

My Vampire Boyfriend: Postfeminism, “Perfect” Masculinity, and the Contemporary Appeal of Paranormal Romance

Introduction

This essay examines the currently prolific genre of vampire-human romances¹ in terms of rapidly changing postmodern² gender roles and with respect to current trends of gendered and romantic ideals. I look at the casting of the romantic hero as vampire as a vehicle that allows the author and the reader to indulge a craving for an old-fashioned, generally wealthy, and socially dominant gentleman and a fantasy of stable and secure gendered expectations without fundamentally compromising or relinquishing hard-won and necessary, but also sometimes challenging, feminist rights and responsibilities.

The past 15 years (1996-2011) have seen an increasing surge of romances featuring vampire men, usually white vampire men. I will focus on some popular examples of such fiction, especially fiction aimed at the expanding young adult market. We are living in bountiful times for these stories, and there are many more texts that belong in this paper than I will be able to address. What I do want to discuss is some common themes concerning masculinity and female heterosexual desire³ in some of these

books and to offer an analysis of what these themes suggest about the tense and changing relationship women may have to power – overt and covert – in the United States today.

These vampire romances have especially proliferated in what is often called a postfeminist moment, at the turn of the 21st century (Siegel). “Postfeminist” is a highly contested term, used to refer to: (1) those contemporaries of Third Wave feminists who disavow feminism, finding it divisive or to have outgrown its relevance and appeal, and focus instead on the social liberties women have already won (see, for example, Sommers); and also (2) those Third Wave feminists who actively claim feminism but who are also working to transform it into what they hope will be an “updated” and more dynamic movement (see Siegel). (Editor’s note: See the Benjamin A. Brabon and Stéphanie Genz edited volume *Postfeminist Gothic* for a relevant exploration of the term.)

One major point at issue in the postfeminist moment is the question of whether feminism can still be beneficial to women *or* whether women can afford to give up the often difficult struggle of feminism. Postfeminism is, largely, a question of *mainstream* social and political matters and, as such, whether they subscribe to the language or not, these questions of the role(s) feminism can, does, or should play in contemporary women’s lives are widespread through U.S. society. Of especial interest to many women who value heterosexual partnerships or involvements in their lives is the way that rapidly fluctuating gender roles, sexual boundaries, and romantic expectations affect them, creating opportunities at the same time that they create new challenges and instability (see Hogeland and Levy for further discussion of this topic).

With changes in economic standing, domestic responsibilities, and political and media representation in the very early 21st century, there has also emerged an almost schizophrenic polarization of sexual ideals and accepted behavior. Careening somewhere between chastity pledges and the popularization of porn culture, many girls and women find themselves ambivalent about how to present themselves and what they desire. Ariel Levy writes, “[J]ust because we are post doesn’t automatically mean we are feminists.... It is worth asking ourselves if this bawdy world [of highly sexualized contemporary pop culture] reflects how far we [women] have come or how far we have left to go” (5). Meredith McGhan, however, echoes

many feminist advocates of the rebirth of burlesque when she writes that taking control over the display and use of one's body for purposes of seduction can be empowering for women. Several ardent *Twilight* fans I interviewed explained to me that Edward Cullen is appealing to them because they see him as a *gentleman*, atypical for today, who anchors Bella as she figures out who she wants to be and does not pressure her sexually. Conversely, fans of *True Blood* frequently praise its unabashed and explicit portrayals of sexuality (see Grigoriadis). Old-fashioned gender roles, on the one hand, and the mainstreaming of pornography, on the other, comprise reactions to each other, leaving little room for deep analysis or critique of either or both, and posing each as the soothing antidote to the stresses of the other.

My thesis is that many of the vampire romances that have become so popular in the 21st century so far, especially the ones aimed at a young adult readership, present us with old-school gentleman-vampires who are, certainly, sensitive and evolved in some ways, but who also offer the security and stability of old-fashioned gentlemen that some readers may now crave without being able to clearly articulate that craving. I argue, though, that such a yearning has to do with the contradictory and conflicted relationship that many women have to feminism and femininity and a perceived conflict between feeling protected and having the approval of visible femininity, on the one hand, and being self-determining and active, on the other.

