

Revamping The Gaze:
How *Twilight* Hosts the Conditions for Female Spectatorship

by
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Abstract

This thesis seeks to understand how narrative pleasure operates in romance novels in order to better understand how women's consumption of romantic literature affects their personhood. The primary text examined in this project is the enduringly popular *Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer. First published in 2005, it is the first in Meyer's four-book *Twilight* series, as well as the basis not only for a collection of five movies, but also for countless spinoffs, responses, and fanfictions. *Twilight* is thus significant for its great popularity among young women, influence on popular culture, and lasting influence on the female psyche. This thesis is a feminist pursuit that centers female agency, empowerment, and happiness. It has an interest in the lived experiences of women influenced by the texts they consume. It proposes that we can build a theory of women readers' deep psychological attachment to *Twilight* by examining closely the dynamics of looking and being looked at, both within and around the text. In doing so, I draw on psychoanalytic theory, feminist film theory, feminist reader-response theory, and feminist narratology.

By focusing on looking and being looked at in *Twilight*, this thesis takes up the challenge of applying Laura Mulvey's critical film theory of the male gaze to literature. Mulvey concludes that visual pleasure is reserved for the male spectator alone, and consequently, that cinematography is constructed for and by the patriarchy. However, through my close reading of key scenes from *Twilight*, I demonstrate that literary texts distribute the pleasures and powers of looking differently. This literary context ultimately allows at once for an empowering, pleasurable experience for the object of the gaze, and the possibility of a female spectator.

This thesis, moreover, analyzes the gaze not only in its capacity to connect characters within a novel, but also as a function that connects reader and text, and connects reader to self. I make an argument that through visual recognition by another, the gaze serves a reflective role, mirroring self-image to aid in the construction of the self and personal identity. I further argue that such a process allows for identification with a character that likewise influences the reader's self-consciousness and experience.

For example, central to the novel is the amorous relationship between Isabella Swan and Edward Cullen. A close reading of the novel reveals the gaze to be foundational to this relationship and facilitatory of connection inside the book and out. Using Sara K. Day's concept of narrative intimacy as a lens, I demonstrate how Bella relates to her reader, and how a reader in return is invited to identify with Bella. Narrative intimacy and the gaze compliment each other, joining spectatorship theory with reader-response criticism to produce a transcendental, empowering, and enjoyable experience for the female reader.

In my concluding chapter, I pivot from close readings of *Twilight* and engagement with psychoanalytic, feminist, and literary theory, towards reception studies. I use selected fan responses to *Twilight* as evidence of the theory I have developed.

Keywords: spectatorship, gaze, reader-response, scopophilia, identification

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Short Titles

TW; Meyer, Stephenie. *Twilight*. New York; Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2005.

VP; Mulvey, Laura “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” In *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B. Leitch, William E. Cain, Laurie A. Finke, and John McGowan, 1952–1965. New York; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018.

RLG; Day, Sara K. *Reading Like a Girl: Narrative Intimacy in Contemporary American Young Adult Literature*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013.

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Introduction

We have not yet heard enough, if anything, about the female gaze.

-Maggie Nelson, *Bluets*¹

The sensation of being watched is so palpable that some claim to have an inexplicable sixth sense for detecting the gaze of another. Neurological researchers have confirmed that this is no imagined feeling and can be explained by a complex system of neuroreceptors in the brain that detect the gaze of another.² While the brain is skilled at gaze detection, the eyes are remarkable at gaze signaling, with a unique appearance that makes it especially easy for others to discern the direction of their gaze. With a bright and large macula, the human eye has a distinct macula-to-pupil (or white to black) ratio, which researchers have found to be “an adaptation to enhance the gaze signal,” whereas the converse ratio in other animals serves to camouflage the gaze.³ While camouflaged eyes are meant to deflect attention, high contrast, noticeable eyes are meant to attract it. This difference is notable because it allows humans the “ability to communicate using gaze signals,” marking the human

¹ Maggie Nelson, *Bluets* (Seattle, WA: Wave Books, 2009), 23.

² David Perrett *et al*, “Visual Cells in the Temporal Cortex Sensitive to Face View and Gaze Direction,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London*, (January 1985): 293.

³ Hiromi Kobayashi and Shiro Kohshima, “Unique Morphology of the Human Eye,” *Journal of Human Evolution*, (May 2001): 419.

gaze with a primarily social rather than survival based function.⁴ Researchers have found that the gaze is not merely an auxiliary component of communication but is central to it, determining that “Making eye contact is the most powerful mode of establishing a communicative link between humans.”⁵ If human biology provides for advanced gaze signaling and detection to further social interaction, then spectatorship, at its core, becomes an activity of human connection.

The gaze’s function as a method of interpersonal connection is the primary interest of this thesis. When humanities scholars discuss the gaze, they typically do so in the context of film and spectatorship. “Spectatorship” is a term I will be borrowing from film theory, which references the activity of viewing a film, or viewing anything—or anybody, for that matter. Laura Mulvey, a feminist theorist, has had an influential voice in the study of spectatorship, framing the act in terms of power and introducing the “male gaze” that is deeply saturated with it. Mulvey argues that due to the nature of the male gaze and the unbalanced power dynamic inherent to spectatorship, visual pleasure is reserved for the male spectator alone and always reinforces the patriarchy. According to this conclusion, women are either denied the pleasure and power that the position of spectator affords, or they must be subjected to the domineering gaze of another. In other words, they cannot happily look, nor be

⁴ Kobayashi and Kohshima, “Unique Morphology,” 419.

⁵ Teresa Farroni *et al*, “Eye Contact detection in Humans from Birth,” *National Academy of Sciences*, (March 2002): 2602.

looked at. Surely, there must be a way out of this restrictive gaze relationship.⁶ Under what conditions might a gaze exist in a manner that could be empowering and pleasurable for a woman? Perhaps if the power dynamic was leveled, and the gaze was not rotten with patriarchy, such a gaze could exist.

Although Mulvey's theory was originally intended for film, it can also serve as a foundational and critical lens to understand the function of the gaze in different types of media. I suggest here that we examine the gaze in a new context, in order to find the proper conditions for a different gaze, a female one, even an empowering one. I am interested in what can be revealed about the gaze if we locate it in literature, rather than cinema, and define it by its potential to connect us. If I am to study connection in literature, I must engage with reader-response theories, which address the reader-text relationship. I see the female gaze as a literary device, facilitating connection both inside the novel and out. It encourages connection between the characters in the narrative, as well as between the characters and the reader. By reaching beyond the page and touching the reader, the gaze's connective effects join the study of spectatorship with the study of reader-response. Writing many decades ago, Patrocinio Schweickart declared that "reader-response criticism needs feminist

⁶ While Mulvey's theory has been dominant, there have been feminist scholars who, like me, seek to challenge her theory and open up a space for the female spectator. See for example, Miriam Hansen, "Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification: Valentino and Female Spectatorship," *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, vol. 58 (2018): 6-32.

criticism.”⁷ In writing this thesis, I see my work filling this need in our scholarship that Schweickart astutely diagnosed. By linking these two concepts and studying the gaze in a new, literary context, the function, nature, and consequently, effect of the gaze is changed.

This different, female gaze that I speak of exists, unnoticed by major scholars on the topic, nestled between the pages of contemporary romance novels. Romance is a genre famously enjoyed by women and written for an intended female audience.⁸ It is one of the most read genres, with over 51 million readers in North America alone.⁹ Furthermore, as determined by the genre, romance plots are necessarily defined by courtship and romantic pursuit.¹⁰ Because these novels are thematically concerned with love and desire and are enjoyed almost exclusively by women, I view the romantic novel as a space for female pleasure. But what specifically is it about these novels that make them so popular and enjoyable to women? Why does heterosexual romance, when written out on paper, become so appealing to women, when we know romance itself is enjoyed by both men and women? It is these questions that guide my interest in female readers’ experience of contemporary young adult romance novels

⁷ Patrocinio P. Schweickart, “Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading” in *Feminisms, an Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Robyn Warhol and Diane Herndl (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 613.

⁸ Jenni M. Simon, *Consuming Agency and Desire in Romance* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 27.

⁹ Ramsdell, Kristin. "The Demographics of Love." *Library Journal*, February 15, 2003, 124. <https://link-gale-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/apps/doc/A98468868/AONE?u=umuser&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=0ee3cefa>.

¹⁰ Pamela Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 19.

when that experience is defined by spectatorship. In this thesis, I argue that spectatorship, when present in a literary form, is able to subvert the oppressive nature it has in other types of media, in a way that heightens the possibility for identification and consequently amplifies the pleasure the female reader derives from its reading. A liberated gaze frees the female spectator, granting her the pleasure the male gaze denies her. My task in this thesis is to prove the presence of such a gaze and convince you, my reader, how, when active in literature, this gaze evades the negative power structure that Mulvey says it must occupy. This is my argument for the female gaze, and the explanation I offer for the popularity of romance novels among women. This pursuit is important for what it can reveal about the way women experience pleasure, and the relationship between woman and text. It is a feminist undertaking to understand the ways in which literature shapes the female concept of romance, and ultimately herself. This is an exploration of female desire, female agency, and the construction of the female herself.

I must acknowledge that my discourse on the topic of gender and sexuality throughout this thesis is both binary and generalizing in a way that does not well account for the nuance and room for difference that such topics demand. This is regrettable, but I fear it must be done in order to simplify a complex argument. While I understand gender as a social category that exists on a spectrum, the theorists that I'm engaging with, who are typically feminists from the 1980's and 1990's, did not

always understand the topic in such a way in their time. In order to engage most directly with their arguments, my own argument at times will treat gender in a more binary and rigid way than I believe accurate. Moreover, my presentation of heterosexual romance may seem rather reductive or prescriptively cisgender. This is because the theories that I am engaging with are interested in the power dynamic that exists specifically within a male-female relationship, and it is within this dynamic that the theory of gender-difference, which my argument hinges upon, exists. To preface “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey explained that her argument “takes as a starting point the way film reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle.”¹¹ I chose to write about contemporary romance novels for the same reason. I view the genre as a sort of playground for heteronormativity to be presented and explored, and consequently as a prime site to analyze the dynamic that is created, but which consequently calls for language that is heteronormative. I trust that a reader will understand the fluid nature of gender and sexuality and agree with me that the arguments I make in this thesis can be flexible when such nuance is considered.

¹¹ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch *et al.* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), 1954. Subsequent references to this text will be shortened to parenthetical in-text citations formatted as (VP, page #).

Furthermore, I recognize my discussion of men and women, particularly as either oppressive or oppressed, to be a generalization that is not reflective of individuals. While not every man is the way I describe, nor is every woman, I will speak of them in the ways that I do because we are all in some way or another influenced by “the unconscious of patriarchal society” and subject to its systemic, gender-related effects (VP, 1954). Here I turn to Schweickart and her work on feminist reader-response to understand how we might treat readers and texts within such a society. In “Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading,” she explains how “the feminist story stresses that patriarchal constructs have objective as well as subjective reality; they are inside and outside the text, inside and outside the reader.”¹² Schweickart’s words illuminate the way that the patriarchy’s effects permeate a text and reader without conscious invitation, engagement, or even resonance with such a construct. I bring your attention to this to make the point that when I make mention of oppression, power-imbalances, and other symptoms of the patriarchy, I do so to critique an underlying social and cultural problem, not in a manner that is meant to implicate the morals or intentions of individuals, men, or women. With this said, I implore understanding for the generalization my argument necessitates.

¹² Schwickart, “Reading Ourselves,” 624.

