

Bite-Sized Beauty: The *Twilight* Manual to Body Ideals and Disordered Eating

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Introduction

Where does one begin to introduce and describe the *Twilight* Saga? Fourteen-year-old me would dreamily say it is a love story between two people who belong in different worlds, whose fate is supposedly decided because of their nature, yet succeed in beating the odds and creating a magical bond. This view of *Twilight*¹ still lives in every person who was mesmerised by the world Stephenie Meyer created in 2005, but growing helps us see it in a new light, and that is why I decided to revolve my thesis around it. Meyer's best-selling series puts forward a typical paranormal romance between a teenage girl and a morbidly good-looking vampire. This romance has been discussed repeatedly, both by the fans who idolise the story, and the detractors who criticise its archaic view of gender roles and sexuality. Although the

¹ I will be using *Twilight* to refer to the four books published between 2005 and 2008, unless specified otherwise.

romantic aspect of the series is important for my argumentation, my thesis focuses mainly on the characters, their view of themselves, and their behaviours: how does Bella incarnate body ideals and the societal pressure to adhere to them? What does Edward's immaculate self-control ability really mean? And why should a simple young adult book pay more attention to the message it teaches a blooming readership? A reading through feminist and cognitive literary lenses will answer these questions by providing a profound understanding of the depiction of body standards and eating behaviours in *Twilight*. It becomes evident that these representations incite scrutiny, and that the young adult genre has nowadays the responsibility to educate on a healthy way to perceive oneself and others.

First, it is important to situate *Twilight* in a large literary spectrum. It is mainly labelled as young adult romantic fiction, targeting teenagers and revolving around a teenager. Alicia Otano Unzue describes the series as a marker of the "adolescent popular fiction canon", and the first American young adult novel to compete with the *Harry Potter* franchise in terms of success (1). Moreover, Stephenie Meyer's series focuses on the romance between Bella and Edward, and how they both try to move past the obstacles and make their seemingly impossible love work. However, there are multiple elements that make it trespass the young adult genre to other subgenres. Indeed, its supernatural aspect makes it fall under the paranormal romance genre, more specifically the vampire romance. In "My Vampire Boyfriend: Postfeminism, 'Perfect' Masculinity, and the Contemporary Appeal of Paranormal Romance", Ananya Mukherjea explains how the genre typically depicts the "old-school gentleman-vampires" who "offer the security and stability of old-fashioned gentlemen" (3). Her description fits the portrayal of Edward's personality, who in a gentlemanly manner defends and protects Bella in all sorts of ways. His traits are an aspect that young readers are attracted to in these novels; they give them a sense of security and respect (Mukherjea 3). Besides, another subgenre that *Twilight* fits into due to its paranormal elements is the Gothic romance, and this one is just as important for my analysis since it highlights what Stephenie Meyer considers horrific in her story.

The Gothic romance dates back to the late 18th century, and it has gone through a lot of changes to become the staple of Horror literature that entices readers today. Joseph Crawford describes the evolution of the Gothic romance in *The Twilight of the Gothic?*: the genre used to englobe books involving medieval romance stories, which use violence, magic, and adventure in their plots (16). Crawford explains that they were usually stories of "male heroes in feudal settings", but the famous Gothic author Ann Radcliff changed the trajectory by rather depicting heroines in distress. It is a pattern later followed by many authors after her who championed the fear-driven Gothic widely recognised nowadays (18). Also, Crawford mentions that this Radcliffian Gothic simply tells the story of its predecessors from another perspective, while highlighting the darkness and fear that the heroine experiences dealing with the cruel and monstrous characters (19). Afterwards, this dynamic shifted from apprehension and disgust to a more enabling approach in future prominent Gothic works such as *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier, who forgives the crimes of the man

she loves rather than holding him accountable (Crawford 42). This, as Crawford clarifies, highlights the start of romanticising the monstrous in mass market romance, and opens the door to a Gothic that allows the love between a human, and a creature that does not usually incite that feeling (46). But one thing that the Gothic genre kept unchanged throughout the years is its use of this fear, whether it is lurking or explicit, in order to assess social issues and the violence that human nature is capable of (Budruweit 270).

Now more specifically, *Twilight* also belongs to the subgenre of Gothic vampire literature, following a long line starting with John William Polidori's *The Vampyre*, published in 1819. Mirroring the genres mentioned before, significant transformations have occurred to the vampire novel across time, since Polidori's Lord Ruthven displays a completely different facet of the blood-drinking creatures than Edward Cullen and his virtuousness together with self-restraint. The story opens with Polidori explaining how vampirism is seen across different countries and cultures, mentioning "the dead rising from their graves, and feeding upon the blood of the young and beautiful" (xix). Polidori includes in his introduction that vampirism shares the similarity of being an abomination in each version of the superstition: in the Arabian tale, the vampire is a woman coming back from the dead to torment her lover; the Greeks consider it a punishment for those who committed horrible crimes in their life (xxii-iv). This introduction highlights the vampire's monstrosity in *The Vampyre*; the creatures described are said to bring horror at the mention of their names (Polidori 44). After Polidori's work, the vampire novel transitioned gradually, resulting in a new version of the undead, haunting the fantasy of fans of supernatural stories.

Indeed, the vampire novel has made a considerable turn since the publication of *The Vampyre*. It progressed from repugnant, cold-blooded entities that derive pleasure from senseless killing to more sensual beings capable of experiencing emotions and representing a heroic fantasy. Although later Gothic novels still portray vampires as creatures who go on a streak of crimes, akin to the protagonist of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, there is a noteworthy difference: this time, the vampire is motivated. Instead of solely committing pointless and savage murders, *Dracula* is also depicted as seeking power (Crawford 54). Afterwards, the horrifying monsters gained a more palatable guise, namely an erotic and sensual one as in Anne Rice's *The Vampire Chronicles*, while still "renewing critiques of gender norms" (Budruweit 271). Moreover, Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* is considered one of the most important revisions of the genre in the 1970s; her main character Lestat belongs to a "hidden vampire society" with its own values and systems (Crawford 56), making him part of a community like the Cullens, rather than a mere perversion of nature. Crawford reports that *The Vampire Chronicles* were the first books to make vampires social creatures and to give them depth of relationships and social interaction, contrary to the loner vampires of the previous eras (56). As a matter of fact, this new socialised vampire is also present in *Twilight*, illustrating a reconstructed monster who is not only able to live in a family and build relations in a parallel hidden world

but can also integrate into normal human society, and blend with civilisation by being capable of following human rules.

Actually, the *Twilight* novels deviate from the Gothic tradition, discarding most of the traits that make vampires the elements of looming fear, and giving monstrosity to other aspects of the narrative. While Rice's vampires are more humanised through the depiction of their different relationships, they are still part of a pariah monstrous society. Contrary to Rice, Stephenie Meyer's creatures are completely part of the human world and are respected and revered by it as well. The monstrous aspect of the novels is not embodied by Edward, whose self-discipline elevates him to the status of hero, but rather in other features. For example, the setting in *Twilight* is Forks, Washington, a town that Bella describes as having a "gloomy, omnipresent shade" (Meyer, *Twilight* 3), which is a reference to the usually dark and cold atmosphere of the traditional Gothic. Other than this typical dreary context, she encounters creatures she never knew existed, and these awake a special type of fear in the protagonist – that of not being accepted. One would think the vampires and werewolves are the things that haunt Bella and worry her the most, but her inner demons and conflicts emerge as the real monsters of the story. In fact, the undead and the shapeshifters are made immensely appealing by Stephenie Meyer; the vampires are beautiful and chivalrous, while the werewolves are strong and courageous. Instead of being afraid of the gory monsters, Bella is more concerned about whether she will be accepted by her peers, and most importantly, by the creatures she grows to idolise and crave to turn into.

Upon initial reading, *Twilight* presents itself as a story that combines the elements to make the target audience fantasise and believe in an impossible love, all while shifting the fear from a fictional presence to something prominent in our own real society. Bella is first intrigued by Edward who, unlike the rest of her new classmates, does not seem to like being in her presence. She is so frustrated by the fact that this boy has something against her, that she obsessively investigates his whereabouts. We then realise through Bella's eyes that Edward does not hate her because she is a plain girl from Phoenix, but rather the opposite: he is extremely attracted to her and her blood so that his virtuous vampire nature makes him immediately retreat (Meyer, *Twilight* 156–163). This highlights the real threats of the story: the divide that makes Bella and Edward's relationship complicated, and most importantly, Bella's low self-esteem and obsession with being seen as beautiful. By the time Bella realises that Edward is in fact fascinated by her, we do go through the process of her lamenting over the fact that she is not as good as her peers, especially the other members of the Cullen family. After uncovering the secret of the Cullens, unlike Polidori's protagonist Aubrey who is immediately alert after realising lord Ruthven's nature (Polidori 61–62), Bella grows more curious, and her attraction to them becomes stronger. She is now interested to know more about the species she thought were only part of folk stories, to the extent of wanting to become one of them. Strength, beauty, and more importantly, eternal perfection – all these advantages

sound like the best solution to Bella's worst fear: not being good enough. This obsession over appearance mirrors the pressure that women are put under in our society, which is worth examining through a feminist lens.

Another aspect of Meyer's vampires that minimises their frightful identity, or at least the ones with yellow eyes, is that they do not feed on humans, emphasising self-control as their immense virtue. Edward explains to Bella that he, his family, and other harmless vampires choose to lead a life where they live among humans and drink animal blood to survive (Meyer, *Twilight* 164), putting them on a pedestal compared to the other savages of their kind. Although evil and dangerous, the red-eyed vampires feeding on humans are just as beautiful. With that in mind, we see that beauty is still a major aspect of these creatures, and the main difference appears to be how some are more civilised and acceptable than others. The dietary restrictions seem to be a differentiating factor between the other characters as well, as each has a different attitude towards food. On one hand, the main character barely eats anything throughout the books, avoiding meals in multiple instances, solely craving to be around the Cullens. On the other hand, the other faction of supernatural creatures, the werewolves, are simply seen as savages with no etiquette, who indulge as they please reinforcing their similarity to animals (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 149). This aspect of restrictive and controlled eating behaviours is also a reflection of social standards of what is acceptable and what is not. Hunger is usually seen as a sign of discipline, as well as a means to get the perfect body by Western criteria, which, once again, makes the feminist perspective suitable for the analysis of the characters' behaviours and ideologies.

Within the scope of my thesis, it is important to go back to the foundational genre that *Twilight* is classified under. This is, first and foremost, a young adult novel, targeting a group of young girls learning how to navigate life in a growing and changing body and mind. According to Maria Nikolajeva, "Childhood and adolescence are periods of identity formation. Adolescence especially is a dynamic and turbulent phase of human life, and it is perhaps young adult fiction that has the strongest potential to offer readers somewhat accurate portrayals of selfhood" (Reading 141). This means that most of Stephenie Meyer's readers are drawn to her *Twilight* series to find a relatable character in Bella: a teenager navigating the growing pains in a new environment, but is she then the most suitable example of how to fit within her peers? Between self-deprecation and self-starvation, Meyer's books paint an outdated and unhealthy model of growth for a group of teenagers, and the cognitive literary reading of *Twilight* is a means to argue about the depth of this problematic representation.