Certainly, not all women at this moment in time perceive this conflict or, perhaps, feel it to be a problem, but many women voice that they do. This feeling is expressed, for example, in one way when Buffy Summers laments, at multiple points throughout the television series, that the enormity of her vampire slayer destiny (as a female protector of humanity), and the seriousness with which she deploys it, limit the scope for lighthearted fun in her life. It is expressed in another way when Stephenie Meyer defended Bella Swan's danger-proneness and clumsiness with her now much-cited quote, "We can't all be slayers," ("The Story Behind New Moon") to explain the popular appeal of a female character seeking a male protector.

The human girlfriends in the vampire romances at issue here seem to want both the approval and security of performing femininity well and also the augmented independence and options that feminism has brought many people. To have both seamlessly, it seems, it helps to have a supernatural

lover, one who is simultaneously very much of the past and of the future, but present in the present. Such a one would need his superhuman strength to exert the necessary control over the potentially problematic elisions that could occur between his efforts to be, at the same time, a vengeful and protective monster and also a sensitive, evolved guy and caring boyfriend.

What's So Hot About the Cold-Blooded?

My vampire boyfriend: what is he like and what makes him so riveting? As a longtime fan and scholar of Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), I take that series as a sort of urtext for this current genre of popular fiction. Although LJ Smith's *The Vampire Diaries* (1991-1992) and Annette Curtis Klause's *The Silver Kiss* (1990)⁴ are both examples of excellent genre stories that precede *Buffy* and Anne Rice's novels made vampires tremendously popular still earlier, the Buffyverse became so influential that few vampire texts following it could avoid an association with it, at least in its consumption and analysis (see, for instance, Johnson). I begin with a discussion of *Buffy*, then, and also consider *The Silver Kiss*, Meyer's *Twilight* series, and Ellen Schreiber's tween-targeted *Vampire Kisses* books. While these texts vary widely in terms of their crafting, popularity, and messages (or lack of intended message), they all share a distinctly sympathetic view of the love between a young, high-school aged human girl-woman and a blood-drinking boy-man who is taking pains to refrain from killing humans or to turn his beloved into a vampire. I will also comment briefly on some other vampire fictions such as the television series *Moonlight*, in which, as in HBO's Alan Ball series *True Blood*, the vampires have a more complicated relationship to the killing of humans, and the female protagonist and intended audience are adult.

Scholars of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* have discussed the fact that Buffy's romantic relationship with the human Riley Finn, while very important to the series, suffered in comparison to her relationships with the vampires Angel and Spike (see, for example, Stokes 2004). The quality of these latter relationships was enhanced by the fact that these vampire boyfriends could match Buffy in her physical strength and her knowledge of the many literal and figurative dimensions of our world. However, this paper is more concerned with the qualities of vampiric *character* than of vampiric *exist-*

ence and in how these qualities are at the heart of what makes these men into such page-ready heroes. As is often the case, Whedon's stories are noteworthy for their willingness to upset or complicate gender types, and Buffy's vampire boyfriends are more willing and able to let her be the leader and to have the upper hand than is any human boy, including Riley, that she dates. The protean quality of vampire masculinity – old-fashioned and rigid in some behavioral respects but endlessly evolving in the essential principles – is crucial to what makes these vampire men perfect lovers. (See Lorna Jowett on varieties of masculinity in *Buffy*.)

Much has been written on the questions of vampire leading men as Gothic or Byronic heroes (recently, see Abigail Myers' and Robin Brande's treatments of *Twilight*), but I wish to consider these figures in terms of their contemporary social resonance rather than as timeless literary tropes. To begin with, for example, I argue that even human leading men in supernatural fiction can have vampiric qualities. Riley Finn thrives in the nighttime, gains superhuman physical strength from transfusions of chemically altered blood, keeps dark secrets, and lives underground for a time. In his penultimate episode on the series, Riley's descent into darkness exceeds the habits of the actual vampire Spike, who is still grocery-shopping for junk food snacks and watching daytime television while Riley slips down, out of control, becoming increasingly solitary and allowing vampires to feed on him in order to feel the rush of the connection. He is undeniably human but, at this point, it is both his vampire-like qualities and his quest to understand how it feels to *be a vampire* that are significant, especially in Riley's own understanding of Buffy's desires and their relationship. Consistent with Whedon's firmly feminist world-view, though, Buffy's relationship with Riley does not last. More lasting is her relationship with Angel, whose own muscled and brooding vampire masculinity is winningly undercut by his unhip fondness for Barry Manilow's power ballads and tendency to mute social awkwardness. The vampires provide more intricate characters than the human Riley, who is solid in either his darkness or his goodness. Buffy's arc of personal development, meantime, is only partially tied to her romantic life and weaves in and out of these relationships, progressing in conjunction with her partner – human or vampire – while she is in a relationship but continuing apace when she is single as well. *Buffy*, therefore, stands apart from the other

