Vampires Are Real

AN EVOLUTIONARY VIEW OF THE TWILIGHT SAGA

Books and Films Under Review

Twilight

New Moon

Twilight
directed by Catherine Hardwicke, 2008.

New Moon
directed by Chris Weitz, 2009.

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If the female dares to wander far away or is actually near other males, he rushes to her and gives her a neck bite. . . . And now something remarkable happens. Instead of running away from the attacker, like any “sensible” animal, the female presses herself screaming against the ground or runs straight into the jaws of the attacking male. After the bite she follows close behind him . . . and begins to groom him.¹

And so we discover from this description of the Hamadryas baboon that vampires are not the only hominoid in which the male keeps the female close to him by sinking his canines into her neck. Could it be that legends of vampires are based at least partly on an archetypal pattern of sexual behavior, deeply rooted in our ancestral line? Our enduring fascination with vampire stories might become more intelligible if we ask how these stories blend fact and fantasy.

Mathias Clasen builds a good case for understanding beastly monsters in horror stories as echoes of the predators from our evolutionary past.² Yet one of the lingering mysteries of this genre concerns the prevalence of what Clasen calls “hybrid horrors”: creatures like vampires and werewolves who possess characteristics of both animals and humans. Clasen invokes a cognitive theory to explain the prevalence of hybridized monsters. He suggests
that creatures who cross the boundaries between animals and humans are more likely to attract our attention. I am going to propose a slightly different explanation for our fascination with vampires: that all of us are literally animal/human hybrids—civilized humans with vestiges of a more beastly ancestry.

Human canine teeth are vestigial remnants from an era in which our male ancestors—like the modern-day Hamadryas—used their fang-like teeth to threaten and compete with each other for females. Even though the canines of modern humans have undergone a great reduction in size, the root of the canine has not shrunk proportionally—a reminder of how large our ancestors’ canines used to be. And, despite the reduction of the canines over millions of years, these teeth still often protrude beyond the neighboring incisor and bicuspid. This fang-like protrusion is usually more pronounced in males than in females. These physical vestiges, together with the homologous biting behavior in other primates, suggest that our male ancestors bit our female ancestors on the neck. Could vampire legends be based on some kind of ancestral memory?

The reader might legitimately ask, “What about female vampires?” Indeed, vampires of both sexes exist, and in real-life primates (both human and nonhuman) females occasionally bite males on the neck, especially in the throes of sexual passion. Vestiges of this behavior can be seen in lovers who leave bruises called “hickies” on each other’s necks through vigorous sucking. While acknowledging neck biting in both sexes, we must also recognize a sexual dimorphism in both the larger canines and the greater incidence of biting in male primates.

Even if we understand that a small remnant of our more beastly ancestry lives on in the canine teeth of modern males, this hardly explains the enormous popularity of vampire “dark romance,” exemplified by the recent Twilight books and movies. It is something of a puzzle as to why so many young women would be attracted to a hero who is half monster. (Over one hundred million copies of the Twilight novels have sold worldwide, and, while exact statistics are difficult to come by, it is safe to say that the majority of author Stephenie Meyer’s audience is female.) To help explain the Twilight phenomenon, I will share my personal experiences with the movies and books and suggest how evolutionary ideas can shed light on the dark romance.

Looking for entertainment during the holiday break in 2008, I decided to watch the original Twilight movie in the theater. Aware that the primary audience for the movie was mainly female teens and young adults, I was surprised by the way I was drawn into the movie. “Something primordial is going on here,” I thought. “This film must be striking chords that appeal to my evolved nature.” I made a mental note to sit down and figure out what was going on someday, and here I am, just over a year later, seeking to unravel this mystery. On reflection, I noticed three dramatic contrasts in the movie that captured my attention. The striking contrast of physical environments at the beginning of Twilight undoubtedly helped to draw me in. The story opens in the desolate Arizona desert, an environment inhospitable to life in general. Modern humans have found ways to barely survive in deserts, but that is not where we come from and not where we belong. To our great relief, the heroine, Bella, is leaving this arid wasteland for the Olympic Peninsula of Washington State, where about twelve feet of rain falls each year. While the more-or-less constant rain and cloud cover in Forks, Washington may have been meant as an external reflection of Bella’s depression, the rain
supports a spectacularly green forest and rich meadows. This environment, teeming with life, is appealing to the modern eye because it bears resemblance to our ancestral environment. E. O. Wilson argues that our brains are programmed to expect to be surrounded by lush greenery: “People can grow up with the outward appearance of normality in an environment largely stripped of plants and animals, in the same way that passable looking monkeys can be raised in laboratory cages and cattle fattened in feeding bins. . . . Yet something vitally important would be missing, not merely the knowledge and pleasure that can be imagined and might have been, but a wide array of experiences that the human brain is peculiarly equipped to receive.”

