expanded emotional space. Thus is forged a dynamic community that transcends psychological, material, textual, and socio-cultural boundaries.

For readers to bear this burden with the writer, however, they must open themselves to the writer's world(s), as expressed through the demanding and sublime realities of language, and allow themselves to increase in understanding vicariously. If we deny ourselves the vitality of such experience in our ventures toward eternity by refusing the uncanny a place in our personal and cultural theologies—especially as this refusal relates to gaining (or not) an understanding of sexuality, sin, and evil without falling prey to the (potential) perverseness of these principles—it may just take, as Anderson asserts from his position as a believing Latter-day Saint, "four billion earth lives (give or take a million) to experience what we need to experience to become like God"[34]—the end (and subsequent beginning) of Mormon theology. And Stephenie Meyer summons us into this revisionary reading of terror and the ungodly through her rearticulation of the Gothic aesthetic. That is, by coaxing the vampire novel into the light, she isn't, as Arnaudin suggests, merely cramming her beliefs down the unsuspecting throats of the world. Rather, she's giving readers the opportunity to confront and come to terms with the implicit humanness of the uncanny as they grow into the fullness of knowledge, compassion, and community measured in and against the eternal body of Christ.

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Until Dawn. He blogs at chasingthelongwhitecloud.blogspot.com and is a contributor to the Mormon Arts and Culture blog *A Motley Vision*. An early version of this essay appeared as a review of the *Twilight* Saga in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 42.2 (2009) and an expanded and revised version of that was presented at the 2009 Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association Convention at Snowbird, Utah. This essay incorporates feedback received at the convention.

Notes

[1] Stephenie Meyer, *Twilight* (New York: Little, Brown, 2005), print. *New Moon* (New York: Little, Brown, 2006), print. *Eclipse* (New York: Little, Brown, 2007), print. *Breaking Dawn* (New York: Little, Brown, 2008), print.

[2] Jonathan Green, "When Your Eternal Companion Has Fangs," Rev. of *Breaking Dawn*, by Stephenie Meyer, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 42.2 (2009): 141-3, print, 142.

[3] Eric W Jepson, "Saturday's Werewolf: Vestiges of the Premortal Romance in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* Novels," *Reading Until Dawn: Critical Essays on Stephenie Meyer* 1.2 (2009): 1-11, web, 8 Oct. 2009, 1.

[4] Elizabeth MacAndrew, *The Gothic Tradition in Fiction* (New York: Columbia UP, 1979), print, 3.

[5] Steven Bruhm, *Gothic Bodies: The Politics of Pain in Romantic Fiction* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1994), print, xiv.

[6] Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" *The Norton Anthology of Literature and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch, et al, trans. Alix Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2001), 929-51, print, 933, 944.

[7] 952.

[8] Barbara Creed, *Phallic Panic: Film, Horror, and the Primal Uncanny* (Carlton, Victoria, AUS: Melbourne UP, 2005), print, viii.

[9] Stephenie Meyer, "The Story Behind *Twilight*," *StephenieMeyer.com*, Stephenie Meyer, 14 Dec. 2008, web, 8 Oct. 2009.

[10] MacAndrew 6.

[11] Meyer, *Twilight* 1.

[12] 10.

[13] Stacy Whitman, "Good Stories Told Well: A Survey of Mainstream Children's Books by LDS Authors," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 41.2 (2008): 135-40, print, 138.

[14] Green 142.

[15] *The King James Bible* (Salt Lake: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979), print, Exodus 19.5.

[16] 1546.

[17] 1 Peter 2.9.

[18] Caitlin Flanigan, "What Girls Want," *The Atlantic Online*, The Atlantic Monthly Group, Dec. 2008, web, 8 Oct. 2009.

[19] Edwin Arnaudin, "Mormon Vampires: The *Twilight* Saga and Religious History," MS thesis, U of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2 Apr. 2008, *SILS Electronic Theses and Dissertations,* web, 24 Oct. 2009, 19.

[20] 94.

[21] 91.

[22] 94; italics added.

[23] 93.

[24] 90; italics added.

[25] Jepson 1.

[26] A. Hartung, "Is Everyone Nuts?" "*Dark Knight* and *Twilight* Saga Surge Reader Response," letter, *Meridian Magazine: The Place Where Latter-day Saints Gather*, Meridian Magazine, 8 Aug. 2006, web, 8 Oct. 2009.

[27] Nina Jo Jensen, "Missing the Point," "*Dark Knight* and *Twilight* Saga Surge Reader Response," letter, *Meridian Magazine: The Place Where Latter-day Saints Gather*, Meridian Magazine, 8 Aug. 2006, web, 8 Oct. 2009.

[28] Lev Grossman, "Stephenie Meyer: A New J.K. Rowling?" *Time.com*, Time, Inc., 24 April 2008, web, 9 Oct. 2009.

[29] Jensen.

[30] Freud 952.

[31] Tory C. Anderson, "Just the Fiction, Ma'am," *Tending the Garden: Essays on Mormon Literature*, ed. Eugene England and Lavina Fielding Anderson (Salt Lake: Signature Books, 1996), 69-77, print, 73.

[32] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful with Several Other Additions*, Vol. 24 of *The Harvard Classics, e*d. Charles W. Eliot (New York: P.F. Collier and Sons, 1909-14), *Bartleby.com*, 2001, web, 9 Oct. 2009.

[33] *The Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), print, Alma 7.11-13.

[34] Anderson 73.