The *Twilight* novels put forward a teenage female character who struggles with self-esteem and relationships, providing the reader with relatable experiences, mirroring the struggle of young girls in modern society. In addition to embodying unrealistic body ideals, Bella and the Cullens portray unhealthy eating behaviours for multiple purposes. For the vampires, the dietary restrictions are a sign of self-discipline and control. Hunger is used to elevate them from the status of predators to

heroes, and therefore set them apart from the creatures who live by the laws of nature. Bella, on the other hand, uses hunger to control her emotions, especially since her life changes at a fast pace, and repressing her appetite makes her take the reins. In addition, repressing appetite in *Twilight* covers both food and sexual desire; while Bella seems to have full mastery of her food intake, her sexuality is much less controllable, in contrast with Edward who refuses to cave into her demands. For a young audience, repressing one's urges and desires is championed as a sign of discipline and a means to social integration, particularly considering Bella's ultimate transformation. The protagonist consecrates the majority of the novels wishing to be a perfect vampire while hating her soft and undisciplined human body. Finally, her wishes come true as she becomes a perfect orderly member of the Cullens clan, confirming all the ideologies portrayed in the series.

With such a message, the teenage reader is faced with a heroine who confirms the unrealistic body ideals and normalises eating disorder tendencies, which further propagates the pressure on young girls to correspond to social standards, thus endangering their health. Body issues as illustrated in *Twilight* are common within the young adult genre: "issues of weight, beauty, dieting, and 'lookism' (the idea that a person is judged solely by looks) can be found in every subset of [young adult] literature" (Younger, *Learning Curves* xvi). The pressure of using the different methods to change one's body is especially dangerous for individuals who are still in the growing process; whose bodies are constantly changing and are realistically unable to control it, which *Twilight* paints as the contrary. While all adolescents go through the same growth process, young girls are primarily targeted by said pressure. In Natalie Angier's words:

girls, poor girls, are in the thick of our intolerance and vacillation. Girls put on body fat as they pass into adulthood. They put on fat more easily than boys do, thank you very much, Lady Estradiol. And then they are subject to the creed of total control, the idea that we can subdue and discipline our bodies if we work very very hard at it. The message of self-control is amplified by the pubescent brain, which is flailing about for the tools to control and soothe itself and to find what works, how to gather personal and sexual power. Dieting becomes a proxy for power. (qtd. in Younger, *Learning Curves* 5–6)

The diet metaphor is prominent in the eating behaviours of the vampires and Bella's transformation, and Angier's notions of personal and sexual power through dietary restrictions are also present in Meyer's novel. With such imagery and distinct patterns, combined with Meyer's use of literary techniques that break the barrier between fiction and reality, the reader is subjected to yet another validation of unrealistic body ideals and how to reach them. This portrayal offers the potential for readers to relate to the protagonist and internalise her ideologies. In order to denounce the responsibility of young adult novels in raising awareness about these issues and the importance of the messages they propagate, both feminist and cognitive literary

theories provide necessary notions to dissect *Twilight* specifically, and the genre in general.

Of Mind and Body: Theoretical Approach

To begin, the selection of *Twilight* as the focal point of this thesis is not arbitrary, because its notoriety makes it a powerful medium. In fact, Meyer's works are a notably successful young adult series that explores the topics of self-worth and self-control in an explicit way, which allows a clear understanding of the importance of representation in the genre. As aforementioned, Stephenie Meyer created a world where the scariest thing for the main character is not the monster lurking in the darkness, but rather whether that monster will love her despite her imperfections. This makes the question of ideal bodies and linking one's value to appearance a prominent theme in a novel targeting mainly adolescent girls. Moreover, the contrast between the good and the bad, the civil and the savage, and the line between each pole is control. Controlling one's appearance and desire is a recurring topic throughout the entirety of *Twilight*, and this relates as well to its Gothicism in order to define who, or what, is monstrous. Again, in a novel with a majority of teenage readership, what is the limit of unhealthy behaviours that a story can perpetuate?

The main approach to my analysis is feminist theory, which provides a clear view of social standards, and how the media continue to spread them in different ways. Feminism has undergone successive waves of transformation, beginning with the aim of lifting women from the status of second-class citizens in the initial wave and progressing to the contemporary fourth wave which aspires to expose inequalities through social media platforms. However, a central focal point across all waves remained the female body. In fact, the policing and objectification of women's bodies is not a recent phenomenon, but rather a historical practice that can be traced back centuries. According to Maryanne Cline Horowitz, this practice is seen in the "Aristotelian intellectual habit of describing the female body as a departure from the norm of the male body and of deducing a characterization of femaleness by lack of maleness" (185). This focus on the woman's body and how it differs from a man's is further analysed by feminist scholars, considering it an excuse for the patriarchal society to exclude women from the public sphere and subordinate them to the private one. Indeed, as stated by Dana Jalbert Stauffer in her article titled "Aristotle's Account of the Subjection of Women", it is noteworthy that Aristotle, in his philosophical ideology, perceived women to be inherently associated with their physical bodies. Consequently, he proposed that women are rightfully subjected to the rule of men, who, in contrast, are characterised by being the manifestation of a soul, which naturally confirms domination over the body (935).

The matter of exerting control over women's bodies has been a focus within feminist discourse, encompassing various manifestations of societal imposition regarding the prescribed body ideals that women are expected to adhere to. Susan

Bordo addresses the topic often in her writings, namely in her book *Unbearable Weight*, where she analyses the domination of unhealthy representations of the body and food behaviours in media. Subsequently, as will be discussed in the forthcoming analysis of *Twilight*, a recurrent pattern takes shape across media platforms. It defines societal expectations regarding the desired physical appearance of the female body and the everlasting efforts exerted by women to conform to such ideals. Bordo delves into a significant aspect concerning the role of feminism in relation to this matter: she addresses the question of why, despite feminism shedding light on these unattainable standards and detrimental behaviours, a considerable number of women still choose to embrace them (30). She states that feminism does not dictate what we should and should not do. Conversely, it gives us an “understanding, enhanced *consciousness* of the power, complexity, and systemic nature of culture, the interconnected webs of its functioning”, then each person is given the chance to decide based on this consciousness (Bordo 30). That is why, arguing that books like *Twilight* perpetuate toxic ideals does not mean that it will stop people from reading them, but it inspires healthier representations in the young adult genre. Moreover, it gives the young readers an idea, as well as a set of tools to understand what lies behind the fictional fantasy.

Furthermore, feminists have drawn connections between the imposition of rigid standards on women and their vulnerability to subordination, fashioned on the previously mentioned Aristotelian notions. This sentiment is perfectly expressed by Andrea Dworkin in her work *Woman Hating*:

Standards of beauty describe in precise terms the relationship that an individual will have to her own body. They prescribe her mobility, spontaneity, posture, gait, the uses to which she can put her body. *They define precisely the dimensions of her physical freedom.* And, of course, the relationship between physical freedom and psychological development, intellectual possibility, and creative potential is an umbilical one. (qtd. in Bordo 21)

This means that these body ideals continue to restrain women and keep them from reaching their potential. As Dworkin further explains, these ideals include every part of the body, and the list is unending when it comes to the changes women have to go through on a regular basis to be accepted as beautiful in society. Most importantly, she highlights the fact that achieving these ideals is expected from women from the ages of 11 and 12 until the very end (qtd. in Bordo 21). In the changing trends of media, one can observe the shift in ideals that perpetuates a continuous flow of economic activities. Indeed, a consistent pattern emerges within which there is always a perceived imperfection that women must correct to meet societal expectations. This phenomenon is especially worth analysing when it comes to the young audience.

Bordo addresses the preface of the tenth-anniversary edition of *Unbearable Weight* to her daughter Cassie, calling it “The Empire of Images”, because images are indeed a ruling force in our society. The purpose of this preface is to express

concern towards the pressure that the media puts on women, starting from a very young age, to fit into a certain mould while disregarding their wellbeing. In her work, Bordo shares her worries as a mother when observing television programs that convey the message to young girls that their natural selves need improvement. She argues that the show she uses as an example promotes a shift towards more feminine attire rather than embracing their preference for “tomboy” outfits (xxviii). In addition, it encourages black girls to straighten their hair and even dictates how they should move their bodies to conform to societal standards of attractiveness. This influence primarily stems from the expectations of their mothers and the need to appeal to the male viewership (Bordo xxviii). The instillation of body ideals begins at an early age, and the media consistently reinforces the notion that there is always a higher level to attain, whether it is through shinier hair, clearer skin, or the ultimate pillar of beauty: a consistently slender physique.

It is intriguing to dissect the various illustrations of beauty ideals; however, within Western society, thinness appears to be regarded as the epitome of beauty. For example, multiple coming-of-age movies that marked pop culture present a protagonist that undergoes a drastic makeover in order to climb the social hierarchy and win the affection of a love interest. Similarly, with the nearing of hot and sunny weather, a wave of advertisements promoting dieting programs submerges television and various social media platforms. In fact, the obsession with the thin body that we see now was initially more pronounced in the Western sphere, but due to the media influence and globalisation, it spread gradually to other cultures, reshaping their views of beauty. For instance, reflecting on my own experience growing up in Morocco, I got to observe the dichotomy between the older generation’s conception of beauty and that of the younger one, who had been more subjected to westernised ideals. Susan Bordo gives an interesting and similar example in “The Empire of Images”. She relates that in Central Africa, where thinness has connotations of sickness and poverty, women tend to be encouraged to gain weight, especially when they are on the verge of getting married, therefore “voluptuous” women were sent as contestants to Miss World (xiv). The problem is, this contest is judged by Western standards, and therefore these contestants were at the bottom of the pyramid since they were not seen as beautiful. Later on, “Agbani Darego, a light-skinned, hyper-skinny beauty” entered the contest and won, making her the first Black African to get the title of Miss World, and as a result, introducing, to young African girls the power of Western beauty ideals (xiv). This is a manifestation of how these standards propagate and influence other cultures and ideologies; the media has the power to spread body ideals to the four corners of the world, and impose them on different age groups.

Moreover, scholarly investigations have established that this fixation on the ideal body, perpetuated by cultural and media influences, is strongly connected to patterns of body dissatisfaction and eating disorders (Paxton and Damiano 271). In their book, *The Media and Body Image*, Maggie Wykes and Barrie Gunter explain that this phenomenon of body dissatisfaction is common among men as well as women,

but low self-esteem seems to be a prominent driver for thinness among women specifically (5). Moreover, they argue that the higher rate of body-related issues among women contributes to the rise of eating disorders. The disorders mentioned before in terms of the thinness cult are also being discussed on a global scale due to their spread from the Western world to other cultures (Wykes and Gunter 5–13). Susan Bordo addresses this particular topic as well, relating the curious case of the translation of her articles on eating disorders to Chinese and Japanese, since the research she had conducted for those articles demonstrated the lack of awareness surrounding the topic in Asia (xv). Bordo cites a quote from *Asian Week* magazine by Eunice Park, underscoring that the westernisation of Asian countries and the thin body aesthetic brought up an overwhelming surge of eating disorders (qtd. in xv), and this further demonstrates the capacity of ideologies to reshape identities and behaviours.

These different concepts from feminist theory provide a valuable analytical framework to understand the messages behind the representation of body ideals and eating behaviours in *Twilight*. Stephenie Meyer highlights the different manifestations of low self-esteem in Bella's character: self-deprecation, comparison, fear of rejection etc., which only reinforces the idea that the perfect body is tightly linked to one's worth in our society. Aside from body dissatisfaction, dietary restrictions are also a common topic, especially the deprivation of food in various cases, which is one of the displays of eating disorders. Understanding the harm caused by the perpetuation of such messages to the young readership is important to highlight the responsibility that young adult books have, and why changing these trends is urgently needed. To do so, cognitive literary theory adds a number of necessary concepts to the framework.

