Reading the Mormon Gothic

Stephenie Meyer. All titles published in New York by Little, Brown, in hardback: *Twilight* (2005), 544 pp., $19.99; ISBN: 0316160172; *New Moon* (2006), 608 pp., $19.99; ISBN: 0316160199; *Eclipse* (2007, special edition), 672 pp., $19.99; ISBN: 0316036293; and *Breaking Dawn* (2008), 768 pp., $22.99; ISBN: 031606792X

Reviewed by Tyler Chadwick

Mormons and vampires—a strange combination, indeed. Stephenie Meyer first brought them together in her mock-epic series of Twilight novels, a contemporary literary phenomenon that sprang, true to the classic gothic impulse, from the author's vividly persistent dream.[1] The series tracks Isabella ("Bella") Swan and her "vegetarian" vampire[2] beau, Edward Cullen, as they first meet in Forks, Washington, fall into forbidden love, and, after conquering a series of increasingly threatening obstacles, live happily ever after as immortal husband and wife.

Although there is little in the story that openly speaks to LDS theology, its cultural reception, most notably among active Latter-day Saints (particularly LDS youth), and Meyer's self-avowed Mormonism virtually beg readers to view it as an article of the faith. For some enthusiastic readers, this response entails adoring Meyer's commitment to her characters' chastity, her apparent affirmation of choice and moral agency, and her infusion of light into the darkly erotic mythology of vampires.

However, for some orthodox Mormons, the uncanniness of Meyer's world simply misses the mark of LDS theology. In an assembly of letters written to the editor of *Meridian Magazine* in response to the magazine's positive treatment of the *Twilight* saga, several readers wonder how we Mormons, "the children of . . . Light," can justifiably indulge ourselves by reading literary works situated in supernatural realms of darkness and touching the inherent sensuality of human experience.[3] How have we, "the very Elect" of God, one asks, "been hood winked [sic] and dazzled by the Adversary" into thinking that *Twilight* and its sequels are "harmless" entertainment?[4] For despite *Twilight*'s squeaky clean

façade, the story seethes with an "erotics of abstinence,"[5] a muted sexual interplay that arises as Bella's hormones and Edward's bloodlust repeatedly interact and their bodies ache to possess one another, often actively to the point of arousal, though never beyond sexual climax until after their marriage in *Breaking Dawn.*

In light of LDS teachings on chastity, this unconscious answer to the question "How far can we go without going all the way?" may thus pose valid concerns for those worried about the morality of our youth and Meyer's influence on their attitudes toward sexuality. Hence, even if readers don't grasp the historical connection between vampirism and sexual perversion, this tension between a self-consciously hygienic surface and an implicitly dirty core leads one letter writer to ask why we insist on "glamoriz[ing]" and "splitting hairs with evil." For as this writer reminds us, "The Savior does not split hairs[;] wrong is wrong, evil is evil. Dress it up or slice it any way you want to . . ., the [teachings of the] Prophets of the Lord . . . are contrary to Ms. Meyer[']s story lines."[6]

Similar arguments have been leveled against Eugene Woodbury's *Angel Falling Softly* (Provo, Utah: Zarahemla Books, 2008), another, more explicitly erotic iteration of the Mormon/vampire union. In Woodbury's tale, Rachel Forsythe, wife of an LDS bishop, struggles to come to terms with her youngest daughter's terminal disease. Unwilling to believe that neither God nor medical science is going to restore her daughter's health, she attaches herself to Milada Daranyi, a mysterious new neighbor who, Rachel senses, may have the power to release her daughter from the chains of death and her family from despair. Once Rachel learns that Milada is a vampire, the two women set in motion a pattern of sacrifice and a separation that, in the end, prove redemptively subversive to both, restructuring their individual faith, their identities, and their families in apocalyptic ways.

Angel Falling Softly differs from *Twilight* in form, approach, and audience. *Twilight* is a sprawling young adult romance published by a national publishing house, a story in which Mormonism plays a largely metatextual role while *Angel,* a genre-based book printed by an independent Mormon publisher, takes an outsider's view of Wasatch Front Mormon culture even as it pokes at the boundaries of LDS theology and of the vampire genre. However, each is firmly linked to the other and rooted in Mormonism in its interaction,

however unconscious, with Freud's notion of "the uncanny." As Freud has it, that which is uncanny is an object, image, or idea that is alternately "familiar and agreeable" *and* "kept out of sight" and that, through this paradox, presents us with "nothing new or alien" but rather illustrates "something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through a process of repression."[6] Since the uncanny thus occupies the threshold between the unfamiliar and the familiar, the imagined and the real, in its broadest sense it essentially serves a subversive function in the systems through which we mediate the immaterial and material aspects of our world, including psychology, language, and religion. In terms of the Mormon gothic, as I've suggested here, this repressed and subversive familiarity deals with more than simply the hidden aspects of Edward's or Milada's vampirism, an identity each book's protagonists and readers sense–but are ultimately unsure of– from the beginning. Beyond that, it suggests that we must confront the psychologically or linguistically or metaphysically repressed aspects of our psyches (as represented by the gothic monster) if we are to move through the "silence, solitude[,] and darkness"[7] of estrangement into a genuine state of at-one-ment with self and others, including God.