This thesis will be divided into four chapters. The first chapter is intended to lay a preliminary theoretical substructure for the arguments I will make throughout this piece, and to begin those arguments. These will include theories from literary criticism, psychoanalysis, and feminist studies. Then I will briefly reflect on their relevance to my own argument. Some of the theories, like those of reader-response, directly speak to my topic, but others I will need to extrapolate a bit in order to make them applicable. In the first chapter I will explain how I will go about that and why I see them to be applicable when they were not originally intended to be so. Next, I will intervene in the conversation, which will both take the form of correcting flaws that I see in the arguments and in some way altering the theories to allow their application to my subject material.

In the second chapter of this thesis, I will perform a close reading of my primary text, *Twilight* (2005) by Stephenie Meyer,¹³ in order to illustrate how the theory of the first chapter practically manifests in literature. While there are four novels in the saga, I will primarily focus on the first novel, *Twilight*. *Twilight* is an exemplary novel for my thesis because it is saturated with spectatorship, as gazing serves a dominant role in the development of the central couple's romantic relationship. Moreover, *Twilight* has been immensely popular among young women. In this thesis, I connect the presence of spectatorship in a romantic context with high

¹³ Stephenie Meyer, *Twilight* (Boston, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2005). Subsequent references to this text will be shortened to parenthetical in-text citations formatted as (*TW*, page#).

enjoyment for women, which renders *Twilight* an ideal exemplary novel. I have decided to explore this experience in young adult novels because they are read by a maturing generation and consequently interact with malleable minds that use social and cultural information to formulate their ideas of the world. *Twilight* is part of this maturation process for many young girls, so understanding the ideas that it spreads concerning love, identity, and self-worth is critical to understanding the developing generation. Furthermore, the young readers of *Twilight* are notably female and are reading a book about romance that they, as we will see from statistics and fan-testimony, immensely enjoy. As feminist scholar Jenni Simon reasons, in a patriarchal society where “social definitions of pleasure and enjoyment are decidedly masculine,”¹⁴ spaces that allow for distinctly feminine pleasure and enjoyment serve to work against that normative construct. In this regard, female pleasure itself is a radical, feminist notion.

However, there is more to *Twilight* than simple female enjoyment.¹⁵ Simon further points out that in romance novels, “the woman’s desire is forefront,” which

¹⁴ Jenni M. Simon, *Consuming Agency and Desire in Romance: Stories of Love, Laughter, and Empowerment* (Lanham: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2017), 30.

¹⁵ I acknowledge that within the field of popular culture and literary studies, there has been some feminist scholarship on the *Twilight* novels. However, it is almost exclusively focused on the series’ genre-welding of romance with horror and gothic fiction. While not denying the significance of these approaches, my approach here focuses on the more fundamental narrative relations in and around the novel. For examples of vampire-focused scholarship on the *Twilight* Series, see Lydia Kokkola, “Virtuous Vampires and Voluptuous Vamps: Romance Conventions Reconsidered in Stephenie Meyer’s ‘Twilight’ Series,” *Children’s Literature in Education: An International Quarterly* vol. 42, Issue 2 (2011): 165-179; June Pullium, “Gothic, Romantic, or Just Sadomasochistic? Gender, and Manipulation in Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* Saga” in *21st Century Gothic: Great Gothic Novels since 2000*, ed Danel

we can understand to be precisely because of the strong presence of the female gaze.¹⁶ It is the female gaze that marks *Twilight* as feminist, not the content or themes of the novel itself. I do not pretend that *Twilight* is an intentionally feminist novel,¹⁷ but rather that the female gaze, as a literary device, has the potential to allow for a feminist connection to and experience of the text that can operate even within a novel that does not intentionally engage with feminist thinking.

Bella Swan herself is not going to lead us into fifth wave feminism. She is not a feminist superheroine, breaking the bonds of patriarchy. Rather, she represents a girl you might meet on the street, the type of woman you might encounter in your everyday life, even the type of woman you yourself might be. This doesn't render her "bad," or anti-feminist, but rather reflects how she is a product of her culture, of her society, just as we all are. But the way we read Bella, the way we see ourselves in her and her in us, the way we share a special connection with her through our shared experiences and identity is what makes *Twilight* a feminist project. It is the very act of feminine connection that empowers *Twilight* and empowers the female reader. It is

Oslon (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2011), 573-583; Anne Klaus and Stefanie Krüger, "Vampires without Fangs: The Amalgamation of Genre in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* Saga," *The Looking Glass: New Perspectives on Children's Literature*, vol. 15, n. 1, (April 2011).

<https://ojs.latrobe.edu.au/ojs/index.php/tlg/article/view/260>.

¹⁶ Simon, *Consuming Agency*, 31.

¹⁷ The plot of *Twilight* follows a typical, heteronormative love narrative of girl-needs-boy, boy-saves-girl that most romance plots are defined by. Furthermore, Bella Swan, the female protagonist, is certainly a figure of heteronormativity. She embodies many stereotypical and even subservient roles that women have traditionally played underneath a patriarchy. In these ways, *Twilight* may appear in contrast with mainstream feminist values.

finding that feminine empowerment within a patriarchal society that is the true resistance. Bella isn't going to overturn a systematic power imbalance, but through her we might quite literally "see" a space to do that someday. Through the process of close reading, I will examine in the second chapter how the female gaze operates in a capacity that forefronts female pleasure, drawing on the theory from the first chapter to understand the function of the gaze in *Twilight*, and how consequently, texts like *Twilight* serve as a locus for the creation of anti-patriarchal ideas and attitudes by empowering the female reader.

In the third chapter of this thesis, I will join spectatorship with reader-response theory in order to present the gaze as a pillar of reader-text connection. This chapter will be strongly informed by feminist literary criticism, namely concepts from Patrocinio Schweickart, Sara K. Day, and Alice de Lauretis. I will use these critics' arguments, which explain how a female reader connects with a text, to argue that the gaze in romantic novels furthers the connective potential in such novels.

The fourth and final chapter of this thesis will be dedicated to examining the gaze's effect on *Twilight's* readers off of the page. I am interested in what readers' reactions to the frequent spectatorship in the novel can reveal about the way they relate to the book. For a first-hand account of the novel's reception, I will investigate fan-based communities, fanfiction, and fan-authored book reviews. After some analysis, I will then conclude.

I intend for my work to function closely alongside that of Patrocínio Schweickart, as we, unified with other feminist scholars and critics, take on the “heartwarming task” of “recovering, articulating, and elaborating positive expressions of women’s point of view, of celebrating the survival of this point of view in spite of the formidable forces that have been ranged against it.”¹⁸ For my thesis, this means investigating the female gaze and all that it does for us both inside and outside of a text. In “Reading Ourselves,” Schweickart spoke of a “critical project” which prioritizes “the articulation of a model of reading that is centered on a female paradigm.”¹⁹ She reflected on this project, saying that “while it is still too early to present a full-blown theory, the dialogic aspect of the relationship between the feminist reader and the woman writer suggests the direction that such a theory might take.”²⁰ Now, almost 40 years later, I say that the time for such a project has come. Here I present my “full-blown theory,” an effort to articulate what exactly is going on between the female reader and her text, the female author and her reader, and the female gaze that connects the two women.

¹⁸ Schweickart, “Reading Ourselves,” 625.

¹⁹ Schweickart, “Reading Ourselves,” 626.

²⁰ Schweickart, “Reading Ourselves,” 626.

Chapter 1: Theories of Spectatorship

This book is about space, about language, and about death; it is about the act of seeing, the gaze.

-Michael Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*

In this chapter I will engage with various theories of spectatorship, mainly those of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Laura Mulvey. These theorists all make an argument about the function of the gaze, in some capacity, and its consequences. For my purposes, I am interested in the pleasure that Freud thinks the gaze brings, the possibility for identification that Lacan posits, and the way in which a spectator is affected by the interactions of these two products, according to Mulvey's thinking. I apply their theories within the context of literature to understand the function of the gaze in the contemporary romantic novel and argue that when applied to literature, the gaze becomes something empowering and enjoyable. To preface my close reading of *Twilight*, where I will examine the gaze's function in detail, I must first state my intervention in the conversation between these scholars and explain how their theories are readily applicable to literature. This section is dedicated to that project, and I begin with Freud.

Reading Feminism into Freud

Sigmund Freud created foundational theories on how the unconscious mind interacts with the conscious mind. In this thesis, I am interested in his notion of *Schaulust*, which translates to “scopophilia,” and its role in spectatorship. Freud’s study of spectatorship is concerned with the pleasure that the gaze produces. In his *Three Essays on Sexuality*, he identifies the impulse to look at others and to be seen by others as desires that manifest from a sexual instinct inherent to all humans. He argues that in turn, such gazing produces an erotic pleasure, which he calls scopophilia. This scopophilic desire can manifest either actively or passively. Actively, the drive would manifest as a desire to look at another being, to view them as an object, which process would produce some sort of erotic enjoyment for the spectator. Passively, the drive would manifest as a desire to be seen, which would likewise produce a sexual pleasure for the object of the gaze. This concept of scopophilia, of a pleasure specifically sexual in nature that the gaze produces, is central to the arguments I make of how the gaze functions in romantic novels because of the characteristic amorous plots that such novels are recognized by.

I am Seen, therefore I am

In his revisions of Freudian theory, Jacques Lacan is more interested in how the gaze produces consciousness, rather than sexual pleasure. His writings in “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic

Experience” posit the role of the gaze as unifying the subjective self with the real self. In this essay, he argues that an individual’s ego is created upon identification with their image, an image that is in some way more perfect than what they experience themselves to be. He proposes that as an infant, a child’s conception of its own identity is tied to that of its mother. As part of its development, the child experiences what Lacan calls the “mirror stage,” where, upon looking into a mirror, or “hold[ing] it in his gaze,” the child sees its own reflection, as the mirror “brings back an instantaneous aspect of the image.”²¹ This *imago*, or likeness, that the child sees of itself is one of a whole, more perfect self, which Lacan calls “the Ideal-I.”²² Through this process, the child at once realizes its own identity as autonomous, as it is not connected to the mother, and consequently the “otherness” of all other humans. In this way, the mirror stage functions “to establish a relation between the organism and its reality.”²³

In this developmental experience, the gaze is the link between the subjective self and reality, and is therefore the facilitator of identification. Embedded in Lacan’s theory is the assumption that an individual is unable to fully see themselves, and accordingly unable to accurately envisage themselves. Because of this, an individual

²¹ Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch *et al.* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), 1112.

²² Lacan, “Mirror,” 1112.

²³ Lacan, “Mirror,” 1114.

must then rely on a reflection of themselves in order to see their full and actual self through an image. In Lacan's mirror stage, this reflected image is literal: the infant comes to understand its being only through gazing at its reflection in a mirror.

If we take this argument, that our reality is confirmed only through our reflection, and apply it in a more figurative manner, the reflection can appear in another being. In this circumstance, a secondary person functions as the mirror reflecting our image back to us, their gaze the transmitter of our reality. Rather than seeing a visual image of ourselves reflected back, we see ourselves being seen, which reflects our objectivity. As the object of another's gaze, our realness is confirmed through our recognition by a secondary party. A more concise arrangement of the argument here is that "I am seen, therefore I am," if I may play on the famous phrase. If we are unable to properly see ourselves and consequently unable to conceptualize ourselves, then by being seen, we know we exist. These theoretical mechanics behind the gaze partly explain the pleasure being looked at provides.