One of the pioneers of cognitive literary theory is the cognitive scientist and linguist Mark Turner, who dived into the intricate ways the mind functions in relation to literature. In his book *The Literary Mind*, Turner investigates narrative imagining as the primary tool of thought, which enables us to look “into the future of predicting, of planning, and of explaining” (5–8). One of his main focuses is the mind's capacity for projection: while reading a specific story, we are capable of projecting it to a much larger one, including our own life (Turner 5–8). This projection helps us understand a story based on our own experience, as well as build our understanding based on said story thus becoming an exchange between our mind and literature. Turner further explains this phenomenon with the notion of “image schemas”, describing them as “skeletal patterns that recur in our sensory and motor experiences”, arising from “perception” as well as “interaction” (16). This means that these schemas help our mind with the projection process by perceiving the experience through our already given knowledge and completing it through the newly interacted with.

Specifically, by employing cognitive literary theory, Maria Nikolajeva delves into the intricate way children's literature helps shape the mental landscapes of its young readers. In *Reading for Learning*, she clarifies the importance of fiction in building the

mind of whom she refers to as “novice” readers. Their experiences of real life are narrow; therefore, fiction provides a worthy “second-hand experience”, completing Mark Turner’s claim that the mind interacts with story by projecting our experiences on the narrative, as well as building our experience from it (Nikolajeva, *Reading* 84). Due to the inexperience of novice readers, they are more likely to have a prompt strong affective response to the fictional narrative, overpowering their ability to rearrange information and sort them (Nikolajeva, *Reading* 16). This makes the novice readers’ connection to the fictional work and its characters deeper and its establishment easier, which is why it is important to carefully tailor the message behind books targeting this specific audience.

Moreover, according to Nikolajeva, the cognitive and empathetic immersion in fiction is a concrete phenomenon linked to our brain’s activity (*Reading* 83). While the connections created with fictional characters might seem trivial and be more of a romanticised idea of engagement with literary texts, neuroscience has proven that it has to do with the cognitive processing of information. Nikolajeva clarifies that by saying:

Fiction creates situations in which emotions are simulated; we engage with literary characters’ emotions because our brains can, through mirror neurons, simulate other people’s goals in the same manner as it can simulate our own goals, irrespective of whether these “others” are real or fictional. Cognitive critics mentioned earlier [...] purport that the reason we can engage with fictive characters is a connection between the mediated experience of the text and emotional experience stored in the brain. (*Reading* 83)

In other words, due to the mirror neurons, image schemas, and all the components of brain activity, reading incites similar reactions to real-life experiences, and, therefore, interacts with fiction the way it does with reality. Background knowledge and previous encounters inform the individual’s engagement with their surroundings, thus helping them learn. According to cognitive literary theory, this is the same pattern our mind follows when reading literature and fiction.

Also, the ability to relate and empathise with fictional characters is a key component of understanding the importance of the messages perpetuated by young adult novels. Cognitive literary theory dissects how multiple literary techniques are used to help our minds interact with the text and project our own experiences and thoughts to understand the characters. In “Young Adult Pop Fiction: Empathy and the *Twilight* Series”, Alicia Otano Unzue explains how empathy emerges from reading. From the perspective of cognitive psychology, empathy can be simply defined as the capacity to understand and emotionally react to another person’s point of view. Besides, she adds that it blends both affective and cognitive elements, as the reader employs their own patterns to make sense of and relate to the character’s thoughts, feelings, and objectives (Unzue 4). In the case of *Twilight*, it is crucial to grasp how the process of understanding and relating takes place in the young adult genre. Since the target readership is fairly young, their experiences are incomplete

and, therefore, more vulnerable to absorbing without rearranging the information proposed to them. Moreover, the techniques used by Stephenie Meyer, which are also markers of young adult books, are especially engaging and therefore invite the reader to form a connection with Bella. According to Unzue, Meyer uses “Bella’s filtering consciousness as a narrative tool offering the reader abundant description, monologues, and dialogues that are engrossing enough to trigger empathetic response” (4).

With regard to *Twilight*, the reader forms a connection with Bella as a fellow teenager who confesses her struggle with adapting to her environment. As previously addressed, with the help of multiple literary devices, the barrier of fiction is blurred, and the readers can directly relate to the fictional character on a personal level by projecting their own thoughts and experiences. In fact, as Nikolajeva outlines, fictional texts encourage readers to draw from their experiences in real life to make sense of fictional characters, calling this a “life-to-text” strategy, with the reversed process being “text-to-life” (*Reading* 84). Furthermore, this strategy is facilitated by the natural human need to know more about others; Vermeule’s answer to the question “Why do we care about fictional characters?” is “gossip” (xii). Individuals are inherently curious about themselves and fellow human beings, and that is “because we want to understand (or are, for survival, compelled to understand) our own and other people’s ways of feeling and thinking, views, beliefs, intentions, desires, motivations and decisions” (Nikolajeva, *Reading* 77). Bella, by expressing all her emotions and deepest thoughts, establishes a relationship with readers that provides them with insight on how she navigates social and personal issues. However, the problem arises when considering the inexperience of *Twilight*’s target readership and their vulnerability to absorb information without negotiating it.

Am I Pretty Enough?: *Twilight*’s Representation of Body Ideals

Stephenie Meyer’s protagonist is Bella Swan, and aside from the storyline of her epic love, we go through the typical journey of a teenage girl growing up and adapting to a new environment. Through Bella’s relocation from sunny Phoenix to the rainy town of Forks, the reader gains insight into her experiences as she navigates the challenges of being “the new girl from the big city, a curiosity, a freak” (Meyer, *Twilight* 9). This is how the reader embarks on Bella’s long journey of integration and self-discovery. Notably, Bella’s character exhibits a tendency towards self-deprecation, employing it as a means to describe various aspects of herself and constantly comparing her own perceived flaws to those she deems more beautiful. Such behaviour is common among works targeting young girls, whether it is young adult literature, or romantic comedy movies and teen series. Those works follow the social inclination of pressuring women starting from a young age to adhere to certain body standards. Beth Younger maintains the same idea in her book *Learning Curves*,

in which she emphasises the importance of using a feminist perspective to critically investigate the unrealistic representation of young female bodies in works mainly addressing female readership (1).

Beyond Human: Body Ideals between Reality and Fiction

First, it is essential to understand that Bella, who is presented as *Twilight's* “Everyman”, internalises the social standards of beauty, resulting in harsh self-judgement. At the beginning of the first book, we are given an initial taste of the protagonist’s critical inner voice:

Maybe, if I looked like a girl from Phoenix should, I could work this to my advantage. But physically, I’d never fit in anywhere. I should be tan, sporty, blond – a volleyball player, or a cheerleader, perhaps – all the things that go with living in the valley of the sun. Instead, I was ivory-skinned, without even the excuse of blue eyes or red hair, despite the constant sunshine. I had always been slender, but soft somehow, obviously not an athlete. (Meyer, *Twilight* 9)

In her detailed monologue, the reader can already extract some of the usual body standards advertised by the media: athletic, blond, and tan among others. Besides, it is interesting to note that she admits that she is indeed “slender” but “soft”. In other words, one of the prerequisites of Western beauty is fulfilled, but the softness is still prevailing, which means that her body is not perfect. Throughout the series, Bella is seeking perfection, presenting itself to her in the form of an immortal being, mirroring the unrealistic standards portrayed in media that women are obliged to follow.

While navigating her relationship with her physique as a teenager, Bella embodies the different elements of body image. In fact, Lina A. Ricciardelli and Zali Yager enumerate these elements in their book *Adolescence and Body Image*:

The way we see our bodies (perceptual);
The way we feel about our bodies (affective);
The thoughts and beliefs we have about our bodies (cognitive);
The things we do because we are dissatisfied with our bodies (behavioural) (1).

Based on these defined aspects, Bella presents her appearance to the reader. First, from a perceptual viewpoint, she sees herself as plain, weak, and soft. Then, from an affective perspective, she despises her body, as it constitutes a barrier between her and her goals; she craves to change it and become one of the perfect vampires she admires. Cognitively, Bella expresses her disappointment with her body by judging herself against unrealistic body ideals and constantly comparing herself to others. This brings us to the behavioural aspect of body image: comparing, judging, and acting. Bella’s discontent with her body pushes her to change her appearance

drastically, even if the process puts her in considerable danger. All these aspects of Bella's perception of herself fall under the notion of body dissatisfaction, which is particularly harmful in the developmental phase of adolescence (Ricciardelli and Yager 47).

Regarding body dissatisfaction, different researchers claim that it is confirmed by the ideals propagated in the media. A review conducted by Levine and Murnen indicates a potential causal interrelation between the consumption of mass media, and the development of body dissatisfaction and eating disorders (qtd. in Ricciardelli and Yager 77). These studies have shed light on the influence that media exposure can have on shaping unrealistic beauty standards and contributing to negative body perceptions, which in turn may increase the risk of developing eating disorders. As a matter of fact, the media set these unrealistic ideals that individuals may feel pressured to follow in order to fit the images of beauty. Wykes and Gunter argue that due to the overwhelming images of beautiful thin women in all types of media, the average person tends to perceive themselves as "less attractive", as this constant exposure affects the individual's self-assessment and distorts the image of their physique (175). Furthermore, as mentioned previously, different industries rely on the propagation of body ideals, as well as body dissatisfaction, since it puts in place the constant pursuit of perfection, and by means, relentless consumption.

Indeed, the consumerist society benefits from the image of the perfect body, especially from its perpetuation in media. In "The Impact of Advanced Capitalism on Well-being" by Stephen Butler, it is explained that the ideal body is a fantasy constituting an essential part of consumer culture (213). As aforementioned, women are subjected to ideals that render them perpetually searching for a better appearance, resulting in low self-esteem, hence Bella's self-deprecating and insecure inner voice. The omnipresent promotion of the "perfect body" standards increases the individual's vulnerability to cave into the "materialistic values" propagated by advertising, the entertainment industry, and the fashion sector, all aimed at encouraging consumerism (qtd. in Butler 213). Indeed, through attractive marketing methods and the spread of social beauty standards, these industries strive to promote consumption and shape people's desires and aspirations. Women are forced to believe that there is always something to correct, making the workflow of these industries continuous, similarly to Bella who always finds softness to harden and humanness to transform. Moreover, the frequent confrontation with the representation of the ideal body in media results in their internalisation, even if they are false. Consequently, women tend to suffer from a disparity between their bodies and the ideal one, leading to body dissatisfaction (Butler 215).

The extent of reality in the representation of body ideals should be a concern since the lines are often blurred between what looks real and what does not, normalising perfection and fostering intense body dissatisfaction. As a matter of fact, Bordo discusses our ability to differentiate between real and fake images. She starts with the popular example of breast augmentation surgery, and how normal imperfect breasts are now seen as abnormal because we are used to the perfection of fake

ones in media, meaning that “normal” is being fundamentally reshaped in our society (Bordo xvi). She is also concerned by the banalisation of perfection in the natural human body (Bordo xvii). In fact, Bordo’s concern is thought-provoking considering the diversity of the natural human body, which encompasses an endless palette of forms, and the limitations imposed by the standardised body ideals that confine it in distinct criteria. In the consumerist society, the pervasive ideology implies that every imperfection is to be corrected, advancing the illusion that one has complete control over their appearance and the ability to achieve perfection. The market inundates women with various products, such as weight-loss teas, waist-lining clothes, and seemingly accessible surgeries, reinforcing the notion that one’s physical appearance is solely determined by personal choice. Bordo’s *Unbearable Weight* approaches the idea as well, relating that the modern popular culture has no limits to the “fantasies” of building one’s body, that you only need “[t]he proper diet, the right amount of exercise and you can have, pretty much, any body you desire” (qtd. in 247). But is our choice really the only thing between what we are and the body we want? In the real world, the fantasy gets broken by the limits of the natural body.