texts discussed here in that the romances in the story are important to the narrative arc but only one piece of it.

As Riley, in company with a variety of Southern Gothic literary heroes, illustrates, the old-fashioned gentleman with dark secrets, hidden danger, and passionate devotion to the *right* woman is not an uncommon literary type. It is, however, a type that the contemporary vampire plays to perfection because the qualities of his *existence* greatly heighten the necessary qualities of *character* for such a hero. In general, this dark gentleman also functions as a foil for the protagonist and the reader to work through the contradictory aspects of the contemporary woman's roles, desires, and needs. A paranormal figure is ideal for playing the multi-faceted, constantly evolving, but deeply reliable male lead for today's postfeminist heroine as she navigates the shifting array of gendered prescriptions, proscriptions, and desires before her (for other considerations of feminism and female agency in the vampire romance, see articles by Coker and Stevens). As Meyer tells us in *Twilight*, for example, Edward is already frozen in his development, although the books do reveal him to learn and change. They are, however, primarily driven by Bella's personal growth and human choices. The story's focus, then, can be less on *his* moral journey — as is usually the case with superhero fiction — than on *her* human, emotional development and satisfaction, which I argue is the real story being told in this genre.

Dating an Older Man: Vampire Boyfriends and the Implications of Age

Simon, from Klause's *The Silver Kiss*, is, like Whedon's vampire Angel: beautiful; quiet; dressed in leather; and, completely miserable in his lonely vampire existence. Like Angel, Simon dines on small animals when necessary to spare human death and is preoccupied by the emptiness of eternal life. Jennifer L. McMahon, in an essay on "our fatal attraction to vampires," cites Sartre's *Nausea* (a book the viewer glimpses Angel reading in the season 3 *Buffy* episode "Helpless") to describe mortal unease in facing our aging bodies and to explain part of the appeal of literary vampires. As she writes, "Aging arouses anxiety not only because it is outside conscious control and yields diminished performance, but also because we idealize

youth.... the appeal of vampires lies not only in their immortality but also in their eternal youth" (195). Indeed, the vampire boyfriend usually appears as a young man no matter what his age is. To some extent, the reader must accept this appearance of youth as just as valid as the vampire/man's actual age; otherwise, his relationship with a young woman loses its romance in becoming perverse. However, this age-duality of being ancient in experience while also youthful in impulse renders the vampire boyfriend both wise and passionate. His beloved can benefit from the intensity of his desire for her but not suffer from his inability to control it or to express it elegantly. This is the inverse of current media trends of grown-up men perennially acting like boys (see Hymowitz); rather, this is the physical glory of youth combined with adult accomplishments and restraint.

In *The Silver Kiss*, the human girl Zoë's mother is dying, and she is struggling to accept mortality and finitude as an inevitable aspect of humanity while she also struggles with adolescence and the transition to adulthood. Simon, still mourning his own long-dead mother, elucidates the nature of her grief, saying to her, "It's death that frightens you so.... I've seen its effect on people before now" (Klause 56-57). Zoë is isolated in her loss and her awkwardness, but Simon, eternally solemn and having witnessed the world for centuries, renders those qualities romantic, less of a piece with our mundane, material world and more a sublimity that fosters uncommon intimacy.

As well, Simon's ability to be surprised by the young, mortal Zoë, despite everything he has seen and done, makes her specialness, as the object of his desire, seem unique and important.