While Lacan was theorizing about an infantile development of consciousness, we can extrapolate his theory to later stages of life as well. If the foundational understanding of self is curated in relation to others through gazing, it is reasonable to assume that the gaze serves as a mediator between self-image and others throughout life as well. This abstracted application of the mirror stage can then be applied to literature to understand that spectatorship functions as a method of

identification for the characters in the novel. This is especially evident in the *Twilight* series, where Edward's gaze causes Bella to gain a matured self-consciousness. As we shall see in greater detail in Chapter 2, Edward is watchful of Bella and she frequently notices his gaze. Edward's supernatural nature causes Bella to question the world around her, but his heightened attention to her concurrently reinforces her own existence. When Edward gazes at Bella, he reflects not only her existence back to her, but his opinion of her. Since he is in love with her, this opinion is generously benevolent and frequently expressed. Bella, in identifying with the image of herself that Edward reflects of her, identifies with a more perfect version of herself than she ordinarily experiences, effectively increasing her self-worth. This identification process is twofold because the reader of the novel relates to the character and so similarly experiences the spectatorship, which in turn inspires an affectionate self-image.

Contextualizing Mulvey

In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," feminist theorist Laura Mulvey studies the effects of spectatorship in the context of cinematography. In this essay, she draws on Freud's theory of scopophilia and Lacan's mirror stage to reveal how cinema is structured around a concept she calls the "male gaze" (VP, 1959). She argues that cinema combines both the pleasure associated with spectatorship and the

pleasure associated with identification by allowing a male spectator to look at objects of desire (women) on a screen, as well as providing him with figures to identify with (male protagonists), and experience a “more powerful ideal ego” (VP, 1960). Females in cinema are both objects of erotic desire for the spectators outside of the movie as well as the characters within; the male spectator receives pleasure from watching the female character, as well as through identifying with the male character who interacts with her. Scopophilia and the mirror stage, then, explain the enjoyment men gain from watching a film, and the gaze of the men both in and outside of the screen watching the women is what Mulvey calls the “male gaze.” In sum, cinema was created to appease the male ego.

This gaze is not innocent spectatorship but rather harmful in nature. It is characteristically negative and oppressive because of the castration anxiety perverting it and the power imbalance supporting it. According to Freud, gender-difference is constructed around something’s phallic-ness or lack of it. Men are clearly phallic, while women lack the phallus. In a world tainted by gender-difference, women’s identity revolves around their characteristic lack of a phallus which consequently causes a sort of “castration anxiety” in men when viewed because a woman can only signify the very thing she lacks. With this premise, Mulvey concludes that “ultimately, the meaning of woman is sexual difference,” and so her appearance,

or the viewing of her, “always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified” (VP, 1961).

The theory follows that this anxiety in male viewers interferes with the pleasure that viewing a woman might provide, and must be “escaped” by two avenues. The first way to overcome such an anxiety is by “turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous,” which essentially results in the over-sexualization of the female body (VP, 1961). This is called “fetishistic scopophilia” (VP, 1961). The second avenue for managing the castration anxiety is a “preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma ... counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object,” which ultimately has a punitive and domineeringly hateful effect (VP, 1961).²⁴ These two tendencies characterize the nature of the male gaze, while the mirror stage and scopophilia explain the premises that cause it to arise.

I am inspired by Mulvey’s ability to at once recognize the chauvinistic and at times absurd logic of Freud, while still engaging with it at a meaningful level that interrogates the real social problems he has tried to diagnose. She has taken his writing and evolved it into revolutionary feminist theory. I hope to follow her example and leverage the parts of truth interwoven in Freud’s theory. With this preface, I want to address castration anxiety and how I will account for it in my own theory. I am not

²⁴ I include these two management styles to illustrate the negative nature of the male gaze. Neither of the two avenues that Freud presents are favorable to women, and both harmfully infuse the gaze.

convinced that the castration anxiety Freud insists upon is literal in the way he describes it, nor do I intend to convince a reader that men truly fear women for the threat of castration their presence evokes. However, I do assert that women's presence subconsciously compels anxiety in men due to their respective genders. As Lacan posits and Mulvey concurs, a woman "stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other," (VP, 1955) and represents the gender difference described earlier. Because the patriarchal society constructed around us is by definition androcentric, women threaten that patriarchy. It is this threat to the patriarchy, which women's very existence symbolizes, that produces the anxiety previously labeled "castration anxiety" in men, and is what I will be referring to when using the term.²⁵

This anxiety permeates interactions between men and women in a patriarchy, causing men to continually suppress and control women, even in and especially in their most intimate interactions. If Freud characterizes the gaze as inherently sexual, and Mulvey characterizes it as inherently negative because it is warped by castration anxiety, then I conclude that the problem with the gaze is the harmful effects of

²⁵ I must acknowledge here that the way I am discussing gender is unrealistically generalizing of the psych and behavior of men and women in a way that does not account for individuality. I recognize this, and explain myself by pleading simplicity. The feminist rhetoric that I am engaging with understands the patriarchal influence to be systemic and therefore inescapable, even to someone aware of and consciously resistant to its effects. Because of this, we are all in some way or another influenced according to the dynamics of a patriarchy, in a way that can be identified as a general pattern or trend. Although these broad characterizations are not unconditionally true, they are still widely applicable.

castration anxiety tainting it. If such an anxiety did not perfuse the gaze, then it would be benignly pleasurable. Moreover, if castration anxiety is stimulated in men because the female gender symbolizes a threat to masculinity, then it reasonably follows that a woman, looking at a woman, would experience no such anxiety.²⁶ Because women do not unconsciously stress over the preservation of male power and control (patriarchy), they are free from this anxiety and free from its pervasive effects on the gaze. Because women, comparatively to one another, have equal amounts of power in the structural hierarchy of patriarchy, they do not symbolize a threat to one another, sexually or socially. It is a lack of this motivating anxiety that allows the female gaze to subvert the malice that the male gaze is steeped in. This is a fundamental difference between a male gaze and a female gaze that Mulvey failed to consider and led her to conclude the impossibility for a female gaze. However, recognizing this characteristic difference, a female gaze has space to emerge.

Redeeming the Gaze

Given the described nature of the male gaze, Mulvey further believes it to be problematic because of the power imbalance inherent to the dynamic of spectatorship. She makes a convincing argument for why this is the case, which I will leave to her to defend. As context for my addition on the subject, it suffices me to say

²⁶ Note that Freud also theorized that viewing men stimulates a similar anxiety in women. See Sigmund Freud, "Female Sexuality," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 13, (June 2016): 112-135.

that, according to Mulvey, the position of spectator is always occupied by a male, while the object of the gaze is always female. This is problematic because the position of spectator is active, as they are the one performing the action of gazing, while the position of object is necessarily passive as one is being looked at, regardless of the object's desire to be seen. Accordingly, in cinema, this dynamic always places the male spectator in a position of power and consequently the female object of the gaze in a powerless position, helpless to control the gaze and how she receives it. I see two points of potential flexibility in this argument's rigid positioning that can lead to increased agency for the object of the gaze.

The first point I will address is the degree of agency that the individual, as the object of the gaze, has in being spectated. I disagree that the object of the gaze is a necessarily passive position, as Mulvey prescribes. Although it is true that one cannot do much to prevent an unwanted gaze, one can certainly invite a desired gaze. In *Subjects on Display*, Beth Newman uses this reasoning to argue that the object of the gaze can be just as an empowering and active position as that of the spectator. She asserts that "the pleasure of being seen depend[s] on one's being in control of when and how one is looked at," analyzing the potential for pleasure by the degree of control one has.²⁷ This logic suggests that the level of empowerment for the female being spectated is dependent on her desire to be seen. It follows then, that if a woman

²⁷ Beth Newman, *Subjects on Display* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2004), 136.

wants to be seen and is accordingly looked at, the gaze becomes welcomed and the object of the gaze empowered by its occurrence instead of subjected to an undesired sensation. With this reasoning, Newman concludes that the passive, scopophilic drive, which is the desire to be seen, is passive only in language.²⁸ If being gazed at is a consequence of some sort of internal invitation or personal desire, then the resulting gaze is no longer a passive occurrence, but something actively compelled. Newman's redefinition of active and passive desires explains how desire is a key determinant of the gaze's effects. For something to be pleasurable, it must first be desirable.

The second point of flexibility I see in the rigid spectatorship dynamic Mulvey has presented is in regards to the separation of the participants into two distinct positions. Mulvey, and every other theorist on spectatorship that I have come across thus far, view the individual who is watching and the individual who is being watched as two distinct people. In other words, the role of the observer and the role of the observed are two different occupations. Because of this separation, we as spectators, be it in our normative lives or in the activity of watching screens, must identify with the observer or the observed separately. In such a situation, one party holds the active scopophilic desire to look, while the other holds the passive scopophilic desire to be looked at. This separation splits the experience of pleasure into two avenues. If an individual could somehow occupy both positions, being at once the observer and the

²⁸ Newman, *Subjects on Display*, 137.

observed, then their pleasure would be amplified when both active and passive scopophilic desires were fulfilled at once. Unfortunately, we are not able to watch ourselves beyond the use of a physical mirror. Or can we? What other ways might we see a reflection of ourselves?

Let us consider the female reader, reading a romance novel. The reader of a novel occupies a position analogous to the position a spectator of film does. As a third-party to the narrative, a reader spectates all that passes in a novel and observes the characters. Moreover, a reader comprehends a text by way of visually looking at it. Although the novel offers descriptions, all images produced are mentally created by the reader, allowing for more agency and discretion than cinema provides its spectator, which projects a predetermined image. By this comparison, the reader is a spectator, enjoying the scopophilic pleasure of watching. Furthermore, the female reader identifies with the female protagonist—a more perfect version of herself and an example of an “ideal-I,”—who gazes at others in the book herself. In this way, a female reader functions as a spectator on two levels, as she watches both inside the novel and outside of it, just as Mulvey argues a male spectator behaves in film (VP, 1960). Additionally, by her identification with the female protagonist, the reader is also the object of the gaze. As explained earlier with the support of Lacan’s mirror stage theory, the process of looking at oneself, or of finding a reflection or like image to be indicative of self, is the process of identification. If the reader finds the female

character(s) to be at all similar to herself, then the character would serve as a reflection of the reader, mirroring her own image or likeness back to her. This is how she might identify with the character, and in turn reinforce her own identity and sense of self. Because the female reader is able to identify with a female character, she can at once occupy the role of spectator and become the object of her own gaze. This enables her to control each point of the interaction and enjoy a “satisfying sense of omnipotence,” to borrow a phrase from Mulvey (VP, 1960). She is at once desirous of the gaze and the giver of the gaze, experiencing the scopophilic pleasure at both ends. This is how romance novels allow a female reader to occupy a dual-position simultaneously and enjoy a higher degree of pleasure as a result in a pleasurable loop. Essentially, literature escapes the male gaze and allows for a pleasurable female gaze because the object of desire is the same as the object of identification.

This dual gaze is what I call the female gaze. It is a gaze at once held by a female reader and experienced by a female reader. It is a desired gaze, empowering and pleasing the object of the gaze as much as it does the spectator. It is a purely pleasurable gaze, void of the castration anxiety motivating the male gaze and twisting it into something unpleasurable. In the romantic novel, the female is liberated from the gaze as much as she controls it, both figuratively in how she desires it, and literally in how she performs and receives it. It is the high degree of agency and the

amplified potential for pleasure for the female reader that sets the female gaze apart from the male gaze.