Since the images that surround us create confusion between reality and perfection, it is nearly impossible to feel content in one’s body. With the implementation of the idea of perfection in a natural physique by the media, Bella’s dissatisfaction with her softness resurfaces in the discussion. In the previously addressed quote from *Twilight*, Bella describes the clash between the thinness and softness of her body. Slenderness is one of the criteria for the perfect appearance that women spend years of their lives seeking, and it is one of those critical situations where body dissatisfaction makes it impossible to reach unrealistic standards. Indeed, Bordo clarifies the role of fake representation in this phenomenon: Women reject the presence of fat in their bodies out of fear of ruining the perfect ideal, but that is a result of comparing themselves with what she calls “computer-generated torsos” in media, ridden of every crooked line and unwanted spot, instead of real women (xviii). It is crucial to bear in mind that pictures are easy to manipulate and that the illustration of neat, slender legs and well-defined abdominal muscles does not mirror the natural state of the human form. Consequently, many individuals succumb to the tendency to engage in harmful comparisons that further undermine their perception of their own bodily form.

Speaking of comparison, Bella is prone to evaluating her appearance based on others whom she deems more beautiful, which accentuates her own body dissatisfaction. In the first book, we are introduced to the Cullens, a family of vampires, and this is how Bella describes them upon seeing them:

The girls were opposites. The tall one was statuesque. She had a beautiful figure, the kind you saw on the cover of the Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue, the kind that made every girl around her take a hit on her self-esteem just by being in the same room. Her hair was golden, gently waving to the middle of

her back. The short girl was pixie-like, thin in the extreme, with small features. Her hair was a deep black, cropped short and pointing in every direction [...]. But all this is not why I couldn't look away. I stared because their faces, so different, so similar, were all devastatingly, inhumanly beautiful. They were faces you never expected to see except perhaps on the airbrushed pages of a fashion magazine. Or painted by an old master as the face of an angel. It was hard to decide who was the most beautiful – maybe the perfect blond girl, or the bronze-haired boy. (Meyer, *Twilight* 16–17)

The description summarises the types of body ideals that women aim for: tall and athletic body, wavy blonde hair, as well as being petite. Bella uses the expression “the kind that made every girl around her take a hit on her self-esteem just by being in the same room” (Meyer, *Twilight* 16), which reflects how she feels around a woman who embodies the perfect image portrayed in the media. According to Bella, the vampire's body belongs on the cover of a magazine, underlining the result of comparing one's own body to another, and its detrimental effect on the perception of oneself. Although redundant in her descriptions, the allusion to magazine photos, paintings, and devastating inhuman beauty presents the overwhelming representation of the unattainable perfection of these creatures, the same perfection that Bella will sacrifice her life for to achieve later in the books. Furthermore, Bella finds this group of vampires' traits “straight, perfect, angular” (Meyer, *Twilight* 16), leaving no space for the softness she despises in herself.

Scholarly research has found that this social comparison behaviour is destructive to a person's self-esteem, yet it is normalised in media and culturally transmitted. Bella starts praising the Cullens and their inhuman attractiveness in the first few pages of the first book, right after putting her own appearance down. Considering the young girls constituting the majority of the readership, it gives the example of how it is a normal behaviour and a common way to assess one's appearance. The article “Self-esteem as a Moderator of the Effect of Social Comparison on Women's Body Image” mentions that half a century of studies were led to support these notions: the first notion is that it is a frequent behaviour among people to compare themselves, especially their physical appearances, with others. The second one is that these comparisons can either be upward with people who are viewed as better, or downward which is the contrary. And finally, that these social comparisons define the self-perception and how we feel about it (qtd. in Jones and Buckingham 1165). In addition, it is also common to use the image we see in media as a reference for these comparisons, which usually do not reflect our reality because of airbrushing and filters. The most recent studies have raised that in 86% of the cases, women's view of their body degenerates after being exposed and compared to the perfect thin body as represented in media (qtd. in Jones and Buckingham 1165). Bella has already internalised the societal body ideals that determine her views of beauty, reinforced by how she evaluates herself in relation to her peers. By means,

the young reader is getting familiarised early on with the social expectations, and the heroine is processing them.

Beauty of the Worthy: The Eurocentrism of Body Standards

When it comes to beauty standards, it is primordial to discuss the role of race in the broader scheme. As outlined before, the Western body ideals spread around the world via globalisation and media, changing the views in other cultures as well. Consequently, the division between the conventional notion of beauty and its alternative forms emerges as an important aspect of Bella's world, offering us an opportunity to navigate the complexity of beauty alongside her. By exploring the dynamics of race within the empire of body image, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of its impact on diverse communities. Moreover, denouncing racial bias in body ideals as represented in media is necessary to dissect the influence on the multiple factions of society.

Beauty standards in the Western world have been subject to scrutiny for their inherent racism and ties to colonisation, particularly in relation to the thin ideal. Susan Bordo elaborates on the issue in her book, analysing the contribution of history to building the beauty ideals that determined the divide between White and Black women, especially during the period of slavery (11). Colonial ideologies, rooted in the perception of other races as "savage" and "inferior", impacted the portrayal of Black women's bodies as larger than the so-called "European norm" due to their perceived "highly developed" sexual organs, thus reinforcing stereotypes of impudence and lack of restraint among Black women (Bordo 9). Moreover, the exhibition of Black women's "voluptuous" bodies as exaggerated anomalies in European museums during the late eighteenth century further dehumanised them, stripping away their dignity and facilitating their enslavement (Bordo 9). This means that the Western view of championing slenderness over curves is not a modern ideal, but rather a result of years of separating whiteness from other races, and using their differences in order to treat them as inferior.

The question of race is also present in Stephenie Meyer's world, with a clear distinction that the pale statuesque creatures are superior. The fictional world of *Twilight* is made of humans, vampires, as well as werewolves. As pointed out before, the vampires, and especially those who lead the pacifist vegetarian life, are considered the good ones, and their beauty is incomparable. The werewolves on the other hand are descendants of the Quileute Native American group; Jacob Black explains to Bella that they come from wolves, considering them family (Meyer, *Twilight* 107). Generally, as presented by Natalie Wilson in "Civilized Vampires Versus Savage Werewolves", there is a distinctive binary representation between the white and the non-white characters in *Twilight*. Edward and his cohort are considered beautiful and heroic, and their paleness equates to purity, while the werewolves are referred to as savage beings (56). Edward himself calls them dogs in *Eclipse*, demanding they should make themselves useful (Meyer, *Eclipse* 182), and they are brought down

to “guard dogs” for the vampires later in the series (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 208). With an attentive reading, one can notice the weaponisation of the “normal” and the “other” that marked years of colonialism, with the other being the Quileute werewolves who differ from the Cullens, and, therefore, are treated as savages and servants despite their will.

Moreover, Eurocentric beauty standards are still the norm represented in media. The overwhelming number of ads that propel Western ideals suppress cultural and ethnic differences, normalising fair skin with whitening creams, or a slender body with weight loss supplements and programmes. In the article “Western Beauty Pressures and Their Impact on Young University Women”, the authors argue that this is indeed a global phenomenon, and these ideals push not only women but young girls to adhere to criteria including but not limited to light and fair skin, thinness, having a toned and athletic body (Mckay et al. 1). Moreover, the authors maintain that the capacity to reach these criteria is becoming more difficult over the years, which is a pressure moulded by the multiple social disparities, namely the racial one. The fact that Western culture demonises blackness in itself makes reaching conventional beauty impossible (Mckay et al. 1–2). As an example, hair is one of the elements by which a group of women gets favoured over others. *Twilight’s* vampires are mostly described as having shiny, soft or blond hair:

The stories say that the Cold Woman was the most beautiful thing human eyes had ever seen. She looked like the goddess of the dawn when she entered the village that morning; the sun was shining for once, and it glittered off her white skin and lit the golden hair that flowed down to her knees. Her face was magical in its beauty, her eyes black in her white face. Some fell to their knees to worship her. (Meyer, *Eclipse* 227)

The “Cold Woman” is portrayed as a goddess coming to the Quileutes, blinding them with her clear white beauty. This quote sums up the Westernised perspective of beauty as the “most beautiful thing human eyes have ever seen”, mirroring the general idea represented in media. When it comes to hair, women of colour are mostly encouraged to hide what makes them categorised as “other” – not having golden and flowy hair. McKay, Moore, and Kubik alert to this occurrence in the article, explaining that women belonging to minority groups are obliged to change their hair in order to be accepted and respected in the workplace (2), meaning that curly, kinky or braided hair is seen as a sign of unruliness. Once more, this stems from a historical rule: in the nineteenth century, Black women were only allowed to enter churches and clubs if they succeeded in passing a comb through their hair without damaging its thin teeth, calling this the comb-test (Bordo 254).

Nevertheless, a number of studies have examined the insensitivity of Black women, among other minority groups, towards the perpetuation of body ideals. However, this focus on their resistance highlights the underlying disregard and marginalisation of minorities and their bodies. As discussed previously, Black women find themselves pressured to follow certain criteria to fit in, but a few reviews have

been conducted on groups of white and Black women to analyse the impact of media representation of beauty standards on their self-esteem. Ninoska DeBraganza and Heather A. Hausenblas, the authors of “Media Exposure of the Ideal Physique on Women’s Body Dissatisfaction and Mood”, support the idea that African American women are not impacted by the pervasiveness of attractive Caucasian women in the media images, since they show fewer signs of body dissatisfaction than the group of white women in the study (700). Moreover, they argue that social comparison occurs with those who feature similar traits, therefore the African American women did not relate to those represented in the images and did not seem to recognise their appearance as an ideal. Also, the authors assume that Black women had a more positive body image than Caucasian women, and despite their body size and shape, their body esteem was not affected by exposure to idealised Caucasian images (DeBraganza and Hausenblas 712). To argue that Black women are not affected by the representation of beauty in media only feeds into the racist discourse that they do not embody femininity the way White women do (Bordo 63). Moreover, this presumption does not acknowledge the intricate social dynamics that shape the experiences of Black women, who are obliged to convey an image of strength and resilience in order to navigate their own communities and society alike. Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant defends this idea in “Strong and Large Black Women?” by mentioning the essay “Fat Is a Black Women’s Issue” by Retha Powers, in which she explains that her own struggles with body dissatisfaction were diminished because Black women are expected not to fear fatness because it is more acceptable for them since they are not seen as sex objects (qtd. in Beauboeuf-Lafontant 112–113). In other words, femininity and sexuality are seen as aspects of the thin white woman, excluding Black women and their own struggle with beauty. Ergo, the representation of the white beauty ideals in media is not less impactful on women of colour, but rather assumed to be based on the existing systemic racism.

In terms of beauty, Bella is our eyes in the series, and through them, we see the contrast between the luminous vampires and dark werewolves. Bella thoroughly describes the mesmerising appearance of the Cullens, but she seems to have a concise view of Jacob and his friends. According to her, the werewolves are “all tall and russet-skinned”, with chopped black hair and hostile eyes (Meyer, *New Moon* 231). The description of the Quileutes is recurring throughout the series, as Bella uses terms such as “copper skin” and “black hair” to illustrate the different members of the clan yet emphasise the fact that they look the same. To her, Leah is “beautiful in an exotic way” (Meyer, *New Moon* 131–132), and Kim “had a wide face, mostly cheekbones, with eyes too small to balance them out. Her nose and mouth were both too broad for traditional beauty” (Meyer, *Eclipse* 214). Wilson clarifies that this “exotic” representation of indigenous people is conventionally used in media, and reinforces their juxtaposition to what Bella and the West consider as traditional beauty (61).