He pulled her to him. Take away my cold, he thought. Make me warm again. She trembled, and he thought perhaps it was not from fear [but from attraction]... How long, he thought, since a beautiful girl trembled for me alone, and not because of my power to hypnotize. (Klause 118)

Later, Simon says of his connection with Zoë, "I didn't know I needed this so much" (129). When he muses about her pretty legs, it is not simply the mark of a crush but also of chivalric and ultimately unfulfillable love. We see this theme repeatedly in vampire romances: when Angel tells Buffy that she is the only woman he has really loved in his 240-plus years ("Ear-shot," season 3 of *Buffy*); or when Edward Cullen reveals to Bella that she is both his first love and his first romantic partner of any sort (Meyer, *Twilight*).

light 311). One might want to extrapolate from such examples a progressive message that the developed love of experienced adults is particularly desirable and that aging is nothing to fear in itself. The dominant message in most vampire romances, however, remains a valorization of first loves, an elevation of teenage ardor and teenaged desirability, and of the notion that loving a very good (young) woman can save even an extremely “bad” man.

Simon’s constancy and commitment to Zoë are compelling, but they are never tested by time; they are a given because the two have a brief but transformative period together. Simon is an idealized romantic hero. His relationship with Zoë, as with most great tragic romances, does not end until one of them does, and this only happens after Zoë helps Simon accomplish the mission that has driven his centuries of undeath, and the recently reissued version of the novel is bookended by two lyrically crafted short stories, which suggest that, while true love can bring life even to the undead, death cannot stop true love, which continues on in afterlife.

As mournful and minor key as is Klause’s elegant novel, the current *Vampire Kisses* series of youth fiction is very light, quick, and upbeat. Raven Madison, the narrator of Ellen Schreiber’s self-consciously, stylizedly Goth (though not so Gothic) books, spares no detail in describing her vampire boyfriend, Alexander Sterling. She tells us exactly what he is wearing, describes his cologne, his chocolate brown eyes and shoulder-length dark hair precisely. We hear about his car, his motorcycle, his home, his coffin decor, and his boots in detail, and Raven, as the narrator, informs us of each teenage girl in her vicinity who also describes Alexander as “hot” (and there are many). Like Edward Cullen, Alexander Sterling could produce his own style guide for men. Also like Edward, Alexander is not only desirable to his girlfriend but generally desired by all girls. As in *Twilight*, heterosexuality and chastity are presumed for the major characters in *Vampire Kisses*. Raven, like Bella, is presented as virtuous and virginal, unique, and notably brave and insightful amongst her peers; Alexander is her reward for possessing these qualities.

Schreiber’s books are sweet, breezy, and somewhat campy in their heavy stylization. Raven has some impressive qualities, especially considering the intended readership of tween girls, but the Goth nature of these books relies on heavy-handed commercial consumption even more than on carefully rendered “atmosphere” or plot lines. Just as Raven literally wears

her Gothness on her sleeve, undermining its rebellion with its *prêt-à-porter* price tag, her independent spirit, refreshing self-confidence, and energetic physicality are undercut by her frequent need to be rescued by Alexander or to defer to his better judgment. Alexander, too, has many believable characteristics – such as the shyness and loneliness of the isolated boy that he is – but he is largely a confection of perfect masculinity who is presented as Raven's just desert for her courage to stick to her own principles of style and behavior in their small town.

Unlike most fictional vampires, Alexander resembles the *lamia* from LJ Smith's *Nightworld* in that he was conceived by and born to vampire parents and grows at a normal, seemingly human pace for much of his life. Thus, he shares with Raven the sneaking out and getting grounded. Unlike Raven, however, he is a model student (home-schooled to keep him safely in his coffin during daylight hours), knowledgeable, circumspect; and he acts, as she puts it, like "a Southern gentleman" (Schreiber *Dance* 18). He also wins fist-fights to protect Raven's honor, makes personal sacrifices to do what is right, and channels his unhappiness at his own lonely immortality into painting beautiful pictures of his human girlfriend and planning elaborate cemetery picnics to woo her. As a Goth teenage boyfriend, he is pretty much awesome.