Mulvey wrote “Visual Pleasure” with a hope to “conceive a new language of desire” capable of “transcending outworn or oppressive forms” (VP, 1956). I have located such a language. It has been with us all along, serving as a companion to women and a site of pleasure for centuries. Inside the romantic novel is the language of desire Mulvey has called for. It is able to circumvent the oppressive form that romance in film is confined to, able to restore pleasure to women and reclaim the power of the gaze for the female spectator. If cinema serves the male ego, then romance likewise appeases the female ego for the same reason. Contemporary romance novels house this liberating gaze because they offer what film does not, what is at the heart of all freedom: agency.

Chapter 2: Love at First Sight

A Close Reading of *Twilight*: Bella and the Gaze

The first feminist gesture is to say: “OK, they’re looking at me. But I’m looking at them.” The act of deciding to look, of deciding that the world is not defined by how people see me, but how I see them.

— Agnès Varda

With over 160 million copies sold²⁹ and \$3.3 billion grossed in the box office,³⁰ Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* Series has garnered an incredible amount of attention in popular culture. The series has proved especially popular among adolescent girls³¹ and has inspired countless fan-authored spin-offs, including Erika Mitchell’s best-selling *50 Shades* book trilogy.

The *Twilight* Series’ central plot revolves around an intense love triangle consisting of Isabella (Bella) Swan, the female protagonist, and her fantastical suitors, Edward Cullen and Jacob Black. The book’s narrative follows Bella and her romantic

²⁹ Danny McLouglin, “Twilight (Novel Series) Statistics,” Wordsrated, last modified October 13, 2022, <https://wordrated.com/twilight-novel-series-statistics/>.

³⁰ Scott Mendelson, “‘Twilight’ Occupies All 5 Top Spots Among Netflix’s Most-Watched Movies,” *Forbes*, July 21, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/scottmendelson/2021/07/21/twilight-occupies-all-5-top-spots-among-netflixs-most-watched-movies/?sh=4d22b54510ca>.

³¹ Nancy Cordes, “‘Twilight’ Attracts Unexpected Audience,” *CBS News*, November 22, 2009, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/twilight-attracts-unexpected-audience/>. Statistics show 80% of the audience is female and 50% under the age of 21.

adventures, marking it as a contemporary romance novel. Edward Cullen, born in England over a century before the novel begins, is a chivalrous, solemn vampire who finds Bella —and her human blood— irresistibly alluring. Jacob Black, a member of the indigenous Quileute tribe, is an easy-going and good-natured family friend of Bella's, who transforms into a massive wolf when he and his tribe are threatened by their sworn enemies, the vampires. This mythical rivalry is heightened when Edward and Jacob find themselves both pursuing the human Bella Swan, in the little town of Forks, Washington.

While this world of ageless and absurdly handsome mythical creatures is an intriguing draw for young readers, upon analysis, the massive popularity of the *Twilight* series has to do with the relatability and ordinariness of the main character Bella, and the unordinary romantic attention she gets from such creatures. In this chapter I perform a close reading of the first novel in the series, *Twilight*, focusing on the way Bella experiences her romantic relationships and being pursued by men. Specifically, I will analyze the function of gazing in this context, with Bella being both the receiver of the gaze and the spectator, as she herself gazes at others. Gazing in *Twilight* enables the female reader to closely identify with Bella, producing a pleasurable and transformative reading experience.

Presence & Awareness of the Gaze in *Twilight*

Gazing is the first point of connection between Bella and Edward, with quick glances precipitating any genuine conversation. The two characters spend a lot of time stealing glances at each other and hoping for a reciprocated look. In the first chapter of the novel, fittingly titled “First Sight,” their first interaction is an intense gaze. Bella describes this “brief flash of a glance,” reporting that “suddenly ... his dark eyes flickered to mine. He looked away quickly, more quickly than I could, though in a flush of embarrassment I dropped my eyes at once” (*TW*, 19). This shared gaze reveals mutual interest in the other, which they both try to hide upon discovery.

Edward especially is constantly looking at Bella, and she begins to notice his frequent stare. She observes, “In his rearview mirror, Edward’s eyes were on me,” She notices an indirect version of his gaze, which could only be noticed if she decided to look at him at the same time (*TW*, 78). At the same time that Bella “catches” Edward staring at her, he discovers her gaze in return, and they instantaneously notice the attention of the other. Without even a direct look at each other—as this gazing is happening through a reflection—or a spoken word or physical touch, the two characters share a moment of mutual interest. The reciprocity of this interaction is key to its connecting power. According to research on eye-contact in humans, “human infants prefer to look at faces that engage them in mutual gaze.”³² With this

³² Farroni, “Eye Contact,” 2602.

evidence for human's preference for mutual looks, we can better understand the bashful mirror interaction where Bella and Edward share a glance for a moment. Both characters want to look at the other, and both hope that such an action, revealing as it is of interest, will be reciprocated, indicating a shared interest or attraction. This reciprocated attention and evidence of mutual interest serves as a preliminary point of connection in their early relationship.

Edward so frequently looks at Bella that other people around her in the novel begin to notice. Bella's friend Jessica comments on this behavior to Bella, stating, "Edward Cullen is staring at you again" (*TW*, 86). This staring would have gone unnoticed by Bella had her friend not said something, and Jessica's noticing of this happening "again" indicates that this secret gazing has happened more than once. In response to Jessica's comment, Bella confesses, "I don't think he likes me," to which Jessica reassures her, "The Cullens don't like anybody ... well, they don't notice anybody enough to like them. But he's still staring at you" (*TW*, 41). To Jessica, the Cullen's lack of affection is equivalent to their lack of attention. With this insight, Edward's uncommon noticing of Bella indicates some sort of potential for affection, signaled via his gaze. Bella also looks at Edward, which does not go unnoticed by her perceptive friend: "Bella, what are you staring at?" Jessica intruded, her eyes following my stare. At that precise moment, his eyes flashed over to meet mine" (*TW*, 41). In these instances, gazing is performed by both Edward and Bella and functions as

a point of connection between the two characters, reflecting an interest in the other that is revealed upon notice of the gaze.

Other times, however, Bella feels like she is being watched, though neither she nor the reader can confirm if she truly has a spectator or not. After falling asleep near the woods, Bella awakes, commenting, “I looked around, muddled, with the sudden feeling that I wasn’t alone,” and calls herself “foolishly edgy” (*TW*, 148). Since the narration in this novel is dependent on Bella’s perspective, the reality of a spectator in this scene is unable to be confirmed or denied. However, the importance of this passage comes not from the presence of a secret spectator, or lack thereof, but from Bella’s suspicion that she has one. The *feeling* of being watched that Bella experiences is the same regardless if she is truly being watched or not. Researchers have found that Bella is not alone in experiencing a phantom watcher, and that people frequently suspect another person to be looking at them when they are not.³³ Bella’s projection of spectatorship reveals that she is developing a certain complex, caused by Edward’s previous gazing attention, of an ever-present observer. After catching him stealing glances at her on multiple occasions, she now suspects that his eyes are always on her, having developed a sort of paranoia of being watched. This in turn stimulates in Bella the same sensation of being watched, of getting attention, regardless of whether she has a spectator or not. Bella is uncomfortable when she can’t reciprocate the gaze,

³³ Farroni, “Eye Contact,” 2602.

or look back, in other words. While a reciprocated gaze is preferable, a one-sided gaze can also be pleasurable, but less so. As we understand from Freud, there is scopophilic pleasure to be found in gazing at another. Likewise, it can be pleasurable to be gazed at. However, Newman has pointed out that it is only pleasurable to be gazed at insofar as the gaze is desired. In this situation, Bella was not wishing for Edward's attention, or anyone's attention for that matter. She believed herself to be alone and so any secret gaze would be unexpected, unwelcomed, and unsettling. A reader might also feel diminished scopophilic pleasure in this scene. Although we might enjoy watching Bella, insofar as we enjoy narration and reading, we feel uncomfortable when Bella is uncomfortable because we associate so strongly with her. Furthermore, as spectators, our gazing in this scene is one sided and not reciprocated. We would feel more pleasure if we were engaged in some vicarious mutual engagement with Bella, like when she interacts with Edward.

This interesting moment can be further understood when we consider the relationship between spectatorship and identification. Lacan finds the mirror stage experience, discussed in Chapter 1, to be so fundamental to an individual's sense of identity because it establishes that an individual's existence predates consciousness of that existence. To use his analogy, the child exists even before it sees itself in the mirror, and recognizes its own autonomy. In his own words, he says "the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in ... identification with the

other.”³⁴ This revelation helps us to understand that our sense of reality is formed before we can contextualize ourselves in relation to other individuals. As Beth Newman comments, this principle challenges the famous words, “I think, therefore I am,” instead suggesting its reversal, where instead more logically the phrase should read “I am, therefore I think.”³⁵ This theory is relevant because it explains how confrontation with an image, or some other form of a reflection of self—like a gaze—challenges our very sense of subjectivity and reality. To Lacan, this is evidence that knowledge is paranoid, functioning the way paranoia might, because it “projects a coherence onto the world that may not be there.”³⁶ When we think about this in context of the gaze, it takes a new shape and meaning. It represents, or rather reflects something new to us about our reality. The one sided gaze is disorienting because it disrupts Bella’s sense of normalcy and reality.

This sheds further light on the phenomena of the paranoia that Bella is feeling in the scene just described. Bella’s sense of subjectivity, of her existing in that moment alone, is interrupted by the suspicion of another being present. However, her knowledge of this is paranoid, because she is projecting a presence that might not be there at all. This feeling of a hidden gaze is unsettling because she cannot tell if she is being perceived, and so cannot situate herself properly in relation to another. Because

³⁴ Lacan, “Mirror,” 1112.

³⁵ Newman, *Subjects*, 11.

³⁶ Lacan, “Mirror,” 1112.

Bella, just as everyone else, uses the gaze to reinforce her own existence or reality, an unproven case then creates an unsure sense of self. If Bella were to look in a mirror, and be unconvinced that the image looking back at her was truly a reflection of herself, she might likewise feel unsettled and literally unsure of herself.

As Newman notes, the gaze “is thus a phantasm, though not in the sense that it is a delusion,” only that “there is no necessary grounding for it in reality,”³⁷ meaning that the gaze’s effects can be influential without a gaze even truly existing. After all, the gaze is not a tangible thing, but only “an object in the mind”³⁸ and so it and its effects are just as strong when projected, as when not. Bella is experiencing the effects of a gaze that she has, we suppose, imagined. Newman summarizes this concept of an envisaged spectator in a fantastic quotation, saying, “the gaze avoids your look. It not only escapes your conscious view, but affects us as a being-looked-at without anybody looking: as if you were an actor in a movie sensing someone looking, but unable to ever find them in your diegetic world.”³⁹

While an elusive, possibly phantasmic gaze uncomfortably questions the connection between self, mind, and reality, a visible, sure gaze likewise confirms a sense of reality and self. This is why the gaze is pleasurable. This pleasure is

³⁷ Newman, *Subjects*, 11.

³⁸ Newman, *Subjects*, 11.

³⁹ Newman, *Subjects*, 11.

heightened when the image that is reflected back at us is a more perfect version than we thought ourselves to be previously, such as an amorous glance from a lover.

Bella Enjoys the Gaze

From these passages it is clear that gazing is central to Edward and Bella's interactions and that Edward's constant spectatorship of Bella is contributing a strange dynamic to their relationship. Bella has begun to expect his constant watching, at times to an extent where she imagines his gaze. Even more interesting is that Bella seems to find a sort of pleasure in his gaze, which could explain why she sometimes imagines a hidden spectator, as she did in the last excerpt. This is illustrated in her own comments to the reader. She reveals, "I was anxious to get out of town so I could stop glancing over my shoulder, hoping to see him appearing out of the blue the way he always did" (*TW*, 150). In this confession, Bella again admits to experiencing a paranoia that Edward could be secretly hidden, just out of her sight, from which hiding spot he might suddenly materialize from, as is his tendency. While this passage does not directly invoke the gaze, it does illustrate the way Bella is followed by the feeling of hidden company. Though she is alone, she feels as if she isn't. This is the same sensation that Edward's concealed gaze brought her, of his ever-presence. While to most readers a secret spectator might seem creepy, or even scary, Bella has admitted to hoping that this is her case.