Besides, grounded in the inherent racist assumption discussed previously, these characters are mostly considered strong and angry. Instead of portraying them as

ethereal creatures similar to the vampires, Bella does not focus her attention on their physique but rather on their violence and animalistic behaviours. The werewolves do not give importance to their appearance, and their attraction is based on animalistic imprinting; Stephenie Meyer paints the werewolves as savages behaviourally and emotionally. Rather than physical attraction, werewolves wait for the unavoidable imprinting: Sam and Emily are the first given example, in which he adores her so much that he is incapable of controlling his anger when she contradicts him, and disfigures her in the process, “*Werewolves are unstable*, Edward had said. *The people near them get hurt*” (Meyer, *Eclipse* 109–110). These descriptions create another division between the good and the bad in the story, or the white and the coloured, to put it differently. Additionally, the distinction is even more underlined when these exotic traits are linked to savage and violent behaviour, and their rejection by the heroine who wishes to be superior to a werewolf, a creature they would fear, a vampire (Meyer, *New Moon* 231–232).

Newly Born: The Fantasy of Remodeling the Body

Another facet of Bella’s journey is her desire to change her physical form, and the means to do so is becoming one of the creatures she ardently admires. After being introduced to the vampires and falling in love with one of them, Bella becomes aware of the shortcomings and imperfections of her human body, leading her to realise that adopting the physique of a vampire would make her worthy. As previously discussed, Bella expresses her dissatisfaction with her body, highlighting its plainness and lack of muscularity and coordination, which she finds both humiliating and overwhelming. Thus, the human body, specifically the adolescent female one, is seen as weak and flawed. Besides, Bella is considered fragile by the vampires as well which encourages her desire to rid herself of her burden and obtain a new body. In fact, Bella’s body comes with limitations to her relationship with Edward, given that he dreads hurting her by engaging intimately with her body: “It’s just that you are so soft, so fragile. I have to mind my actions every moment that we’re together so that I don’t hurt you. I could kill you quite easily, Bella, simply by accident” (Meyer, *Twilight* 271). Again, this gives Bella another reason to despise her body’s softness, because it keeps her from fulfilling her desires.

The pejorative representation of the flawed body in literature and media imposes restrictive ideals that young readers often internalise, hence accepting the idea that their own bodies can be reconstructed or transformed. In “*Twilight and Transformations of Flesh*” by Danielle Dick McGeough, the author asserts that Bella manifests the pressure on adolescent girls to make themselves attractive by following the social norms, and the reality of the link between beauty and sexual desire (89). As brought up previously, the media in consumerist society propagates the fantasy that individuals have complete control over their appearance and the power to remodel their bodies according to their desires. This belief is cemented through multiple methods in the real world, namely plastic surgery, dieting, and following fashion

trends. In tandem, in the fictional universe of *Twilight*, the correction consists of leaving the imperfect body behind and embracing the supernatural one. Bella's fear of rejection because of her plain body is ensured by the fact that Edward rejects any sexual act involving her, from the apprehension that his powerful body can break hers. Consequently, she is determined to reach the alternative body that will liberate her from the confines of humanity.

Aside from fragility, the transformation would also stop Bella's body from ageing, which is another faulty aspect of the human body in *Twilight*, as well as society in general. At the beginning of *New Moon*, Bella turns 18, and she considers that birthday calamity as it makes her a year older than her vampire lover. The first chapter opens with a nightmare in which she sees her grandmother: "The skin was soft and withered, bent into a thousand tiny creases that clung gently to the bone underneath. Like a dried apricot, but with a puff of thick white hair standing out in a cloud around it" (Meyer, *New Moon* 3). She then realises it was her reflection, with flagrant contrast between her and the immortal Edward. In her words, Bella is "ancient, creased, and withered" while Edward is "excruciatingly lovely and forever seventeen" (Meyer, *New Moon* 5) Bella's concern with her growing older mirrors the eternal fear instilled in women through media: the fear of looking one's age. This fear is nurtured by the flood of advertisements of anti-ageing creams in television and magazines, and the procedures to stop the appearance of wrinkles are easily offered.

Ageing is presented as the lurking monster threatening women from reaching their full potential, similarly to Bella whose age is highlighting the difference between her and the man she loves. A woman's social life seems to have an expiration date, since white hair, ageing spots and wrinkles are seen as signs of decline that need to be erased. It becomes clear in the previous quote from *New Moon*, as the elderly woman in Bella's dream is illustrated as creased and wrinkled, undesirable by the man standing next to her. Susan Bordo provides insight into the portrayal of age in media; once again, she highlights the perpetuation of a new illusion that ageing is acceptable only if it remains unnoticed. She gives an interesting example of how "ageing beautifully", which used to mean acting your age with confidence, has now changed to mean looking much younger (xxiv). Moreover, echoing the other conventional and unrealistic beauty standards, having smoother skin and plumper lips as the years pass has become the expectation and the norm (Bordo xxiv). In the fictional realm of *Twilight*, Bella aims to stop the natural process of growing, pursuing immortality as the miracle solution.

Following the multiple instances where the protagonist's body comes between her and her happiness, she becomes obsessed with transitioning to a vampire. The *Twilight* world considers the vampire body the ideal and presents it as the remedy for the challenges caused by having a human form. Danielle Dick McGeough compares this instance with the reality of media: as previously addressed, the media promises a possibility to achieve perfection in multiple ways through surgery and other methods, and while the human body is seen as flawed in *Twilight*, the fantasy

of becoming a vampire is the alternative (100). Indeed, Bella would not only achieve the statuesque and unblemished image that she longs for, but transitioning would also freeze her in eternal youth. With vampirism, Bella can have full control over her whole being, and most importantly it gives her the ability to conquer her true fears.

As previously pointed out, *Twilight* is considered a Gothic piece that twists the foundation of the vampire novel: Vampirism is a tool for Bella to reject her faulty human body, which constitutes the real monstrous of her character. Earlier Gothic vampire novels represented the blood-drinking creature as fluid when it comes to its identity, for instance through shapeshifting abilities or teleportation, even sexual volatility (Budruweit 279). On the other hand, the undead in *Twilight* are mostly referred to as solid, statuesque, and icy, and according to Kelly Budruweit in “*Twilight’s* Heteronormative Reversal of the Monstrous”, this showcases the steady and solid body ideal (Budruweit 277). Through the comparison between Dracula’s fluid monstrosity and the sturdiness of the Cullens, it is crystal clear that the opposition highlights the abomination of the fluid body that has human flaws and the perfect unchangeable one (277). This idea is strengthened by Bella’s description of herself after the transition. First, she points out the relief of getting rid of human shackles:

For the first time, with the dimming shadows and limiting weakness of humanity taken off my eyes, I saw his face [...] My mind spun out, spiralling back to my last human hour. Already, the memory seemed dim, like I was watching through a thick, dark veil – because my human eyes had been half blind. Everything had been so blurred. (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 360–361)

In the beginning, Bella was disgusted by every aspect that made her human, but vampirism gave her the solid and unmoving body she craved: “I was momentarily preoccupied by the way my body moved. The instant I’d considered standing erect, I was already straight. There was no brief fragment of time in which the action occurred; the change was instantaneous, almost as if there was no movement at all [...] One moment I stood straight and still as a statue” (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 360–362). At last, the transition made her see herself the way she saw the creatures she idolises the most, but at a cost.

The period between humanity and vampirism for Bella is marked by her unique and immensely painful pregnancy. The metaphor of pregnancy is usually used in literature to symbolise the disruption of order. According to Beth Younger, especially in young adult novels, pregnancy functions “as a visible sign that the young woman has engaged in sexual activity, as a way to signify a young woman’s transition from childhood to adulthood, and as a disruption of the ideal body image by making her fat” (*Learning Curves* 23). In *Twilight*, it serves to portray all these elements. First, Bella becomes pregnant as soon as Edward gives in to her sexual desires, indicating the loss of her virginity. Then, this pregnancy comes right after events that traditionally define traversing into adulthood, such as her graduation from high school and, more conservatively, marriage. Finally, and most importantly, the pregnancy

destroys Bella's body image, leaving her with transformation as the sole remedy. However, Bella's pregnancy is unusual since she holds a supernatural creature inside her. When asked about the duration of her term she replies:

"I don't know," she murmured. "Not exactly. Obviously, we're not going with the nine-month model here, and we can't get an ultrasound, so Carlisle is guesstimating from how big I am. Normal people are supposed to be about forty centimeters here" – she ran her finger right down the middle of her bulging stomach – "then the baby is fully grown. One centimeter for every week. I was thirty this morning, and I've been gaining about two centimeters a day, sometimes more ...". (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 271)

Her answer highlights the fast pace by which her body is expanding, a softness that she hated before is being more pronounced in the event that changed the trajectory of her life. In fact, childbearing is exposed as the factor that magnifies Bella's insecurities, jeopardising her constant need to control it and model it to perfection. Regarding this facet, Dick McGeough argues that the "birthing body" in *Twilight* is endlessly at risk, while expanding and breaking the confines that are supposed to make it acceptable (95). At last, to regain the lost control, Bella's body transforms into a shape that is ridden of all the humanity that makes it vulnerable, limiting the danger of imperfection.

Feeding on Acceptance: *Twilight's* Representation of Unhealthy Eating Behaviours

It has already been outlined that Stephenie Meyer's vampires deviate from the traditional ones, and their dietary regimen is one of the main differences that set them apart from the monsters in the traditional Gothic. In Polidori's *The Vampyre*, the monstrous creature is depicted as a cold-blooded killer preying on innocents, which is echoed in later works as well. Conversely, the Cullens prefer to lead a life of virtue, favouring animal blood that keeps them fed but not satisfied. This diet differentiates the Cullens and other families like them from the dangerous ones, and that by giving them clear golden eyes rather than the natural dark red ones. Furthermore, the ability to control their urge to feed and resist hunger makes blending within human society easier, which signifies that these vampires are easily accepted as a result of repressing their nature.

Hunger is touched upon in multiple ways in the series, as it is also represented in terms of sexual abstinence; while Bella is craving physical touch and intimacy with her beloved, Edward's impeccable self-control does not allow him to give into such needs. Besides, the different forms of abstinence are also inspired by Meyer's own religious background. Hunger and discipline are equated in *Twilight*, and they draw the line between the revered and the marginalised characters of the series.

Although it is never explicitly stated, different metaphors suggest the normalisation of eating disorders.

Food is Fuel: The Place of Food in *Twilight*

In *Twilight*, nourishment is an important theme that takes multiple forms, but hunger is the common denominator. The main characteristic of Meyer's vampires is their unusual "vegetarian" diet that makes them able to live among humans. In fact, restrictive diets in the series represent control and discipline, mirroring their counterpart in real life. Moreover, although Bella is not a vampire during the majority of the plot, she also favours hunger as a way to control her emotions, and more implicitly, her body. Different aspects of food behaviours in Meyer's writings are observed in eating disorders, which are directly linked to the social pressure of body ideals. In fact, whether it is the obsession with control and diet or the equation of hunger to discipline and value, these practices are instilled by a culture that exerts power on the natural body. In addition, the categorisation of foods in *Twilight* mirrors the common ideology among people who suffer from an eating disorder: while the body needs food to function, not every category is accepted. By portraying these unhealthy behaviours as a means of acceptance and beauty, *Twilight* participates in the propagation of diet culture without addressing its problematic nature.