As Raven repeatedly notes, Alexander always knows the right thing to do and, regardless of the disagreements they often have, only looks out for Raven's best interest and, towards that end, often "scolds" or "instructs" her (for example, Schreiber, *Dance* 25, 26). Though he is only two years older than she (not a significant difference by the standards of vampire-human romance), Alexander is very much presented as the responsible figure who has experienced the world and who understands consequences, mitigates Raven's loneliness, and also keeps her feet on the ground, protecting and guiding her. He is her passionate first love but also the adult figure who protects her from the possible excesses of that relationship. As with Bella and Edward in the *Twilight* books, Raven, for all her independence, quickly grows deeply reliant on her vampire boyfriend. Coping with just a few days away from him at one point, she narrates, "I tried to find comfort in Alexander's handmade bracelet, like a baby does a blanket. The wooden masterpiece remained wrapped around my wrist in the shower and

during sleep, but it was no substitute for my boyfriend's arms" (Schreiber, *Royal* 34).

As a fifteen-year-old, Raven's status as a young adolescent and the intended tween audience for the books are ever-present factors in the series, which is filled with life lessons for the young, such as the importance of maintaining integrity and courage in one's self-presentation and loyalty to family and friends. However, the romantic appeal of the books becomes a lesson in itself. Raven finds the perfect boyfriend – model gorgeous, doting, creative, and able to express his emotions clearly, but also tough, experienced, a leader amongst his peers, and a guide and protector for Raven. Finding such a very complicated individual amongst mere humans might be difficult enough, but it also points to Raven's own highly reticulated positionality *vis à vis* gender and romance. As the books revolve around her efforts to discover a comfortable identity and life-path for herself, she needs Alexander to be all things to reflect or anchor the many roles she tries on for herself throughout the series. This complex, dynamic nature of gender play and identity for both vampire boyfriend and human girlfriend is an important feature of this genre.

In terms of gender, Raven's bold first moves in their relationship, which include actually breaking into Alexander's house, are presented as lively and positive and received that way by Alexander himself, who is intrigued and captivated. Their first date, however, is orchestrated in quintessentially chivalrous style, with the family butler delivering a printed invitation to Raven's house and then serving them dinner at the Sterling mansion, after which Alexander walks Raven to the car and kisses her chastely on her cheek despite her wanting more. She writes a riot grrrl introduction for their relationship, but he, ultimately to her delight, offers a traditionally courtly first chapter.

A repeated motif in the books is Alexander's intense desire to bite (penetrate?) Raven and her intense desire for him to do so. In this mythology, his biting her will instantly make her into a vampire also, which she badly wants. However, Alexander, as the mature decision-maker for both of them, refuses to bite her, to become someone who feeds off of her (uses her for sex?) and completely transforms her life. Alexander is deeply ashamed when the nature and intensity of his desire for Raven are revealed by a mind-reader who says, "Alexander is a vampire, after all... He's hungered

for your [Raven's] flesh, blood, and soul since he laid eyes on you" (Schreiber, *Dance* 161). For such a chaste series, sex, power, and risk are implied constantly, and the reader is repeatedly made aware, as are Raven and Alexander, that passionate love and sexual exploration come laced with the subtext of potential harm. It is the vampire boyfriend who enforces restraint and responsibility and protects the heroine's innocence for as long as possible, who acts as father-figure as well as lover, desiring the woman but also policing that desire.

Multiple Masculinities: The Contradictory Nature of the Idealized Man

If the contemporary, heterosexual woman finds herself flummoxed in the face of all the various roles, often at odds with each other, that she must play — professional, partner, mother, never-aging vixen, moral leader, etc. — then it only makes sense that her fantasized mate must also negotiate a highly convoluted personality. Vampire boyfriends are noteworthy for their extraordinary ability to be all things at once, embodying masculine ideals from multiple classes and eras, for multiple age-groups and subcultures, offering an array of characteristics and abilities from which their human girlfriends (or reader proxies) can choose as they grow and develop themselves.