Although Bella reasonably expects that leaving town will temporarily rid her of her new shadow, she is wrong. In Port Angeles, she finds herself in a dangerous situation, cornered in an alley by a group of drunk men who have malicious plans for her. Seemingly alone, Bella prepares to fend off her persecutors when suddenly a car flashes onto the scene with Edward at its wheel, ready to rescue her. He heroically fends off the attackers and saves Bella from her unfortunate but predictable fate (*TW* 156-161). It is not by coincidence that Edward was in the same city, in the same place, at the same time as Bella, but by design. He reveals that he followed her to Port Angeles in order to keep watch over her, so that he might defend her from the dangers that always seem to befall her. Hearing this, Bella reflects, "I wondered if it should bother me that he was following me; instead I felt a strange surge of pleasure," (*TW*, 174) acknowledging that she is happy to be followed and pleased that he did so.

At this point, Bella seems less hesitant to acknowledge her desire than even before her Port Angeles excursion. However, her feigned disdain soon dissolves altogether as she becomes more comfortable with her not-so-secret admirer. In a scene later in the novel, Edward scoops up Bella's house key from its hidden spot under the eave. Perplexed, Bella notes that "I was sure I'd never used that key in front of him" (*TW*, 292). Realizing that the only way Edward would have known where she kept that key was if he had seen her use it at a time she was unaware he was watching, she accuses; "you spied on me?" and confides to the reader, "but somehow I couldn't

infuse my voice with the proper outrage. I was flattered” (*TW*, 292). This scene is distinct from the one described earlier, where Bella was uncomfortable with the idea of a suspected secret watcher, because here Bella is desiring the gaze. It is because the gaze was wanted, or at least welcomed, that Bella feels a sense of wish fulfillment when it occurs, and gratification from the satisfaction of a previous desire. This recalls Newman’s insights from the first chapter in the way that Bella’s pleasure is correlated with her degree of agency. In this situation, Bella has a repressed passive scopophilic desire to be seen, so when she is seen, it produces pleasure, rather than fear.

Bella has now confirmed that there were multiple times where Edward was watching her in secret. She not only feels like she is being watched, but is. Instead of being afraid, the way one would expect a woman to feel upon discovery that a man—a mythical predator, at that—has been watching her enter her home, and can himself gain access, Bella is flattered. She enjoys being noticed and the notion it entails, that she is therefore worthy of notice. She enjoys the attention that such spectating is evidence of, which is ultimately what the gaze signifies in this novel. She dwells on her discovery of his secret spectatorship, and asks “how often did you come here?” to which he responds, “I come here almost every night,” (*TW*, 293) and expands to reveal that he has been watching her while she sleeps each night.

This confirmation of her previous frequent feeling of being secretly watched strengthens Bella's paranoia. She begins to act as if she constantly has a spectator and worries over how she might have acted before she knew she had one. In this same scene, Edward reveals that during his secret visits he has overheard Bella talking about him in her sleep. Bella is horrified at this revelation, but not for fear of her safety. Edward, in his role as boyfriend, has shown himself to be a loving and protective figure, so his revealed presence instills comfort rather than fear. Instead, she is upset by what innermost feelings she might have unconsciously revealed in her sleep-talking, something that she previously "hadn't thought [was] something [she] needed to worry about" (*TW*, 293). She voices this concern to Edward, who reassures her that she needn't be embarrassed, promises reciprocal feelings, and urges her, "don't be self-conscious" (*TW*, 293). With these words, our English vampire inadvertently harkens back to the words of Jacques Lacan and 20th Century French psychoanalytic theory. Here Edward is making a connection between his spectatorship of Bella and her challenged sense of self. Bella, presuming she was alone, held a secure sense of self and separation from others. However, upon discovery that she was not alone and was in fact being watched in her sleep, Bella's subjectivity—her perception of her existence—in this case of a solitary existence, clashes with her reality. A disconnect between perception and reality, upon correction, is disorienting to an actor, hence Bella's reaction and fright. In this scene,

Bella's sense of self is recontextualized in relation to other individuals. Edward's spectatorship in this moment causes a micro alteration to Bella's identity and therefore a new sense of self. It is important to note that this change in Bella's perception of herself did not change until she knew of Edward's watching. This is because the gaze itself is a "phantasmatic object" and it is "in the experience of seeing and being seen" that in turn "produces an awareness in the subject."⁴⁰ When we speak of the gaze, we speak of its effects. *Twilight* is defined by the female characters' experience of the gaze, not by the male character's projection of it. In this way, the female gaze has everything to do with the way a woman experiences the gaze, rather than how the male spectator experiences it. This is a pivot from Mulvey's discussion of spectatorship, but not a complete turn away. I am simply redirecting what part of the process of spectatorship we give our attention to. In literature, this repositioning happens seamlessly, by nature of how we read.

Later in the novel, Bella confirms that Edward's gaze repeatedly has such an effect on her. In this later scene, Bella mentally notes that "I could feel [Edward's] eyes on me," and that "he was gazing at me, studying my every movement. It made me self-conscious" (*TW*, 315). From this reflection, we understand that Bella is again prompted to take notice of herself by Edward's gazing at her. We are again reminded of Lacan's mirror stage, and of the child who gains a heightened sense of self-awareness by a

⁴⁰ Newman, *Subjects*, 11.

confrontation with his reflection. Edward's intense spectating is taking Bella out of her regular way of being, and creating an intensified consciousness of her as an object experiencing the world. In directing her attention to the object of Edward's gaze, Bella becomes more aware of herself. Bella quite literally becomes more self-conscious via Edward's gaze.

The dynamic link forged in *Twilight* between the gaze and identity can be further confirmed through a quick look at *Midnight Sun*, a book written by Meyer in which the *Twilight* series is retold through Edward's perspective. In this novel, Edward likewise experiences a moment of self-consciousness, induced by Bella's gaze. He says, "her gaze met mine and I saw myself reflected in the mirror of her eyes."⁴¹ Edward's words describe of course the physical reflection that he sees of himself in Bella's eyes, but also illuminate the self-reflection that the gaze of another, especially a lover, can cause. After these words, Edward proceeds to reflect on his character, his demeanor, and his values, wondering what type of person he'd like to be, and what type of person Bella sees him as. The mental image, or internal opinion that Bella has of Edward, indicated through her gaze, causes him to reassess his own person. Through both the thoughts of Edward and Bella, we see the gaze of another creating an intensified self-consciousness.

⁴¹ Stephenie Meyer, *Midnight Sun* (New York; Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2020), 13.

Chapter 3: Reader-Response and Narrative Intimacy

How Spectatorship in *Twilight* Shapes Reader Identity

Narrative Intimacy

Thus far, I have established that the gaze in literature functions as a device that facilitates connection between characters. In *Twilight*, the gaze is the foundation of Bella and Edward's romantic relationship and adds much to the interaction between the two. Furthermore, I have spent some time analyzing how experiencing the gaze can be pleasurable for female characters like Bella, and how it can even impact a character's sense of self and identity. Now, I turn my attention to the female reader's experience of the gaze. This thesis has an interest in the lived experiences of female readers and the ways in which literature connects with, changes, and even transforms that experience. To study this interaction between reader and text, I call upon the work of Sara K. Day, a feminist reader-response critic. Thinking within the framework of reader-response criticism, I use Day's concept of "narrative intimacy" as a lens to understand the mechanics of the reader-text relationship in *Twilight*.

Day defines narrative intimacy as the construction of "narrator-reader relationships that reflect, model, and reimagine intimate interpersonal relationships through the disclosure of information and the experience of the story as a space that

the narrator invites the reader to share.”⁴² As she further explains, through narrative intimacy, “the line between fictional story and real reading experience can be blurred or disregarded entirely” (*RLG*, 3). According to this concept, the relationship between a reader and the protagonist of a novel has the same emotional and intellectual effects that a relationship between two individuals outside of a book may have. Day’s account of narrative intimacy is compelling because it helps us to understand the immersive experience that reading provides. First-person narrators, who are “the main characters of the stories they narrate, who act as their own subjects, and who focus on the presentation of their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences,” (*RLG*, 14) are critical to the construct of narrative intimacy because their narration imitates real-world interactions, helping to “minimize the reader’s awareness” of the “narrator’s fictional status,” (*RLG*, 17) and essentially allow for a suspension of disbelief.⁴³

Day further explains that intimacy is built upon feelings of trust and mutual understanding or knowledge of experiences, thoughts, or feelings (*RLG*, 6). When a character shares personal or private information with the reader, trust is established and a sense of mutual understanding is created (*RLG*, 4).

⁴² Sarah K. Day, *Reading Like a Girl: Narrative Intimacy in Contemporary American Young Adult Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 3. Subsequent references to this text will be shortened to parenthetical in-text citations formatted as (*RLG*, page #).

⁴³ For more reading on the “suspension of disbelief,” see Richard Walsh, *The Rhetoric of Fictionality: Narrative Theory and the Idea of Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007).

The emotional affordances of narrative intimacy can be further illuminated by comparing the intimacy of reading with the potential perils of real-life intimacy. In real world situations, an individual divulging personal information would render themselves socially vulnerable and constantly in danger of possibly losing intimacy once it has been formed (*RLG*, 6). However, when disclosure happens in a novel between a fictional character and a reader, the reader can experience the benefit of intimacy without the risk that they would otherwise face. This is because of the two, the only active and dynamic agent is the reader. The reader is the secret keeper, the only one able to form judgements, and ultimately the one in control of the information. As I've said before, agency increases pleasure. In the interpersonal relationship between reader and text, the reader's pleasure is increased because their control of the relationship removes risk that might cause displeasure.

We can see narrative intimacy built between Bella and a reader in the passages previously discussed, as Bella reveals her desires,⁴⁴ anxieties,⁴⁵ questions, and confessions.⁴⁶ The reader's insight into Bella's mind is a privilege that nobody besides the reader shares—not even Bella's mind-reading lover. In the novel, Edward Cullen has the ability to “hear” the thoughts of everyone around him except for Bella (*TW*, 172). Throughout the novel, he constantly asks Bella what she is thinking and how she

⁴⁴ “I was anxious to get out of town so I could stop glancing over my shoulder, hoping to see [Edward] appearing out of the blue the way he always did” (*TW*, 150).

⁴⁵ “I hadn't thought it was something I needed to worry about” (*TW*, 293).

⁴⁶ “But somehow I couldn't infuse my voice with the proper outrage. I was flattered” (*TW*, 292).

feels because he is denied access to that knowledge in a way that he is not with everyone else. Furthermore, even when Bella does disclose things to Edward, he has no way of ensuring that she is telling the truth. Sometimes, she is not, as we see Bella lie to Edward on multiple occasions. Comparatively, the reader has more access to Bella's inner feelings and thoughts, and is given the impression that these are honest and not to be doubted. For example, the reader learns of Bella's feelings for Edward, her knowledge of his supernatural character, and her fears of him far before he does, when she famously confesses:

About three things I was absolutely positive. First, Edward was a vampire. Second, there was a part of him –and I didn't know how potent that part might be– that thirsted for my blood. And third, I was unconditionally and irrevocably in love with him. (*TW*, 195).