Before diving into the eating habits of the supernatural creatures in *Twilight*, it is important to start with the main character Bella, and her own behaviour stemming from low self-esteem and a need to reach the perfect body. As previously established, at the start of the novel she considers herself plain compared to the inhumanly beautiful Cullens. Amidst her self-perception, thinness is a criterion that she meets but not in a satisfying manner. Bella laments on the fact that her body is not toned enough, meaning that she resents the little bit of fat still present in her body. This facet of body dissatisfaction is scientifically referred to as "body checking" – a behaviour associated with the diagnosis of eating disorders. Body checking entails among other methods "making negative comparisons with others", and research has found that it is a particularly common inclination among young women and many patients diagnosed with eating disorders (Shafran et al. 113). Studies have been conducted to back the idea that body checking and weight-loss dieting are closely associated. According to "Disentangling Relations Between the Desirability of the Thin-ideal, Body Checking, and Worry on College Women's Weight-loss Dieting: A Self-regulation Perspective", body checking results in an important rise in a cognitive pattern believed to be significant to disordered eating (Dalley et al. "Disentangling")

In addition to admiring the appearance of vampires and dwelling on hers, Bella also pays close attention to their attitude towards food. During the first encounter with the vampire family, Bella notices that they are not eating during lunch in the cafeteria: "They weren't talking, and they weren't eating, though they each had a tray of untouched food in front of them" (Meyer, *Twilight* 16). The Cullens do not

go unnoticed at school, and that is due to their unusual appearance, but Bella is so far the only person to notice their lack of interest in food. Moreover, she also links this aspect to their beauty: “As I watched, the small girl rose with her tray – unopened soda, unbitten apple – and walked away with a quick, graceful lope that belonged on a runway” (Meyer, *Twilight* 17). Her vision of Alice mirrors the common idea of the starved and graceful supermodel, which links the body image ideals discussed in the first chapter to the importance of food, or lack thereof, in the equation. Bella has referred to the vampires as belonging to magazines and catwalks repetitively, and her focus on their diet complements the thin ideal addressed before. Furthermore, Bella’s behaviour matches the aforementioned claim by Simon E. Dalley and his group, since Bella engages in “body checking” by comparing her imperfect body to Alice and Rosalie and highlighting the absence of food in their diet.

In the previous chapter, social comparison has been addressed in the context of people assessing their appearance in reference to others. This phenomenon, however, is also applicable to eating behaviours. The longer Bella spends time with the vampires, the more she starts ignoring her hunger cues. At the starting stages of their relationship, Edward and Bella spend a lot of time discussing his nature and their differences, and being around a person to whom food is absolutely not necessary makes her suppress her own need for nourishment:

There was so much to think through, so much I still wanted to ask. But, to my great embarrassment, my stomach growled. I’d been so intrigued, I hadn’t even noticed I was hungry. I realized now that I was ravenous. “I’m sorry, I’m keeping you from dinner.” “I’m fine, really.” “I’ve never spent much time around anyone who eats food. I forget.” “I want to stay with you”. (Meyer, *Twilight* 255)

Examples like these, when Bella admits her hunger but refuses to eat nonetheless, are recurrent throughout the series, especially when she is around the Cullens. Janet Polivy discusses the effect of watching other people’s eating tendencies on our own in “What’s That You’re eating? Social Comparison and Eating Behavior”. Studies confirm that people tend to evaluate their food intake to others, affecting their self-assessment of whether their dietary habits are good or bad (Polivy 1). In addition, Polivy states that we utilise eating behaviours to influence perception: a study by Mori, Chaiken and Pliner shows that women consume fewer quantities of food in order to create a good image of themselves (qtd. in 2). She also maintains that social comparison in this context is “one of the most critical social influence factors” regarding eating behaviours (2). Moreover, Bella considers the fashionable Cullens ideal, and thrives to look like them; multiple studies have been conducted to analyse how young women measure their beauty in relation to models in media and tailor their eating habits accordingly to look more like them (Polivy 2). Bella’s hunger is prominent throughout the books, either in the way she restricts her nourishment

the more she starts to familiarise herself with the “perfect” vampires or to regulate her own emotions.

Besides, Bella often purposely refuses to eat during the series, and it is often linked to moments when she describes herself as being overwhelmed with strong feelings. “Emotion regulation” are the different methods that individuals use to “cope with or modify the external expression and/or internal experience when the emotional state has an unwanted impact on a desired outcome” (qtd. in Leppanen et al. 2). In other words, people use multiple strategies to process and control their emotions in order to keep their reactions socially appropriate, and these strategies can either be “adaptive”, which are healthy behaviours based on the awareness of one’s emotions and their recognition, or “maladaptive” built on suppressing and ignoring these emotions (Leppanen et al. 2). In fact, patients with eating disorders are usually described as prone to relying on maladaptive strategies to control their emotions: “The meta-regression finding also emphasizes the complex relationship between [eating disorder] symptoms and emotion regulation. It is possible that some people with [eating disorders] may use starvation and malnutrition to escape and avoid unwanted emotions” (Leppanen et al. 19). In *New Moon*, Edward leaves Bella following an incident with his family that puts her in danger, which results in her depressed state that she tries to navigate:

TIME PASSES. EVEN WHEN IT SEEMS IMPOSSIBLE. EVEN WHEN each tick of the second-hand aches like the pulse of blood behind a bruise. It passes unevenly, in strange lurches and dragging lulls, but pass it does. Even for me. CHARLIE’S FIST CAME DOWN ON THE TABLE. “THAT’S IT, Bella! I’m sending you home.” I looked up from my cereal, which I was pondering rather than eating, and stared at Charlie in shock. (Meyer, *New Moon* 83–84, capitals in the original)

Bella is in distress for much of the book dealing with this loss, and among other maladaptive strategies, she prefers hunger as an instrument to fill the void: “‘Are you hungry?’ he asked me when he hung up the phone. I shook my head, though I must have been starving. I hadn’t eaten all day. ‘Just tired,’ I told him. I turned for the stairs.” (Meyer, *New Moon* 219). The emphasis on maintaining hunger to cope with extreme sadness is especially highlighted in the second book, but it is also spread throughout the rest of the books relating to other different emotions.

Furthermore, because of the strong feeling that Bella experiences along the series, she seems to hang onto hunger as a way to regain control. This is a common aspect of disordered eating among patients, as hunger becomes important for them to draw the line between what they feel and what they don’t. Sheila Lintott gives an interesting input on the importance of hunger to people suffering from eating disorders, as well as in a society that encourages women to enjoy dieting for the dream body. She maintains regarding the woman who suffers from an eating disorder that “her appetite, her hunger, is her *raison d’être*. Without an appetite and an awareness of her hunger, she would lose the defining feature of her life” (Lintott 72). That is

to say that certain people make sense of their life and essence in measures of hunger and appetite, which is similar to the way Bella links her strong feelings and novel experiences to her hunger. For example, at the beginning of the first book, even before Bella discovers the truth about Edward, she admits that her feelings for him satiate her hunger: “‘Aren’t you hungry?’ he asked, distracted. ‘No.’ I didn’t feel like mentioning that my stomach was already full – of butterflies. ‘You?’ I looked at the empty table in front of him” (Meyer, *Twilight* 78). Once more in *Breaking Dawn*, she has a nightmare before her wedding that troubles her appetite, reflecting her anxiety to leave a normal life and starting her journey in the unknown. Similarly to the multiple moments during the series, she decides to focus on her hunger following the nightmare: “Eager to shake off the nightmare, I got dressed and headed down to the kitchen long before I needed to. First, I cleaned the already tidy rooms, and then when Charlie was up I made him pancakes. I was much too keyed up to have any interest in eating breakfast myself – I sat bouncing in my seat while he ate” (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 35). In the chaos submerging her life, Bella chooses hunger as the stability to regain a sense of control.

In reference to control, the most prominent symbol of restraint in the series is Edward Cullen, and by extension his family and other vampires who follow a similar diet. As aforementioned, Stephenie Meyer subverts the traditional image of the vampires in Gothic fiction by making hers heroic and agreeable, while taking away what makes them monsters. Whereas the traditional vampire is dreaded for being a horrific creature that feeds on human blood, Edward and his peers feed on animal blood and call themselves “vegetarians”. As a response to Bella’s questioning, he explains that drinking animal blood does not quench their thirst by no means but gives them enough strength to “resist” (Meyer, *Twilight* 164). Resistance and control are some of Edward’s most addressed qualities, and they are highlighted by the fact that he is able to love and be around a human being, and not be tempted to put her in danger. Essentially, as a being who naturally survives on blood, Bella is a tempting meal to Edward: “‘You know how everyone enjoys different flavors?’ he began. ‘Some people love chocolate ice cream, others prefer strawberry?’ I nodded. ‘Sorry about the food analogy – I couldn’t think of another way to explain’” (Meyer, *Twilight* 234). In this quote, Edward explains to Bella that he craves her more than other human beings because she is a representation of his favourite “flavour”, which means that he is potentially more dangerous towards her than others. Using the “food analogy”, he essentially clarifies that he is a creature that can feed on people and that Bella could be a meal. However, he is capable of controlling his urges and remaining near her, which paints the scope of his discipline, and makes him stand out compared to the usual gothic vampire.

Moreover, the restricted diet is used as a device to differentiate between good and evil, or savage and civilised. Catherine Spooner discusses how Stephenie Meyer uses Edward’s discipline to overthrow the animalistic aspect of vampires in “Gothic Charm School; or, how Vampires Learned to Sparkle”. *Twilight’s* vampires represent order, and their control transcends the limits of food and sex to allow them to be

the civilised unit of family and blend into human society (Spooner 151). When Bella asks Edward about the reason they hunt animals instead of humans, he responds by saying that he does not want to be a monster (Meyer, *Twilight* 163). Most importantly, while explaining his history, Edward mentions his “rebellious” stage as a vampire who fed on humans: “I had a typical bout of rebellious adolescence – about ten years after I was ... born ... created, whatever you want to call it. I wasn’t sold on his life of abstinence, and I resented him for curbing my appetite” (Meyer, *Twilight* 298). Then, he explains that he carefully sought criminals to feed on, reasoning it as a way to rid the world of evil, but this did not keep him from seeing the monster in him, therefore he accepted to live the way his “adoptive parents” do (Meyer, *Twilight* 299). Edward’s episode is a clear example of how the restrictive lifestyle is considered morally superior since his rampage temporarily made him a monster, even if he carefully curated his victims.

Furthermore, Stephenie Meyer does not only distinguish between the vampires and werewolves in terms of physique and skin colour but also according to their relationship with food. The shapeshifting creatures in *Twilight* are portrayed as unruly, or as Edward describes them: “immature, volatile, the worst thing out there besides Victoria herself” (Meyer, *New Moon* 447), keeping in mind that Victoria is a dangerous vampire who threatens Bella on multiple occasions. Using the words immature and volatile makes it clear that the contrast between vampires and werewolves is linked to their discipline. In fact, their wolf form gives them freedom from the ties of civility and abiding by social norms:

Instead, I concentrated on my memories of the long wolf months, of letting the humanity bleed out of me until I was more animal than man. Living in the moment, eating when hungry, sleeping when tired, drinking when thirsty, and running – running just to run. Simple desires, simple answers to those desires. Pain came in easily managed forms. The pain of hunger. The pain of cold ice under your paws. The pain of cutting claws when dinner got feisty. Each pain had a simple answer, a clear action to end that pain. Not like being human. (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 149)

In this passage, Jacob reminisces about the time he spent solely as a wolf, enjoying the lack of humanity and its rules, and once again, hunger is an important theme in this characterisation. Edward takes pride in his hunger because it reinforces his self-control and gives him the ability to live among humans and to feel less of a monster despite his nature. In contrast, Jacob describes his animal form as liberating from the constraints of humanity and enjoys satiating his hunger as he desires, even the violence that comes with hunting. The disorder of being an animal is appealing to the werewolf, and it is interesting that the appeal is expressed in terms of the freedom of eating when hungry.