Edward Cullen saves Bella's life repeatedly, carries her books and, when necessary or convenient, carries Bella herself, rocks her in a rocking chair, sings her to sleep with his lullaby, scolds and essentially grounds her in *Eclipse*, and even completes and mails her college applications. As discussed above, Alexander Sterling, similarly, acts like Raven's older, sterner brother as well as her boyfriend. In LJ Smith's novella "Secret Vampire," the young *lamia* James puts himself at great risk to execute an elaborate plan to save his beloved Poppy's life and then gently but firmly guides and protects her into the future. Angel is Buffy's great love but also is an important source of information and support throughout the series while she learns the true scope of her destiny, helping her with existential quandaries or in difficult fights and comforting Buffy after her mother's death.

Again, I do not mean to suggest that only vampire men are able to be stalwart guardians and custodians for the women they love. These are, after all, classically gentlemanly traits. The particularities of vampire nature, though, allow vampire men to manifest these qualities with ease and perfection: melting out of or back into the night; using a highly developed, and somewhat weird, sense of smell to always keep track of where their lovers are; winning every fight; and remaining unflappable through crisis after crisis. By giving the entire story a fantastical premise, such exacting gendered expectations are rendered less fantastical themselves. The vampire nature of the characters and the fantasy element in these stories make these actions more believable, but they also make qualities desirable, which, in actual men in real relationships, might be quite unsettling.

I argue that the vampire boyfriend's almost ubiquitous dissatisfaction with his own vampire nature might actually represent the dissatisfaction that many heterosexually involved women would like to see their male partners feel about their own gendered dominance and the ways in which they benefit from an unfair, sexist social system; however, the appeal of masculinity is a complicated matter, and benevolent but incontestable male dominance continues to be widely socially approved and desired. One loudly voiced postfeminist criticism of feminism, in fact, is that the latter movement has emasculated men and confused boys (see Suzanne Venker's 2011 book with Phyllis Schlafly, *The Flipside of Feminism*), depriving them of their birthright dominance. Vampire boyfriends are usually expected to wear many, contradictory hats at the same time, to offer multiple expressions of masculinity at all times. They must be protective but also nurture the heroine's independence. As the older, more experienced partners, they must be wise advisors and somewhat paternal but not to the extent that this seems untoward or that the heroine feels coerced. They must be capable of spontaneous and successful acts of violence in order to protect the heroine but also be extremely gentle by nature. They must be best friends, eager to talk for hours, but also masterful lovers who, though always interested and ready, are also in perfect control of their own sexuality and self-restraint. They are, in short, fantasy men – both very hard and very soft and fantastically flawless in a way that even very few fictional human men could possibly be.

For example, the much adored leading men of Jane Austen and the Brontës were thoroughly flawed. Their saving grace, like that of most actual humans, was in being loving and beloved despite, or because of, those flaws. When Mr. Knightley in Austen's *Emma* relents to tender solicitousness at the end of the novel, both the reader and Emma are beguiled because his knightliness, up to this point, has been only so much stern, formal chivalry. While vampire boyfriends may have their shortcomings, they are generally perfect, and their ability to love and be loved is just another aspect of that perfection.

I believe that vampire romances are important in recognizing and validating feminine (or feminized) desires and, as well, that many or most readers interpret these texts with enough critical reflection to see them for what they are: fiction. I sympathize with the relief that many fans felt when Bella Swan did, in fact, get everything she could have wanted at the end of the *Twilight* series, and I appreciated the fairy tale aspect of the saga's end. I do not, however, agree that these texts are "just stories" or that, as popular fiction, they do not imply anything more than passing entertainment. If that were the case, the fandoms built around them would not be so passionate, committed, or, of course, so very lucrative. I have written elsewhere about the many layers of emotional investment and social meaning that *Twilight* fans bring to or derive from that franchise (Mukherjea "Team"), and several authors have done intensive literary analyses of the books (see, for example, Granger and Wilson). Youth fiction has long been meant to be at least somewhat instructive (such as *Little Women*), so it is worth appreciating the yearnings and needs to which popular literature responds and, also, worrying about the expectations these texts nurture with respect to gender, sexuality, and intimacy. As a feminist myself, I know it is important to treat girls and women, their interests, ideas, and emotions, with seriousness and, as well, to attend to the politics of narrative interpretation — especially when popular (and, thus, widely consumed) texts are at issue.