Given that the reader knows more than Bella's closest confidant, her most intimate lover, and her most trusted friend, the implicit message that Bella is sending with this behavior is that we, as the reader, share the most intimate relationship with her, not Edward. Day herself applies her concept of narrative intimacy to the *Twilight* book series, picking up on the comparative strength of the Bella-reader relationship to the

Bella–Edward relationship. She offers us an explanation for this dynamic, arguing that:

Because [Bella] believes that love and desire are beyond her control, Bella's attempts to confront questions of intimacy require her to seek a relationship in which she has agency over these feelings. Bella therefore relies almost exclusively upon her disclosure to the reader in order to explore her feelings for Edward and Jacob.⁴⁷

In other words, Bella's disclosure to the reader has a connective, bonding effect that creates a type of intimacy between the two. Further, Day's interpretive framework posits that Bella intentionally pursues a relationship with the reader. Thus, narrative intimacy is not simply a byproduct of reading, but rather an intentional narrative strategy.

Day defines Bella's narration style as "immediate and engaging,"⁴⁸ which she says then effectively invites a reader to identify with her.⁴⁹ Bella's narration is immediate because the "narrator and central focalizer are the same," and because

⁴⁷ Sara K. Day, "Narrative Intimacy and the Question of Control in the 'Twilight' Saga," in *Genre, Reception, and Adaptation in the "Twilight" Series*, edited by Anne Morey, 65-78. London: Routledge, 2012.

⁴⁸ Day notes that Robyn Warhol introduced the term "engaging narrator" and that Andrea Schwenke Wylie expanded on it to add the concepts of immediacy and passivity

⁴⁹ Day, "Genre," 66.

“the narration is concerned with recent or still-occurring events.”⁵⁰ The concept of readerly identification has its roots in psychoanalytic theory. Freud says that the “mechanism” through which relating turns into identifying is “that of identification based upon the possibility of putting oneself in the same situation.”⁵¹ Put differently, sometimes a reader is able to relate so closely with a character and adopt the character’s perspective to the point that reader and character experience the novel simultaneously as one. Building on the work of Richard Walsh,⁵² a narrative theorist, Day posits that “the value of fiction lies in the possibility of vicarious experience” (*RLG*, 17).

As Walsh argues and Day seconds, this type of narration is engaging to a reader because it invites them to identify with or mentally occupy the space of the protagonist.⁵³ Because this style of narration imitates the way we think, a reader can easily adopt the same perspective as the narrator and envision the story through a character’s experience. Bella does not acknowledge the reader directly, or the fact that she is narrating. She is thus what Day terms, a “passive narrator.”⁵⁴ This allows a reader to further ignore the separation between herself and Bella, or in other words,

⁵⁰ Day, “Genre,” 66.

⁵¹ Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, trans. James Strachey (London, Vienna : The International psychoanalytical press, 1922), 64-65.

⁵² Walsh, “The Rhetoric.”

⁵³ Day, “Genre,” 66.

⁵⁴ Day, “Genre,” 67.

removes the boundary between subject and object,⁵⁵ and achieve a more immersive vicarious reading experience.

Narrative Pleasure

The concept of narrative intimacy and the immediate and engaging narration that it requires, ultimately helps us to understand how women experience reading and the effect of that reading on their real personhood. We understand from earlier in this chapter how Bella pleurably experiences the gaze, and the positive, self-affirming effects that it has on her. We now also understand from narrative intimacy the way that a reader connects with and identifies with Bella. If a character in a novel experiences scopophilic pleasure, and a reader identifies and relates to said character to a point of vicarious experience, then we can conclude that a reader likewise experiences the female gaze by proxy of a character such as Bella experiencing the gaze.

Critics such as Michele Aaron,⁵⁶ Catherine Driscoll,⁵⁷ Teresa de Lauretis,⁵⁸ and even Laura Mulvey, seem to agree that the degree to which a female spectator may experience pleasure depends upon her ability to identify with a character. Mulvey,

⁵⁵ Day, "Genre," 67.

⁵⁶ Michele Aaron, *Spectatorship: The Power of Looking On* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007).

⁵⁷ Catherine Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture & Cultural Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

⁵⁸ Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

whose foundational theory on the male gaze and spectatorship we engaged with in the previous chapter, found that the male spectator received pleasure both from spectating the female characters on screen, as well as from identifying with male protagonists on screen, whom he viewed as more perfect versions of himself. However, if we recall, Mulvey was unable to agree to the possibility of a female spectator who similarly experienced pleasure, primarily because “the position of transcendence [is] available to the male spectator only” (VP, 25). When asked to reconsider her position, Mulvey again held that there is no benign identification possible. She argues that in order to identify with the spectator on screen, the female viewer would have to either identify with the oppressed female character, or adopt a “cross gaze”⁵⁹ in order to halfway identify with the male character spectating the female character, whom she could never fully identify with. Given this explanation, the impossibility of a female spectator is caused by a lack of true identification, and Mulvey argues that by nature of its media type, film can never allow for true identification. Teresa de Lauretis, in response to this, concurs, and further expands on what it is that impedes female identification. She says,

⁵⁹ As Michele Aaron describes it, to Mulvey, the female spectator has a choice “between identification with masochistic ‘heroine’ and the ill-fitting garb of the male gaze,” of which “remain[s] male even though she [wears] it too” (Aaron, *Spectatorship*, 36).

I am proposing that narrativity, because of its inscription of the movement and positionalities of desire, is what mediates the relation of image and language. For both filmmakers and spectators ... images are already ... overdetermined by narrative through its symbolic inscriptions of desire.⁶⁰

Lauretis seems to think that the narrative structure invites or prohibits certain types of identifiers and predetermines who or what is desired, and by whom. She finds, as I do, that literature is more welcoming of female identification. When analyzing a media, we must ask, who is invited to identify? Who is desired? And what does that mean for the spectator? In *Twilight*, we have determined that Bella is desired by Edward, among other characters, and that this is signaled, or inscribed, by way of the gaze. We have also determined that in so far as Bella is desired, her own desires are satisfied, resulting in a pleasurable experience exactly because she harbors passive scopophilic desires. Lauretis continues, positing,

Positions of identification, visual pleasure itself, then, are reached only *après coup*, as after-affects of an engagement of subjectivity in the relations of meaning; relations which involve and mutually bind image and narrative.⁶¹

⁶⁰ De Lauretis, *Alice*, 79.

⁶¹ De Lauretis, *Alice*, 79-80.

Here Lauretis makes a connection between image and narrative. Through the concept of narrative intimacy, we understand the ways that a female reader relates to and identifies with the narrative presented. By engaging (recall the discussion of immediate engaging narration) with the mental image created then, a reader is able to identify with the subject and likewise experience visual pleasure. In sum, she says that “narrative ... is a condition of ... identification processes,”⁶² and that pleasure depends on “a personal response, an engagement of the spectator's subjectivity, and the possibility of identification.”⁶³ Through *Day*, we understand how narrative intimacy furthers the possibility of identification. We know that by way of how the novel is told in *Twilight* that a reader is invited to identify with Bella, to engage with her subjectivity to a point of adopting her perspective, and fully identifying to the extent that a reader vicariously experiences the emotions and actions of Bella. Following this, the degree of identification is then connected to the degree of pleasure available to the identifier. The closer a reader can identify with the narrator, the more pleasure she will experience. When the boundary between subject and object disappears, female identification is enabled.

⁶² De Lauretis, *Alice*, 80.

⁶³ De Lauretis, *Alice*, 136.

The Female Spectator

Critics Michele Aaron, Patrocinio Schweickart, and Catherine Driscoll are all interested in the ways that female identification, the female as spectator, and the female as the object of spectatorship interact. Recall that Laura Mulvey's primary concern with female spectatorship is the power dynamic inherent to one imposing their gaze on another. John Berger, author of *Ways of Seeing*, comments on the internalization of this dynamic in women, saying,

So she comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed in her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman ... One might simplify this by saying: men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object –and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.⁶⁴

The issue, then, is that when the spectator and object of the gaze are separate people, certain oppressive tendencies manifest. But must the spectator and object of

⁶⁴ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 48.

spectation be necessarily separate? Must the “surveyor of woman” always be other, and therefore objectifying? *Twilight* offers us an alternative dynamic to consider. Driscoll argues that being watched in turn causes self-observation,⁶⁵ which is consistent with Bella’s behavior in response to Edward’s gaze. In this situation, by observing herself, Bella is at once the spectator and the object of the gaze. By her subjectivity as reader, a female reader occupies the position of spectator, as she observes the story taking place and the characters within the novel. The reader is only a third-party to the novel until she is able to identify, and then immersively become involved by identification with the protagonist. While there is not a concrete image to watch, by visually reading, a mental image is created. Because this visuality is all mentally constructed by the reader, it is less coercive by nature than is cinema, because the reader ultimately controls the image. Schweickart says that typically, women experience a “bifurcated gaze,” when they are asked to take on the perspective of a male, as they experience the text both as a man (with the borrowed gaze) and a woman.⁶⁶ However, when the protagonist they identify with is female, this split does not happen, and their identity is instead confirmed. A reader is then able to fully identify with a spectator. This is all to say that the reader, in a certain capacity, functions as an agentive spectator in the process of reading.

⁶⁵ Driscoll, *Girls*, 240.

⁶⁶ Schweickart, “Reading Ourselves,” 618.

Pleasure Loop

I follow the work of these critics for the sake of explaining how the disappearance of the subject-object boundary allows for a reader to identify with Bella, and consequently experience the same effects of the gaze as she does. I argue that in *Twilight*, the position of the spectator (the reader) and the object being spectated (Bella) are not entirely separate. A female reader not only experiences by proxy of Bella the pleasurable effects of a passive scopophilia drive, but also, by nature of figuratively spectating Bella, experiences the pleasurable effects of an active scopophilic drive. Because a reader occupies the position of spectator, the active scopophilic desire is fulfilled, and the reader experiences pleasure. In the case of *Twilight*, Bella is the object being spectated. She is being watched both by the reader and by other characters in the novel, such as Edward. She is the object of desire. However, Bella is also the object of identification. As previously explained, the female reader identifies with Bella, and effectively experiences the novel as her. From Lacan's mirror stage theory, we know that identification with a more perfect self, or an "ideal-I," is pleasurable. To identify with Bella then, an extremely desired character, is pleasurable. The satisfaction of Bella's passive scopophilic drive is likewise vicariously experienced by the reader upon identification with her. Following this, a reader then enjoys watching Bella, and being watched by extension of Bella. In this situation, the object of desire is the same as the object of identification, and both

desire and identification are met through the gaze. When a reader is able to occupy the position of spectator and be the object of that spectation at once, active and scopophilic pleasures are met simultaneously.

This occurrence forms a metaphorical pleasure loop, where a reader controls the active scopophilic desire of gazing, as well as the passive scopophilic desire of being gazed at. It is precisely because the reader occupies both positions and therefore controls the entirety of the interaction that the experience can be pleasurable. Unlike the cinematic situation Mulvey described, there is no unwanted or undesired gazing, and there is no power imbalance between spectator and the object of the gaze because the watcher and the watched are the same. Even Bella, a fictional character, is not only consenting to the gaze but actively invites it through her pursuit of a relationship with the reader. Mulvey postulates that male spectators receive a “satisfying sense of omnipotence” (VP, 1960) by identifying with the controller of the gaze. Following this with my idea of a pleasure loop, if the female reader controls both the gaze and the reception of the gaze, then this sense of omnipotence is only strengthened, empowering the female reader. When both narrative intimacy and spectatorship function jointly, pleasure is maximized in the reading experience, and the reader becomes empowered through the gaze.