After the contrast of the barrenness of the Arizona desert and the greenness of the Olympic forest, the next striking contrast that grabbed my attention was the poverty and plainness of most of the people in Forks versus the class and wealth of the vampire Cullen family. Whereas Bella drives a run-down pickup truck to school, the Cullens arrive in a snazzy Volvo. Many movie viewers have indicated that one of the most memorable scenes in the movie is that in which the Cullens make their grand entrance into the school cafeteria. Their clothing, their grooming, their stature—everything exudes refinement and style. But the scene that really took my breath away was that in which we enter the Cullens’ gorgeous house. Thoroughly contemporary, with great open spaces, white walls adorned with artwork, light wood floors and fixtures, and massive windows, the house possesses dramatic brightness, elegance, and sophistication. It is nestled among giant trees of the dark, primeval forest, visible through the numerous windows. The house must seem all the more spectacular to Bella, who is living in a simple American Craftsman bungalow in town with her father. If we could ask the fictional Bella if she were attracted to the opulence of the Cullen family, she might deny that this had anything to do with her love for Edward Cullen. In fact, in the beginning of the New Moon novel, Bella explicitly denies any interest in his wealth—after going on and on about it. Yet we know from countless studies in evolutionary psychology that money matters to women, whether they are consciously aware of this or not. In ancestral environments, women no doubt varied in the degree of attention they gave to a prospective mate’s ability to provide for her and her future children. Women who took more care in this respect were more likely to leave descendants to whom they transmitted their own dispositions in selecting mates who were good providers.

The third contrast that caught my attention was the difference between the ordinary actions of the mortals of Forks and the demonstrations of extraordinary physical abilities by the Cullens. Edward first demonstrates his extraordinary abilities when he moves faster than the eye can follow to prevent a skidding vehicle from crushing Bella in the school parking lot. Even more dramatic, however, is the moment in which Edward hoists Bella onto his back, scampers up a giant tree, and leaps—practically flying—from tree to tree, to the top of the forest canopy. Bella gasps and says, “This isn’t real. This kind of stuff just doesn’t exist.” Edward replies, “It does in my world.” Now, haven’t we all dreamed that we are super-strong and able to fly? Where do these dreams come from?

Contrary to what Freud and most other dream analysts would argue, I would suggest that these dreams have nothing to do with symbolic meaning. Rather, these are ancestral memories of a time when we were able to fly through the trees and perform great feats of strength. (Reports that chimpanzees are five times stronger than humans are probably exaggerated, but, pound-for-pound, arboreal simians are much stronger than we are.) In addition to a man’s ability to provide for his mate, a man’s ability to protect her is another attractive quality. Edward repeatedly tells Bella how he wants to protect her. And what better protector could we wish for than someone with Superman-like abilities? There is only one problem, though. Edward also tells Bella that he is a danger to her, that she would be safer if she did not associate with him at all. You see, he’s never met a woman whose blood he wants to drink more than Bella’s. Her scent is irresistible to him. He calls her “my own personal brand of heroin.” So why does she want to stay with him?

We could just say that her attraction to him is irrational and leave it at that. But this is an issue that ought to pique our curiosity because it represents a widespread puzzle: Why are women so often attracted to dark, brooding bad boys? Especially when sweet, considerate young men are
available and interested in them? Many other young men have expressed an interest in Bella, including the nice and completely normal Mike from high school and Jacob, the strong but gentle Native American from the Quileute tribe. (We do not know that he is a werewolf until the second installment of the saga, *New Moon.*).

As a relatively nice guy who has mostly only fantasized about being a bad boy, I have been as mystified as other nice guys about the appeal of dark and dangerous men. One evolutionary explanation—incomplete, to my mind—is the “sexy son hypothesis.” Unreliable rogues who are nonetheless magnetically attractive to women may impregnate them and quickly move on, but if a woman has a son by the rogue, the son will grow up to be as magnetically attractive as his father, helping to spread his mother’s genes when he sires many children some day. Okay, fine. I understand the almost syllogistic logic of being attracted to someone who attracts many women and the way this helps a woman to perpetuate her genes, but why do these attractive men have to have nasty, hyper-masculine traits like being uncommunicative, taking physical risks, and being prone to physical violence?

Another evolutionary idea helps here. Perhaps there is just a trade-off when a woman greatly needs a man who will protect her. Her best protector cannot be a sweet, gentle guy; he has to be a dangerous man with the instincts and physical abilities that enable him to protect her from other dangers. And in the *Twilight* movies, there are plenty of physical dangers, including bad vampires who want to kill Bella.

But I was convinced that there was still something more going on in Bella’s attraction to Edward, and her preference for him over Jacob, who is much nicer and friendlier—at least when he is in human form. I had a hunch. Could it be that women believe that a bad boy can harness his intense, primitive animal energy and transform it into a force for good? This idea sounded Jungian—a taming of the shadow archetype, or an alchemical transmutation of base instinct into higher spiritual energy. This fanciful idea might have no basis in scientific fact, but maybe it is something
that women believe, nonetheless. Perhaps they even believe that they can help the dark soul with his transformation. This idea is supported by a large-scale study of Harlequin romances by Maryanne Fisher. She found that while heroines rarely exhibit significant character development in the novel, the hero reliably changes from a rogue (often with hidden positive qualities) into a reliable, caring man willing to commit to a long-term relationship.5

I sought confirmation of the Fisher thesis by consulting an expert on the Twilight series—my daughter-in-law. Carrie has read all of the books multiple times, seen the movies, and participated in extensive discussions of the series with other fans on the Twilight message boards. Without prompting, she told me that the most attractive aspect of Edward and his family is their refusal to engage in the typical behavior of vampires. Instead of taking many sexual partners and killing people, they intentionally choose to do good. Carlisle, the head of the family, is especially admirable because he chooses to become a doctor, saving rather than taking lives. It is fine that Edward is physically beautiful, strong, and wealthy, but what makes him a real hero is the battle he fights (and wins) every day with his animal impulses.