For those strictly raised into repression and social taboo, this dynamic ultimately means confronting the physical desire and curiosity about the nature of sin and evil that flow beneath the individual and the collective consciousness. And that means, in one sense, learning to accept the role an artist (even an LDS artist) can play in laying bare the deeply human experiences, emotions, and sensations that we've successfully tucked away beneath shaded memories and normative attitudes and behaviors. Because language, as art, is essentially compressed or refined experience, it offers the perfect medium through which to absorb, expand, and complete our own life experience to "the nth power" and to fulfill the obligation and opportunity to progress placed on us through our theological and cultural relationship with Mormonism–but only if we're willing to vicariously explore alternate, rhetorical lives.

Tory C. Anderson explores this particular conception of literature and its potential to get at "the heart of the meaning of life without ever talking about it" by leading us through Gustave Flaubert's

Madame Bovary. In his gloss of the story, he illustrates how the skilled and conscientious artist can use aspects of the uncanny—in Flaubert's case, a familiar but repressed reality—to help us feel and understand how another feels and understands by moving us through a fictional life, a "refined life." In this way, Anderson says, readers can "understand something like the ugliness of unchastity without experiencing it," much as Christ can understand everything we've felt and done without actually doing it himself.[8]

For readers to carry this burden with the writer, however, they must open themselves to the writer's world(s), as expressed through the demanding realities of language, and allow themselves to increase in understanding vicariously. If we deny our ourselves the vitality of such experience in our venture toward godhood by refusing an invitation into the uncanny—especially as this invitation relates to gaining understanding of sexuality, sin, and evil without falling prey to the (potential) perverseness of these principles—it may just take us, as Anderson observes, "four billion earth lives (give or take a million) to experience what we need to experience to become like God."[9] Stephenie Meyer summons us, particularly as LDS readers, into this revisionary reading of the ungodly through her rearticulation of the gothic aesthetic—that is, by coaxing the vampire novel into the light, she gives us the opportunity to confront and come to terms with the implicit humanness of the uncanny as we grow into the fullness of our stature as embodied children of an embodied God.

Notes

1. Stephenie Meyer, "The Story behind *Twilight*," StephenieMeyer.com, http://www.stepheniemeyer.com/twilight.html (accessed November 17, 2008).

2. A unique brand of principled vampire (as it were) who drinks animal instead of human blood.

3. A. Hartung, "Is Everyone Nuts?" in "*Dark Knight* and *Twilight* Saga Surge Reader Response," letters, *Meridian Magazine*, August 8, 2006, http://www.meridianmagazine.com/letters/080806knight.html (accessed October 30, 2008).

4. Nina Jo Jensen, "Missing the Point," in ibid.

5. Lev Grossman, "Stephenie Meyer: A New J. K. Rowling?", posted April 24, 2008, http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1734838,00.html (accessed August 14, 2008).

6. Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism,* edited by Vincent B. Leitch et al., and translated by Alix Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2001), 933, 944.

7. Ibid., 952.

8. Tory C. Anderson, "Just the Fiction, Ma'am," in *Tending the Garden: Essays on Mormon Literature,* edited by Eugene England and Lavina Fielding Anderson (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 73.

9. Ibid.

When Your Eternal Companion Has Fangs

Stephenie Meyer. *Breaking Dawn.* New York: Little, Brown, 2008. 768 pp. Cloth: $22.99. ISBN: 978-0316067928

Reviewed by Jonathan Green

As a teacher of language and literature, I am probably supposed to sneer at Stephenie Meyer's novels. They are not just genre fiction but, by blending urban fantasy and romance, genre fiction twice over; they are not only written for the young adult market, but they also avoid offending the sensitivities of Mormon readers; and their prose does not insist that you stop and weep over its sheer beauty. But the students whom I've observed reading one of the *Twilight* novels before class—the only unassigned books I've seen anyone reading so far this semester—are among my brightest and most articulate students. That in itself is evidence that Meyer has chosen some of the right steps in the mysterious dance between authors and readers. Certainly *Twilight* (New York: Little, Brown, 2006) and *The Host* (New York: Little, Brown, 2008), Meyer's recent science fiction novel, have demonstrated the author's talents, among them the ability to open novels so that readers don't put the book down until they reach the middle; and in *Breaking Dawn,* the last novel in the *Twilight* series, Meyer effectively renders the narrative voices of Bella, her protagonist who is in love with the vampire Edward, and Jacob, her perpetually second-best werewolf friend. There would have been nothing wrong with bringing the plot to the satisfying conclusion that my students have been anticipating, but *Breaking Dawn* undertakes