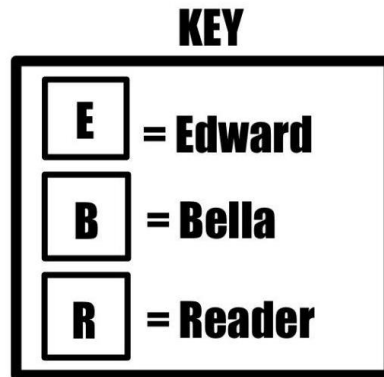
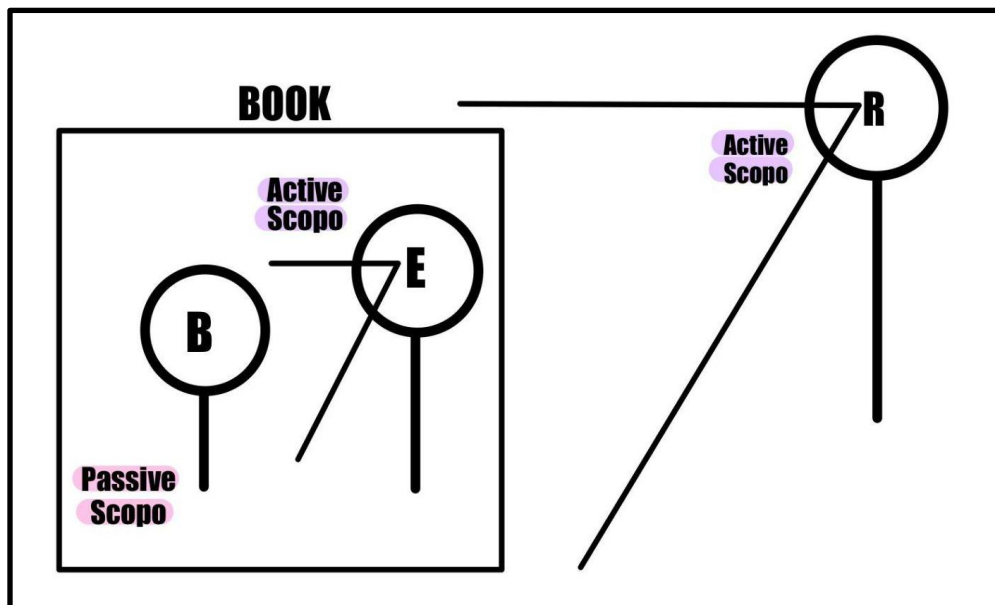


Figure A



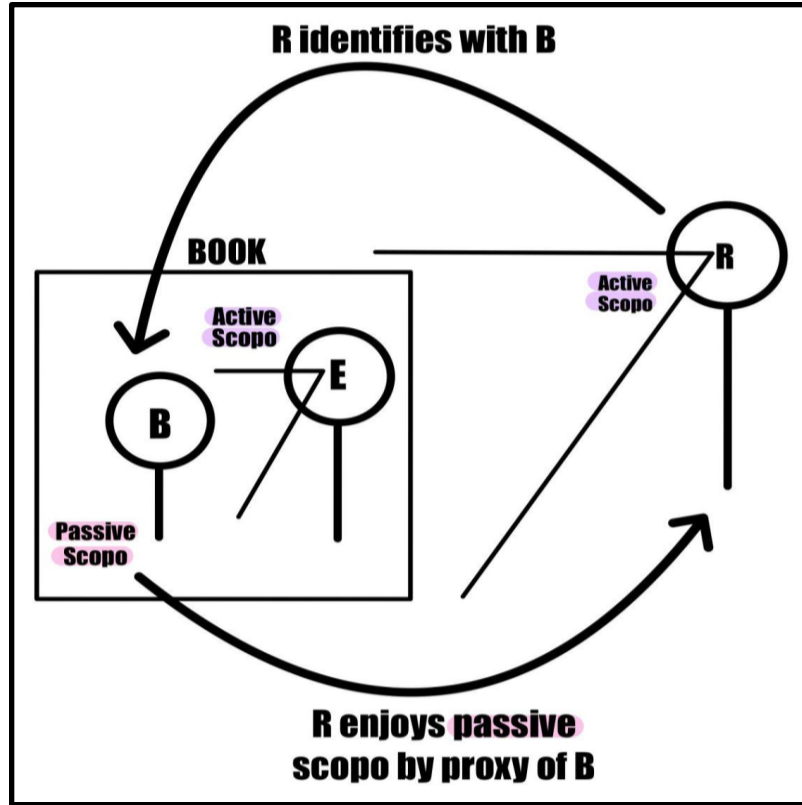


Figure C

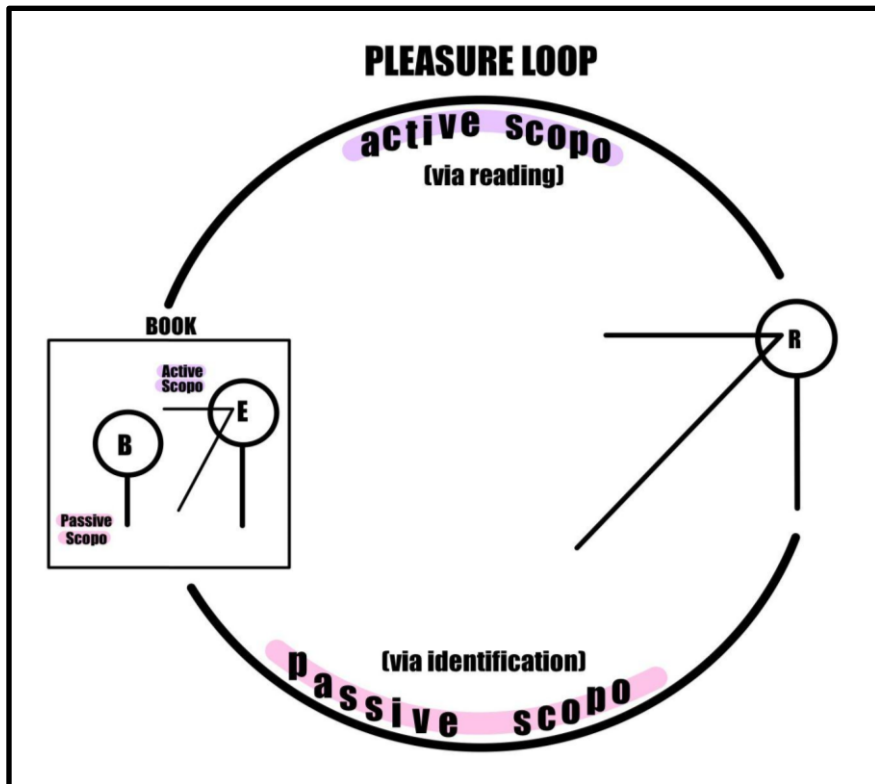


Figure D

I offer the concept of the pleasure loop as an explanation for the popularity of romance novels among women. Romance novels with female protagonists often, by way of their narrative structure and character interactions, display female desire and invite identification in a pattern that allows for the reader to occupy a dual spectator/spectated position and consequently participate in the pleasure loop. In these romance novels exists a female gaze that uplifts, rather than oppresses the female reader, that invites her to enjoy the experience, and that reflects rather than warps her female identity. To borrow Michelle Aaron's words, in this thesis I strive to "retell the discussion of spectatorship as a story of agency, which prioritizes the spectator's response and responsibility."⁶⁷ In this chapter, I have explained the ways in which the narrative structure of *Twilight* provides for narrative intimacy between Bella and the reader, and how the presence of the gaze, in this literary context, aids in the growth of that intimacy. The existence of both narrative intimacy and spectatorship results in a strong reader identification that allows for an immersive reading experience and ultimately narrative and visual pleasure gained through the pleasure loop. This positive interaction is what differentiates the female gaze from Mulvey's male gaze, and is made possible by the literary context it is mediated through. Ultimately, our focus is shifted to the reader's response, and the agency that

⁶⁷ Aaron, *Spectatorship*, 4.

spectatorship grants the reader. The following chapter in this thesis is dedicated to the reader's response and seeks to understand the real-world implications of the female gaze in literature.

Chapter 4: *Twilight* Reception and Conclusion

Literature acts on the world by acting on its readers.

–Patrocinio A. Schweickart, “Reading Ourselves.”⁶⁸

Through this thesis, we have come to understand that a reader may occupy the space of a female protagonist, such as Bella in *Twilight*, and likewise adopt her experience. What then, does this mean for women and text? In *Girls*, Catherine Driscoll argues that there is no “essential difference” between woman as experience and woman as representation because of how substantially the two inform each other.⁶⁹ Woman and text, then have a reciprocal relationship where each informs the other. Given this, I am interested in the real-world implications that *Twilight* has for its female readers, specifically in regards to the ever-present gaze that lives in the text, waiting to be activated by a reader. To understand the impact of *Twilight* on its readership, in this concluding chapter, I turn our attention to the impressively passionate, ever-growing, global fanbase of *The Twilight Saga*.

Hailed by *The New York Times* as “the book that sparked a ‘literary phenomenon’ and ‘redefined romance for a generation,’” (*TW*, front matter) *Twilight*

⁶⁸ Schweickart, “Reading Ourselves,” 615.

⁶⁹ Driscoll, *Girls*, 142.

has been immensely popular, especially among female-identifying readers,⁷⁰ like most romances.⁷¹ The series, which consists of 4 books, has enjoyed global popularity, with over 160 million copies sold,⁷² and has been translated into 49 languages as a result.⁷³ Furthermore, all four books have made an appearance on *The New York Times* bestseller list,⁷⁴ with *Twilight*, the first book in the series, spending 49 weeks at its top.⁷⁵ A total of five movies were produced from the series, garnishing over three billion dollars in revenue.⁷⁶ Such publication success has led *Twilight* to be “one of the biggest story sensations of this generation.”⁷⁷

While *Twilight*'s popularity is impressive, what is most intriguing about the book's celebrity is the way that it seems to stay with readers long after they've read the book. For reasons to be discussed, fans have a relationship with *Twilight* and its characters that drives them to re-engage with the novel again and again. As *Time* magazine comments, "people do not want to just read Meyer's books; they want to

⁷⁰ Leonardo Sax, “Gender Matters: Why Girls Adore ‘The Twilight Saga,’” *Savannah Morning News*, 2008. <https://www.savannahnow.com/story/opinion/2008/08/22/gender-matters-why-girls-adore-twilight-saga/13343411007/>.

⁷¹ Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance : Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 55.

⁷² McLoughlin, “Statistics.”

⁷³ Emily Martin, “The Twilight Saga Books vs. Movies,” Audible Blog, November 18 2021, <https://www.audible.com/blog/article-twilight-books-vs-movies>.

⁷⁴ Martin, “Books.”

⁷⁵ Julie Bosman, “Book Stokes Vampire Fever at Stores’ Parties,” *The New York Times*, August 2, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/02/books/02meyer.html?pid=FDK47UbR1TOzbvoihj-HM-ib&ugrp=c&smid=url-share>.

⁷⁶ Jack Carter, “How Much Each Twilight Movie Made at the Box Office,” Screen Rant, February 3, 2023, <https://screenrant.com/twilight-movies-box-office-earnings/>.