I had not planned on reading the two Twilight novels that formed the basis of the released movies before writing this review, but Carrie convinced me that I must read them because they are more enjoyable than the movies. Incredulous at first because I had really enjoyed the movies, I took her suggestion and was glad that I did. Undistracted by the action and special effects in the movies, I became more aware of the psychological dynamics among characters. In particular, I noticed several classic female relationship concerns that have been described by evolutionary psychologists: choice, long-term commitment, and desertion. In the books, you can better feel the struggle that Bella experiences as she chooses the difficult Edward from among her suitors. This is the perennial evolutionary problem for women, for they are the ones who choose mates, regardless of what men might think. And, at some level, all men really are vampires (or werewolves, or some kind of monster), so every Bella in the world can only hope that she makes the right choice, choosing a man whose positive qualities will in the end outweigh his dark qualities. In the fictional Bella’s case, though, the consequences of her choices are far more profound. Like most women, Bella desires a long-term romantic relationship. So convinced is Bella of her undying love for Edward that she wants him to transform her into one of the undead so that they can be together for the longest possible relationship: an eternal one. Edward resists, claiming that losing her soul was too high a price. But Bella wonders, “Was this fixation with keeping me human really about my soul, or was it because he didn’t want me around this long” (New Moon, 518)? All women wonder if they have what it takes to keep men in a committed relationship; in Bella’s case she agonizes over whether she has anything that can keep Edward interested in her for all eternity. “I don’t trust myself to be ... enough. To deserve you. There’s nothing about me that could hold you” (New Moon, 523).

The polar opposite of commitment is desertion. According to some evolutionary psychologists, a woman’s greatest fear in a relationship is desertion. Desertion for our female ancestors was a devastating problem, for if you lost your mate, you lost your protection and provision. At the end of Twilight, Bella is nearly killed by a vampire due to her association with the Cullens. Consequently, at the beginning of New Moon, Edward and his family leave Forks, believing Bella will be safer. The remainder of the novel describes Bella’s reactions to this desertion. First there is a period of severe depression and withdrawal. Her memories become fuzzy and she wonders if her experiences were real. Then she discovers that when she approaches a group of dangerous men on a dark street, she hears Edward’s voice as clearly as if he were really there. In order to keep hearing his voice, she engages in a series of dangerous activities: riding a motorcycle, walking alone in the woods where vampires are killing people, and jumping off a cliff into the ocean. A distorted account of the cliff jump leads Edward to believe that Bella has committed suicide, and he seeks a way to end his own existence. The climax of the story concerns whether Bella can prevent a repeat of Romeo and Juliet.

Throughout New Moon, Bella compares her choices to those faced by Juliet. “If Romeo was really gone, would it have mattered whether or not Juliet had taken Paris up
on his offer” (New Moon, 371)? Again, Bella is struggling with her choice between the dangerous, remote Edward and the supportive, more available Jacob, whom she calls “a safe harbor” (375). Somehow, she fails to realize that this may be a false choice. On the surface, Jacob is more often sunny and upbeat while Edward is dark and brooding, but werewolves are not really safer than vampires. In fact, the leader of Jacob’s clan once lost his temper and accidentally clawed his human mate’s face. All men are beasts.

Despite the parallels between New Moon and Romeo and Juliet, perhaps the Twilight saga is more accurately seen as one more retelling of the classic story of Beauty and the Beast. (I think it is more than coincidental that Bella’s name is remarkably close to the name of the heroine in the Disney movie, Belle.) A common psychological interpretation of Beauty and the Beast is that men are savage animals until redeemed and civilized by the love of a young woman. But there are some interesting twists on this theme in the Twilight version of the story. Whereas the Beast is ugly on the outside but kind on the inside, Edward is extraordinarily beautiful on the outside but bloodthirsty on the inside. Also, Edward, like actual human males, is more realistically complex than the Beast. He possesses both savage and kindly impulses. At the same time, Stephenie Meyer might be painting an unrealistically optimistic picture of man’s dual nature. As scary and dark as Edward is, clearly he would never physically harm Bella. Sadly, in real life, men sometimes do harm women. Also, unlike the typical man (as well as the typical vampire), Edward insists on cuddling without sex. In this respect, Twilight is idealized fiction: Bella can possess the ultimately intense, passionate, dangerous male—a vampire—but one who is completely safe. And this may be a dangerous message for real women.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

2. Clasen, “The Horror!”
4. Wilson, Biophilia, 118.