The comparison between both perspectives on food comes with a result: hunger equals discipline while eating as one desires is a shameful animalistic act. As a matter of fact, Natalie Wilson draws attention to the way werewolves are nearly shamed

for their eating behaviours, highlighting that it is among the reasons werewolves are considered the savage counterpart to the impeccably civil vampires (62). She explains that in addition to their previously discussed abnormal beauty, they are constantly referred to with bestial terms, and made fun of for their “voracious, animal-like” ways of eating (Wilson 62). The entailed shame and pride dichotomy that can be deduced from both representations in the series is also one of the main components of the diagnosis of an eating disorder (Goss and Allan 303). In “Shame, Pride, and Eating Disorders”, the aspect of taking pride in hunger is addressed thoroughly. Kenneth Goss and Steven Allan articulate that “Restriction, both of foods and other desires/ impulses, is often culturally encouraged and associated with positive self-esteem and pride in the self. [...] Success at these forms of control can be linked to pride and self-esteem, whereas losing control can be associated with shame and guilt” (310). *Twilight* follows the same ideology, since the heroic vampires take pride in enduring hunger, while other beings are either shamed or shunned for giving in to their bodily desires. In fact, championing the controlled diet of the vampires mirrors how such behaviours are encouraged in our society and seen as a sign of discipline.

Indeed, the disciplined body has been a popular theme in the feminist discourse, as it is a reflection of social control. The fact that the people of Forks accept the Cullens because they are capable of blending in, mirrors the acceptance of the disciplined body in society, given that the creatures who are true to their nature are usually shunned. According to Bordo, philosophers like Marx and Foucault advanced the concept of social and cultural control, and how culture has a “direct grip” on the body through the routine it has to practice daily. This routine then teaches the body what is acceptable by social standards “concerning the appropriate behavior for our gender, race, and social class” (Bordo 16). Feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Linda Zirelli are inspired by this concept to analyse how these lessons we routinely learn are internalised and control how we perceive our body, which means that disciplining it is a process that can be tracked in history (Bordo 17). The Foucauldian approach is also the basis of Bordo’s research. She maintains that the modern practices of diet and exercise, along with eating disorders, are stemming from and perpetuate societal expectations of womanhood. These beliefs shape the female body to abide by cultural norms, cementing compliance and acceptance of societal standards. In parallel, these practices are considered sources of power and control (Bordo 27). Stated differently, bodies are controlled by society in media to retain a certain shape, and dieting is one of the most perpetuated methods to do so. Although society has the power to decide what kind of body is acceptable, dieting becomes a means of feeling the power within oneself to control that body. Both Bella and Edward feel pride in controlling and resisting their hunger and urges, resulting in both being admired in the series by other characters, as well as the readers, which reasserts the ideas shared by Bordo and other feminists.

At this stage, it is crucial to understand *Twilight's* representation of controlled eating habits in the context of the obsession with thinness and the strict body standards that are socially perpetuated. In Bordo's analysis of eating disorders from a feminist perspective, she discusses how this lens allows an investigation of "the so-called perceptual disturbances and cognitive distortions of eating disorders as windows opening onto problems in the social world" (54). Bella is conventionally attractive; after starting in the new school, she is the object of attention of multiple male classmates, namely the most good-looking vampire and werewolf in Forks, yet she despises her human body. This is comparable to the concept of "Body Image Distortion Syndrome" (Bordo 55). Bella has difficulties perceiving her body the way it really is; she does so through her internalised standards, which are naturally impossible to reach. According to Bordo, body image distortion syndrome highlights the difference between a healthy relationship with body and weight and a disordered one, for instance, anorexia (55). Besides, Bordo quotes an explanation from a health magazine article dating back to 1984, describing the people suffering from this condition as having a fixation on food and nutrition "coupled with an obsessive desire to attain pencil-like thinness through restricted food intake and rigorous exercise. Even more bizarre is their distorted self-image; it's not unusual to hear a haggard emaciated anorectic complain that she's still 'too fat.'" (qtd. in 55). This means to the person who suffers from an eating disorder, no shape is satisfying enough as they keep pursuing perfection, unable to see their true form that has been distorted by social pressure.

In reference to what has been discussed in the previous chapter, Bella hates the softness of her body and wishes it could be as strong and hard as a vampire's, which echoes the fear of fatness in society and the preference of the disciplined thin body. In a series that glorifies discipline and control, *Twilight* succeeds in adapting the social rejection of fat bodies in fiction. In fact, the aforementioned body image distortion syndrome is explained to be linked to disordered eating, since it pushes the need to change one's body by all means, which can be reflected in Bella's behaviour in the series. The protagonist despises her body that she considers imperfect and goes to certain lengths to mould it in the image that would finally fulfil her need to be accepted. Bordo addresses the dynamic by saying:

as our bodily ideals have become firmer and more contained (we worship not merely slenderness but flableness), any softness or bulge comes to be seen as unsightly – as disgusting, disorderly "fat," which must be "eliminated" or "busted," as popular exercise-equipment ads put it. Of course, the only bodies that do not transgress in this way are those that are tightly muscled or virtually skeletal. Short of meeting these standards, the slimmer the body, the more obtrusive will any lumps and bulges seem. (57)

This proposes the link between socially imposed ideals and disordered eating behaviours, since the unrealistic standards mandate drastic measures, and that often results in unhealthy behaviours. Moreover, *Twilight* clearly represents the contrast

between the disciplined and undisciplined body, making the hungry and self-controlled vampires superior. This phenomenon is similar to the emergence of anorexia in affluent families in the nineteenth century, where having the willpower to “rise above” the mundane need for food became morally and aesthetically superior compared to the lower classes who were more overindulgent (Bordo 62). The division between the werewolves and the vampires falls into a parallel model, as the vampires clearly consider themselves above the werewolves for the ability to control their needs.

In the disordered eating culture, multiple aspects are linked to the superior and inferior binary, similar to the fictional world that Stephenie Meyer built. Indeed, the media does not only propagate the idea that thinness is superior to fatness, but even food is sorted into acceptable and discarded. The vampires in *Twilight* are differentiated on the basis of their diets: those who have a controlled food intake are more acceptable than those who do not. In addition, the characters who follow food restrictions are seen as civilised and respected, hence the valorisation of the Cullens and the derogation of the werewolves, which means that the nature of food is an additional criterion to what is socially seen as ideal. Savuskoski, Uusiautti, and Määttä discuss the categorisation of foods in the article “From Fear of Eating to Appetite for Life: Food and Eating in an Anorectic Mind”. Anorexia patients confess that their nutrition consisted mainly of food they saw as safe “healthy and permissible”; and avoided the bad foods that are high in calories, or only allowed themselves a small amount after physical activities (77–78).

As a matter of fact, individuals who spend time getting to know diet culture learn to differentiate between good and bad foods. Bordo explains that this phenomenon is parallel to the “distorted attitudes” in body image distortion syndrome (57). According to her, there are faulty attitudes towards nourishment as well when it comes to disordered eating, as people tend to give power to one type of food over the other. For example, “forbidden foods” trigger binge eating episodes, meaning that certain foods make us lose control and give into our appetite (Bordo 57–58). Indeed, *Twilight* presents human blood as the “forbidden food” that makes the good vampires lose control. At the end of the first book, Bella gets attacked by one of the savage vampires, and the Cullens save her before it takes a tragic turn, but not before he bites her. In order to keep her from turning into a vampire, Edward has to suck out the venom before it spreads, but he is reluctant to do it since he fears not being able to stop himself at the taste of her blood (Meyer, *Twilight* 396–397).

Once the different elements of disordered eating are understood, the representation of these behaviours in *Twilight* becomes clear. Bordo specifies that the faulty attitudes towards food do not stem from myths or solely irrational thinking, but they are rather a “fairly accurate representation of social attitudes towards slenderness or the biological realities involved in dieting” (58–59). The belief that some foods result in a loss of control is not an accidental occurrence, but rather a result of excessive restriction and constant dieting, and more specifically the encouragement of these behaviours in society. Bordo further argues that the “‘faulty beliefs’

associated with eating disorders are accurate descriptions of psychological and physiological dynamics that we now know are endemic to dieting itself” (59). She reports that the human body has its own mechanism that automatically reacts to being starved, and this response comes in the form of strong cravings, binge eating episodes, or fixating on what could be eaten. Moreover, she notes that studies have asserted that respecting a diet is easier with a total prohibition of solid food than a restricted amount, which makes sense for the bulimic ideology that absolute control is the key to having any control at all. However the difficulty in this ideology is that absolute control over food is not a sustainable technique, ultimately resulting in a loss of it (Bordo, 59). With this in mind, the behaviours that Stephenie Meyer includes in the series are clarified: Edward fears a loss of control after tasting human blood because it would be the reaction of a starved body, and Bella is completely focused on her hunger and pays close attention to food because she wants to have total control over her body and its nutrition.

Thirst and Desire: Bella’s Food and Sexual Appetites Cross

Twilight’s representation of self-control merges eating and sexual behaviours, as both follow parallel patterns throughout the book. Assuredly, Bella is as obsessed with her hunger as she is with engaging in sexual intercourse with Edwards. Her desire for him is portrayed as overwhelming, and the need to become a vampire becomes even stronger after she realises how it can impact Edward’s reluctant behaviour. This is a reference to the relation between the dream body as a key to surpassing social limits. Furthermore, it is intriguing to investigate how food and sex are linked, and how control over one and the other can be associated with disordered eating, especially illustrated in the drastic changes in Bella’s body and behaviour in the last book of the series *Breaking Dawn*. Additionally, the protagonist’s newly acquired perfect body, which is a direct result of sexual awakening, enables her to regain the control she lost before. This part of the story reflects the need to fit the social standards of beauty in order to be accepted, as well as the complicated process to do so.

To begin, Bella realises that her body is not only too soft to be perfect but also too human to be able to engage in sexual intercourse with a vampire. Contrary to her preference for hunger, Bella’s sexual desire is described as uncontrollable, emphasising her weak human nature in contrast with Edward’s self-discipline. Emma Dunn clarifies in her article how the focus on the protagonist’s soft body can also be read as a metaphor, meaning that physically she is indeed less fit than a vampire, but she also “lacks firm mental and emotional boundaries” that can render her able to control her sexual needs the way Edward does (114). The fact that Bella’s humanity makes her more inclined to lose control over her sexuality is addressed in the first book: Stephenie Meyer depicts the progress of Edward and Bella’s relationship gradually. Although Bella is mesmerised by Edward’s body and craves it, they

spend days discovering one another while Edward sets the pace, then Edward decides to allow himself the slightest bit of physical affection through a kiss. During this kiss, and to highlight Bella's uncontrollable desire, she lets herself go and her pace surpasses Edward's who immediately draws back, gaining control again over the course of the event. Seeing that he is able to stop it before it degenerates, he admits to being proud of his strength, to which Bella responds that she is not able to relate as she could not reign in her urges, but Edward simply says: "You are only human, after all" (Meyer, *Twilight* 247–248). In fact, it is explicit that Edward holds the threads of the relationship because as long as Bella is human, she is not going to be able to match his discipline.

The link between Bella's appetite for food and sex is worth exploring in this paper. Previously, Bella's preference for hunger was discussed to be a way to feel control in the midst of the chaos of her new life, but it has also been mentioned that absolute control is not sustainable, and eventually breaks one way or another. With this idea, the contrast between her lack of appetite for food and her abundant desire for sex becomes understandable in the scheme of disordered behaviour. Emma Dunn elaborates on this aspect of Bella's weak human body; both sexual and food appetites signify the disorderly nature of the body, and both tend to be suppressed by people suffering from an eating disorder (114). In addition, the relation between food and sex is expressed linguistically as well in the way Bella describes her need for Edward: "I let my cheek press against his hair, felt the texture of it on my skin, smelled the delicious scent of him" (Meyer, *New Moon* 454; emphasis added), or "I could taste his pure, vivid scent" (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 446; emphasis added). This linguistic "food analogy" is also addressed by Dunn in her article (114).