Summing Up the Vampire as Romantic Lead

In an essay on the Goth sensibilities of the 20th century vampire hero as he evolved (away) from Stoker's evil Dracula, Nancy Gagnier calls this new vampire, "a tortured instance of the romantic antihero," and writes, "as

the twentieth century progresses, the focus is less on his evil nature and more on his romantic allure” (293 and 303). Gagnier argues that, by the end of the 20th century, Goth subculture had taken on some of Stoker’s aesthetic for Dracula — the nails and fangs and deep, basic colors — but the ethos of his *victims*, “... a private, underground affair, fraught with experiences of death, madness... and an overwhelming eroticism” (303). Through the first decade of the 21st century, as the style and substance of Goth and other subcultures have been diluted, mainstreamed, and commercialized, the evolution of the vampire from evil undead to tortured antihero has emerged into the lucrative light of the morally upstanding, terribly good-looking, romantic lead.

These vampire boyfriends are literary “bad boys” in some ways, but they are also extremely successful; these are not the scruffily alluring boys from across the railroad tracks. These are sophisticated men who tend to live in mansions and tricked-out urban lofts and drive fast, shiny vehicles. Such socioeconomic privilege augments their supreme masculine dominance, along with their physical prowess, fighting skills, chivalrous manners, and eternal, gorgeous youth. Far from godless, Tanya Huff’s vampire Henry Fitzroy is a devout Catholic, and some have argued that Edward Cullen seems to stand in as a member of the Mormon priesthood (see Granger and Shaw). These vampires are idealized leading men, and they are more manly than mere men could be or, perhaps, than we would want real men to be. This is evident as the female protagonists of these stories repeatedly choose vampire boyfriends over human ones. The vampire private detective Mick St. John of the television series *Moonlight* demonstrates this each time he rushes in to rescue the winsome reporter Beth. The strength of his love for her shows in his ability to bare fangs and leap enormous distances, unlike her human district attorney boyfriend, who can only lecture and prosecute. Ultimately, Beth chooses Mick.

In her book *Stuffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*, Susan Faludi comments on the unease that accompanies rapidly changing gender roles, especially for men, as the many opportunities opened up by such change can be eclipsed by instability and uncertainty. Despite new ways to engage with fatherhood, sexuality, and emotions — which many men hail, as Michael Kimmel reminds us, as expansive and liberating — some men find that the lack of a clear masculine path can impede their self-concept and their rela-

tionships. Such instability is resolved in vampire romances because most of these men grew up long ago. They hearken, in their speech and habits, to a moment into which we now, with hindsight, might project a certain comfort with stable, lucid gender roles. However, these stories primarily comprise fantasies *for female readers*, and the vampire boyfriends in them do grow and evolve. Again, Joss Whedon's vampire boyfriends are notable for the heroic efforts they make to continually learn and grow throughout their undeaths, particularly with respect to women. But Edward Cullen, too, slowly learns from his mistakes, alters his own notion of what a good man should be, and develops personally, at times doing so while most other characters in the books seem to be regressing. The issue most at stake in these stories, then, is not the uneasy instability of changing *masculinity* but of changing *femininity*.

In *The Silver Kiss*, Zoë responds intensely to her first kiss with Simon, and she is unsettled by her response.

She had never enjoyed a kiss like that before. She climbed up beside him on the couch, but *embarrassed by her desire to be kissed*, she found she couldn't look at him directly. She absently brushed her mouth, and it left a smear of blood on her hand. He leaned to her and gently licked her lip. She felt like she was melting, but he shivered as if he were cold. *She pulled back, afraid of her response.* (102, emphasis added)

The female protagonists in these stories are caught in a tight spot. They are enjoying the typically masculine pursuit of specularly — spying, sneaking glances, and relishing the gazing upon their beautiful vampire boyfriends — and they are making their transgressive desires known, whether that constitutes desiring the vampire or desiring to be the vampire. At the same time, they seem to need to be morally upright, self-sacrificing, and fundamentally “good.” Raven's scrappy impulsiveness in the *Vampire Kisses* books is novel and appealing, given this, but even she needs to constantly defer to her vampire boyfriend's better judgment, be rescued by him, or simply feel satisfied with their chaste relationship. Many of these romances are chaste, or the women in them — Bella, Raven, Zoë, Poppy, Buffy with Angel though not with Spike — come to them without prior sexual experience, as “good girls.” The human female leads in these stories love their vampire boyfriends *despite* the mansions and fancy cars, as Bella declares to Jacob in *Eclipse*. As she puts it, she loves Edward simply for his de-

gency and would much prefer that he had less wealth so that they could be more equal (Meyer, *Eclipse* 110). Regardless, Bella and many of the other human girlfriends can avail themselves of those material perquisites *and* stay morally pure through their affiliations with these vampire men.