⁷⁷ “Twilight,” Barnes and Noble, accessed March 8, 2024, <https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/twilight-stephenie-meyer/1100269742?ean=9780316327336/>.

climb inside them and live there" (*TW*, front matter). The "Twilighters," or "Fanpires," as they're sometimes called, participate extensively in what scholars call "collaborative consumption."⁷⁸ This consumption style includes behavior such as vigilante marketing, which is essentially unpaid advertising of the novel; textual poaching, or writing new narratives using characters or ideas from another text; and generating visual artwork, often called "fan art."⁷⁹ This type of fan engagement is evidenced by the many websites, accounts, hashtags, and other internet based content creation forms dedicated to *Twilight*.

On these platforms, fans openly share their reactions to the novel, expressing their praises, doubts, speculations, and wishes for the series. In my research on the reception history of *Twilight*, I have gathered that constant in these responses by readers is the sentiment of *Twilight's* persistence on the female psyche. In a book review, one reader says that *Twilight* "touched me and stuck with me,"⁸⁰ displaying the lasting impact that readers repeatedly express the novel has had on them. Another says "reading this series is like jumping into a whole other life where the lines between real and fantasy are so blurred that you believe in things you never thought

⁷⁸ Hope Schau and Margo Buchanan-Oliver, "The Creation of Inspired Lives," in *Gender, Culture, and Consumer Behavior*, ed. by Cele Otnes and Linda Zayer (Taylor and Francis Group, 2012), 37.

⁷⁹ Schau, "The Creation," 37-38.

⁸⁰ Twilight_loverx333, review of "Twilight," Barnes and Noble, 2009, <https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/twilight-stephenie-meyer/1100269742?ean=9780316327336>.

you could.”⁸¹ This review speaks directly to the immersive experience that *Twilight* offers its readers, and the erosion of the subject-object boundary that allows for vicarious experience.

From the previous chapters, we understand that this ability to experience the novel as the protagonist is a product of close identification between the reader and a character. Readers of *Twilight* confirm through their comments on online platforms that “it is easy to relate to Bella,”⁸² and even to care for her. One reader comments, “Bella is trull[y] an amazing character from the very start, and I am positive every girl can trull[y] relate to her.”⁸³ Another fan echoes this thought, commenting that “the girl, Bella, is definitely a realistic someone I can believe in, relate to, and sympathize with.”⁸⁴ One reader finds the emotions in the book to invite her identification with the text, saying “the emotions expressed in the book feel very real and people can relate to those feelings and situations.”⁸⁵ These comments illustrate the relatability of Bella, and the kinship that these readers express with her character. Such reactions

⁸¹ Lacie2113, review of “Twilight,” Barnes and Noble, 2009, <https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/twilight-stephenie-meyer/1100269742?ean=9780316327336>.

⁸² SSCGirl, review of “Twilight,” Barnes and Noble, 2009, <https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/twilight-stephenie-meyer/1100269742?ean=9780316327336>.

⁸³ Anonymous, review of “Twilight,” Barnes and Noble, 2009, <https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/twilight-stephenie-meyer/1100269742?ean=9780316327336>.

⁸⁴ Kimi-Chan, review of “Twilight,” Barnes and Noble, 2009, <https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/twilight-stephenie-meyer/1100269742?ean=9780316327336>.

⁸⁵ IsabellaMarie2010, review of “Twilight,” Barnes and Noble, 2009, <https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/twilight-stephenie-meyer/1100269742?ean=9780316327336>.

illustrate Day's concept of narrative intimacy in a real-world context and demonstrate the intensely emotional reader-text relationship.⁸⁶

Fanfiction & Fan Art

To read a text and then to write about it is to seek to connect not only with the author of the original text, but also with a community of readers.

-Patrocinio Schweickart, "Reading Ourselves."⁸⁷

The Twilight Saga Wiki⁸⁸ is an example of the many platforms created by *Twilight*'s dedicated fans. Functioning as a virtual host for *Twilight* knowledge, the wiki acts as an information reference point, providing readers with access to all texts written by Stephenie Meyer and character descriptions. The site also has a "community" section that allows users to create interactive maps, blogs, and write about "news" that may be of interest to the *Twilight* community. In this "community" section is also an archive of fan writing in the form of "fanfiction." Fanfiction, (or

⁸⁶ For further reading on reader identification and vicarious experience in *Twilight*, see Heather Anaastasiu, "The Hero and the Id: a Psychoanalytic Inquiry into the Popularity of *Twilight*," in *Theorizing Twilight: Critical Essays on What's at Stake in a Post-Vampire World*, ed. Maggie Parke and Natalie Wilson (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Publishing, 2011), 41-55. Anastasiu argues that a reader experiences a release from psychological tension, created as a result of the desire underscoring the narrative, through identification with the hero's journey. She further discusses this idea in the context of *Twilight*-based fanfiction.

⁸⁷ Schweickart, "Reading Ourselves," 629.

⁸⁸ "Twilight Saga Wiki," https://twilightsaga.fandom.com/wiki/Twilight_Saga_Wiki.

“textual poaching”) is “writing that continues, interrupts, or just riffs on stories and characters other people have already written about,”⁸⁹ according to Anne Jamison, a scholar known for her work on the history and culture of fanfiction. As Jamison herself notes, this is a very common type of fan engagement with the *Twilight* series, estimating that there are “tens of thousands, even hundred of thousands of stories written by women inspired by *Twilight*.”⁹⁰ These renditions, editions, and additions of *Twilight* indicate a want of readers to engage further with the text and to interact with it in their own way, and each new story reveals some distinct experience with the novel.

The most notable fanfiction written in response to *Twilight* is *Fifty Shades of Grey*, written by British author Erika Mitchell, who goes by the pen name E.L. James. Originally titled *Master of the Universe*, James published the fanfiction on fanfiction.net using the pen name “Snowqueens Icedragon.”⁹¹ James herself has confirmed that *Fifty Shades* was directly inspired by the *Twilight* series,⁹² explaining

⁸⁹ Anne Jamison, *Fic* (Dallas: Smart Pio, 2013), 4.

⁹⁰ “Fifty Shades of Grey Fan Fiction Devotees Grapple with Film's Success,” *CBC News*, February 16, 2015, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/fifty-shades-of-grey-fan-fiction-devotees-grapple-with-film-s-success-1.2957296.

⁹¹ Hayley Cuccinello, “Fifty Shades of Green: How Fanfiction went from Dirty Little Secret to Money Machine,” *Forbes*, February 10, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hayleycuccinello/2017/02/10/fifty-shades-of-green-how-fanfiction-went-from-dirty-little-secret-to-money-machine/?sh=43c53276264c>.

⁹² Alexandra Alter, “The ‘Fifty Shades of Grey’ Author Finishes What She Started (and Restarted),” *The New York Times*, May 29, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/29/books/el-james-freed-fifty-shades-of-grey.html?pvid=CQSarYLTG4vetLVzyv2S22fo&ugrp=c&smid=url-share>.

in an interview, “I was inspired by [‘Twilight’ author] Stephenie Meyer ... she just kind of flipped this switch in my head ... I just sat on my sofa and just read them and read them and read them.”⁹³ James’ characters are so similar to those in *Twilight* that she has faced potential copyright lawsuits due to her characters being “explicitly based on the *Twilight* characters.”⁹⁴ James’ comments and inspiration from *Twilight* suggests a deep connection with the book and its characters, as we’ve similarly seen from other fans.⁹⁵ Other forms of fan engagement express a different internalization of *Twilight*, which will be examined in the next and final section.

Conclusion

To conclude, let us take a look at two visual responses from *Twilight* readers. While the earlier comments reflect a deep feeling of relatability to Bella, some fan art reveals an awareness of the spectatorship that is persistent throughout *Twilight*. The following image was created and posted by an account on Tumblr named “Loleia”:

⁹³ “Fifty Shades of Grey’ started out as ‘Twilight’ fan fiction before becoming an international phenomenon.” Business Insider, February 17, 2015. https://www.businessinsider.com/fifty-shades-of-grey-started-out-as-twilight-fan-fiction-2015-2?utm_source=copy-link&utm_medium=referral&utm_content=topbar.

⁹⁴ “Potential Copyright Dispute Between Bestselling Authors,” *Berkeley Technology Law Journal* (February 2015), <https://btlj.org/2015/02/potential-copyright-dispute-between-bestselling-authors/>.

⁹⁵ See Leslie Paris, “Fifty Shades of Fandom: the Intergenerational Permeability of Twilight Fan Culture,” *Feminist Media Studies* vol. 16, no. 4 (June 2016): 678-692. Paris discusses *Fifty Shades* in the context of an “adult fandom.”



“Mind Over Matter”⁹⁶

Figure E

The creator notes that she designed the artwork as a chapter illustration for the *Twilight* chapter “Mind Over Matter.” This is the chapter where Bella learns that Edward has been watching her sleep at night, and was discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis for its significance of the presence of a secret spectator. The illustration depicts a sleeping Bella who is watched through her window by Edward. The image is mostly dark, as the only light source comes from the moonlit window where Edward stands. The moonlight shines through the window behind Edward, illuminating Bella as the central focal point. As Edward stands directly in front of the only light source through which we can see Bella, it is fair to say she is visually shown in a manner

⁹⁶ Loleia, “Mind Over Matter, Tumblr post, April 2008.

representative of Edward's gaze. In other words, in this fan artwork, Bella is seen through the lens of a gaze, as she is in the novel. Both a reader of *Twilight* and a viewer of this artwork, then, experience Bella through spectatorship, both by nature of their own watching and by way of artful form. Another fan's artwork, pictured below, invokes a similar image.



"Charlie's House"⁹⁷

Figure F

⁹⁷ Darya Shnykina, Instagram post, September 7, 2019.

This illustration, titled “Charlie’s House,” is meant to portray Bella and her father Charlie’s home in *Twilight*. Pictured in “Charlie’s House” is a white home, which stands in contrast to a dark forest through which our view is slightly impeded. One room on the top floor of the home is lit up, and a silhouette is pictured against the light. A viewer knowledgeable of *Twilight* would recognize this to be Bella’s room, as her room “face[s] out over the front yard” (*TW*, 8) and the window accordingly to be the one which Edward uses to enter her room at night. In this illustration, Bella is again the focal point of our crafted perspective as a viewer, or spectator. The trees slightly obscuring our view suggests that the spectator is inside the forest, and likely hidden from Bella in her room, summoning the secret spectator and the “phantasmic” gaze discussed in Chapter Two. Though dark in color, the illustration does not suggest a scary or ominous tone, but projects instead a rather peaceful, quiet mood. From this artwork, it is clear that the gaze, especially that of an unknown, one-sided gaze, lays heavy in the minds of *Twilight* readers, and compels them to interact with spectatorship in the novel long after they’ve finished reading it. These pieces of artwork, along with the other types of fan engagement discussed, serve as evidence for the novel’s ability to connect with readers and the persistence of *Twilight* in the female psyche.

“To begin with (as an ending),” (VP, 1956) I posit that *Twilight*’s tremendous readership and inspirational influence can be explained by narrative intimacy and the

gaze, which function together to connect with readers and make for a deeply meaningful, psychological experience. The gaze's effect in this capacity is of the utmost importance because of its real-world implications for romance readers, which I have strived to exhibit in this final chapter. To borrow the words of Rudine Bishop, "reading then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, of reaffirming our place in the world and our society."⁹⁸ Through the literary female gaze, we are invited to see anew.



*Figure G*⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Rudine Bishop, "Windows and Mirrors: Children's Books and Parallel Cultures," in *California State University Reading Conference: 14th Annual Conference Proceedings*, ed. Margaret Atwell and Adria Klein (San Bernardino: California State University, 1990), 3.

⁹⁹ Catherine Hardwicke, *Twilight* (Los Angeles: Summit Entertainment, 2008).

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