They can have the satisfaction and security of wealth without the inconvenience of any unfeminine greed or ambition. Of course, another casualty of rapidly changing gender roles is the confusion and disappointment many women feel as they reach professional plateaus and find there is no fairy tale knight in shining armor to offset the difficulties of their daily work lives. Instead, in fact, the mass media offer up such idiotic, anti-feminist, bogeyman warnings as the Oscar curse that apparently drives the male partners of successful actresses to cheat egregiously. Many people would agree with me that equal partnerships of all gender configurations are the most desirable, but they are also always untested ground, by their nature requiring the suspension of presuppositions.

Vampire boyfriends, on the other hand, offer us known territory and the reliability of men with vast amounts of experience to hone their principles and actions. They are immensely romantic, laying out decadent picnics they sometimes cannot eat and remembering even minor anniversaries. They are wealthy and influential alpha men, earning the respect of other men as well as the desire of other women, which, however, never interests them. And, they are also *benevolently* paternal — whether this is Edward rocking Bella in his lap, Alexander helping Raven with her homework, or Mick first meeting Beth when he rescues her as a young girl — though never lecherous.

Vampire boyfriends are complex instantiations of every positive aspect of masculine privilege, without personifying those more threatening facets of hyper-masculinity — the violence or the uncontrolled sexuality. The great popularity of this genre suggests that many female readers are seeking certainty and protection and to maximize their options as women without curtailing feminine pleasures, a desire that is definitely worth acknowledging and addressing. The actual embodiment of such a fraught blend of characteristics, though, would be unwieldy, overbearing, and potentially explosive. We know very well that no human man *could* emulate a vampire boyfriend, but I would argue, too, that no human man *should*.

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Notes

¹In particular, this paper examines those romances between vampire men and human women or girls rather than stories featuring the opposite configuration. I focus on the former type both because such stories are far more common and because my research finds the gender characterizations to be more consistent from author to author when the vampire is male and the human protagonist is female. While there is a rich subgenre of human-vampire romances featuring gay or otherwise queer partnerships — Poppy Z. Brite's books provide an obvious example — this subgenre has not (yet) achieved the sort of mass market, young adult niche that the fictions addressed in this paper have.

²I use "postmodern" here to refer to the contemporary era — following the two world wars, the rapid (though incomplete) decolonization of the late 40's, 50's, and 60's, and the increasing shift from an economy based on industrialization to one based on finance and service. This era is strongly marked by very rapidly evolving communication technologies and by the pervasive awareness that mass arsenals of nuclear weapons threaten the existence of viable life on this planet. This era is significant to this paper both for those qualities and because it has witnessed the rise of modern American feminism and has been a time of fluctuating gender roles and sexual expectations. "Postmodernism" is often used to broadly refer to poststructuralist theory or its concomitant social liberation movements, but such sloppy conflation generally does a disservice to both concepts.

³Certainly, there are popular representations of lesbianism in vampire fiction — such as the 1983 film *The Hunger* and the 1872 story *Carmilla* — but the current rash of vampire romance straddles the genres of fantasy, not horror, and mainstream romances and tends to focus on the heterosexual interests and experiences of young women. In my interviews with fans of these stories, however, I found that

gay, male readers often identify with the protagonist, especially of the most popular novels. The vampiric lover is generally described in much finer detail than is she, so many readers feel invited to take her perspective, experiencing the text as the desirer and desired of the vampire boyfriend.

⁴Interestingly, *The Silver Kiss* was recently reissued with a *Twilight* style cover to appeal to Meyer's fans, although Klause's book precedes Meyer's series by 15 years.

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