Most importantly, the gradual progress of Bella's attitude towards food after her sexual awakening is noteworthy, which she only earns after her wedding. In *Breaking Dawn*, the two main characters get married at the beginning of the book, after Bella finally accepts Edward's proposal in *Eclipse*. During their honeymoon, Edward is still reluctant to engage in sexual intercourse with Bella, since she is still human and he fears his overly powerful body would hurt her in the process, but she convinces him to proceed nonetheless. In the morning after, Bella is in a clear bliss from finally tasting what she had been craving from the beginning, but her hunger reminds her of her lesser human form:

I would have been happy to lie here forever, to never disturb this moment, but my body had other ideas. I laughed at my impatient stomach. It seemed sort of prosaic to be hungry after all that had passed last night. Like being brought back down to earth from some great height. "What's funny?" he murmured, still stroking my back. The sound of his voice, serious and husky, brought with it a deluge of memories from the night, and I felt a blush color my face and neck. To answer his question, my stomach growled. I laughed

again. “You just can’t escape being human for very long”. (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 79)

Although Bella satisfied her sexual appetite, she is still not as perfect as Edward, and her hunger is another sign that she still needs to improve and change. Indeed, her hunger serves as a better nudge than the bruises on her body; Bella does not notice her damaged body resulting from the events of the night before, but her growling stomach is an instant eye-opener. Emma Dunn considers the bruises a punishment for Bella’s insistence to engage in sexual intercourse although her body is not ready for it. Edward warns Bella about the consequences of doing it as a human, but she defies and proceeds with it before transition, unable to control her urges anymore (115). After clarifying both of their stand on her brutalised body, Bella expresses an unusual interest in food, which is surprising in comparison to her previous disinterest towards eating and acceptance of hunger.

The complete turn of Bella’s appetite after sex is similar to the representation of female desire in media, as her sexual freedom opens the way for her appreciation of food. After three books in which Bella emphasises her hunger and avoidance of eating, she is suddenly led by a ferocious appetite:

I padded off barefoot to where the smell of eggs and bacon and Cheddar cheese was coming from. Edward stood in front of the stainless steel stove, sliding an omelet onto the light blue plate waiting on the counter. The scent of the food overwhelmed me. I felt like I could eat the plate and the frying pan, too; my stomach snarled. “Here,” he said. He turned with a smile on his face and set the plate on a small tiled table. I sat in one of the two metal chairs and started snarfing down the hot eggs. They burned my throat, but I didn’t care. (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 88)

This shows how drastic her attitude changes, because, from complete control, she is now eating with passion, letting go of the reigns she had before. Moreover, she is also enjoying the food, contrary to her previous treatment of eating as an obligation. What is also captivating is that Edward prepares the food that she is enjoying, paralleling him being the reason she is sexually fulfilled as well, which symbolises that food and sex urges are linked in the series. Therefore, Bella’s absolute control over her appetite breaks after being repressed in both cases.

The connection of food and sex represented in *Twilight* is not unique to it, since it is also one of the common tropes in media. First, Bordo addresses gendered appetites: women simply and vulnerably enjoying food and eating is a controversial topic in media, which is a tendency that can be traced back to the Victorian era (110). Moreover, when the media illustrate women as “sensuously voracious about food”, the image is presented for metaphorical purposes to insinuate their sexual desire. Bordo proposes multiple examples from movies in which the free and unapologetic engagement with food is a prelude to sexual intercourse, to signal that the woman is letting go of her control (110). What happens in *Twilight* is different, since

the order is changed: Bella is sexually freed before the limitation for food vanishes; nonetheless, both appetites are used interchangeably to show female appetite between discipline and freedom. In addition, Bordo specifies that women in media are mostly allowed to enjoy food when they are pregnant (110), which is also the case in *Twilight*.

Besides being a result of fulfilment of her sexual desire, Bella's food appetite in *Breaking Dawn* is also related to her changing body. After their first intercourse, Edward refrains from satisfying Bella's sexual needs for fear of hurting her again, but he continues cooking for her. Bella describes their days as full of outdoor activities to distract themselves, after which she feels famished and eats the big quantities of food Edward prepares without second thoughts (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 91). Although Edward tries hard to keep Bella from demanding sex during their vacation, she does not let go of her desire, on which he comments: "You are so human, Bella. Ruled by your hormones" (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 93–94), which reduces her to a lesser being unable to control her body. The mentioning of hormones is a foreshadowing of what happens after Bella succeeds in "seducing" him once more:

I ended up in the kitchen and decided that maybe comfort food was what I needed. I poked around in the fridge until I found all the ingredients for fried chicken. The popping and sizzling of the chicken in the pan was a nice, homey sound; I felt less nervous while it filled the silence. It smelled so good that I started eating it right out of the pan, burning my tongue in the process. By the fifth or sixth bite, though, it had cooled enough for me to taste it. (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 108–109)

This time, Bella voraciously eats the food that she made herself, and most importantly, the food that she craved. A few moments later, Bella feels sick, and hungry once again, only to realise later on that she is, in fact, pregnant (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 113).

The body that Bella already disliked for its softness is now changing, which is a result of her sexual freedom. Emma Dunn considers Bella's pregnant body "an exaggeration of the vulgarity and monstrosity of female embodiment" (117); the human body has been considered flawed and disorderly from the beginning of the series, hence Bella's need for hunger to discipline it, but the pregnancy makes her unable to stick with the simplest forms of civility. As a matter of fact, in addition to being a destruction of her body, the pregnancy urges her to consume what is not only a questionable meal for humans, but also a taboo for the Cullens: human blood (Dunn 117). Bella admits that she is craving human blood because she desires it, and not simply because the foetus needs it (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 232), showing the ultimate loss of boundaries after the pregnancy. This goes back to the idea of disordered eating and body image since Bella's obsession with the hard ideal body made her fixate on the absolute control over food intake, but with a ruined body, and after a satisfied sexual drive, the need for control is lost.

However, the loss of control is only temporary, since Bella's pregnancy leads to her death and transition to the vampire she wishes to be. In fact, carrying a supernatural foetus had repercussions on Bella's life, as it precipitated her transformation. Being a newly-born vampire, she is expected to have a voracious appetite in different ways, but Bella's discipline seems to be remarkable. According to Emma Dunn, the painful transition of that Bella undergoes presents the key to suppressing the disorder of her human body, following the model of a post-feminist and anorexic perfection: "[u]pon sacrificing her female flesh and transforming into a vampire, Bella gains the ability to dominate all aspects of her previously unruly body, including its appearance, abilities, and desires" (118). This complements the previous discussion about body ideals, and how individuals go through difficult processes to achieve it. In fact, the pain that Bella must go through to achieve her hard and perfect body is the fictional representation of what women are obliged to survive in order to fit into the social mould of beauty, especially that of slenderness. Bordo presents in her book that thinness has been historically considered a sign of "autonomy, will, discipline, conquest of desire, enhanced spirituality, purity, and transcendence of the female body" (68), which is everything Bella was not able to achieve as a human. Furthermore, Bordo describes how food restriction, procedures of weight loss and high tolerance of pain have culturally become analogies of strength and discipline (68). This is comparable to Bella's painful experience of gaining the new vampire form that allows her to dominate the perceived softness and unruliness of her female body.

To sum up, sexual and food appetites interconnect to show the difference between normal and disordered behaviours. In the beginning, Bella is focused on achieving a vampire's perfection, but amidst the chaos of her emotions and the multiple events, controlling her hunger and nourishment is her way of gaining reins over her own life. Her sexual desire is repressed by Edward, who mirrors the social decorum, and it is clear that after freeing her sexual self, her appetite for food becomes liberated as well. Moreover, her appetite is still related to her dynamic with Edward. The ultimate loss of control comes after the consequences of engaging in sexual intercourse with a vampire, since Bella's appetite is a complete mess due to her pregnancy and transitioning body. This pregnancy will in fact end with Bella's death and rebirth as a vampire, which is the transition between the abject human body and the perfect supernatural one. Her vampirism not only gave her the "smooth", "strong" and "perfect body she died for, but also an unusual control over her previously overwhelming emotions, which is surprising for a newborn. Even during her first hunt, Bella is capable of resisting killing a human present on site, which is something Edward describes as impossible at the early stage of transformation, saying that she is not supposed to be able to use her reason (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 386–387), which points to how her ability to control her appetite is heightened with her new form. Being a vampire is the utmost sign of self-discipline in *Twilight*; controlling their urges when it comes to food and sex is what makes them accepted and revered in human society. It is important to analyse this ideology

in the context of Stephenie Meyer's background, as growing up a Mormon has an influence on how she sees the body and its abilities.

Holy Control: *Twilight* Mirroring Mormon Discipline

Edward Cullen, the heartthrob of Stephenie Meyer's fictional universe, is a pious man, or a vampire, to be more accurate, who takes pride in his discipline and restraint. As aforementioned, the Cullens lead a life where they refuse to abide by the nature of vampirism, preferring to feed on animals and live among humans without threatening them. Moreover, Edward admits that although this diet does not satisfy their needs, it makes them less monstrous. Besides equating hunger with discipline, Edward also refuses to engage in premarital sex, which frustrates Bella who craves him more than food itself. Besides, he also refuses to change her to a vampire before they get married, since her transition is a solution to their physical incompatibility, but not to his beliefs. His insistence on marriage and virtue is highlighted in his relationship with Bella, a virtue that also makes him lean towards a way of life that includes him in human society as a symbol of civility. What is essential to understand in this part is the Mormon context in which Stephenie Meyer grew up, and how her beliefs not only influence her writings but merge with the Gothic elements to subvert progressive ideologies and perpetuate conservatism.

While discussing the theme of discipline and its importance to understanding the perpetuation of body ideals and food restriction in *Twilight*, it is just as interesting to dive into the source of these ideologies. Feminist critics of *Twilight* tend to investigate the link between Meyer's religious beliefs and her writings, especially since the traditional social views of the body and heterosexual relationships seem to be heavily illustrated throughout the series (Silver 122). Following the monumental success of the first book, Time magazine named Stephenie Meyer one of the most influential people of 2008 (Silver 121). In the same year, the magazine released an article titled "Stephenie Meyer: A New J.K. Rowling?", in which Lev Grossman presents the author's background:

An observant Mormon, she doesn't drink alcohol and has never seen an R-rated movie. She's not perfect – although Mormons avoid caffeine on principle, she drinks the occasional cherry Diet Pepsi. "It's about keeping yourself free of addictions," she explains, sitting on a huge couch in her living room. "We have free will, which is a huge gift from God. If you tie that up with something like, I don't know, cocaine, then you don't really have a lot of freedom anymore." The characters in Meyer's books aren't Mormons, but her beliefs are key to understanding her singular talent. ("Stephenie Meyer")

As a Mormon, Meyer has a certain discipline that guides her through life, and she believes that humans have control over themselves and what they do, leading a life without immorality and addiction to cloud their judgements. She admits to Time that the vampires are a metaphor that individuals can also choose another road

when one is ambushed (Grossman, “Stephenie Meyer”), which means that they have control over their fate. The idea of total command over oneself has already been discussed in the previous chapters, as the Cullens’ unnatural identity did not stop them from integrating into human society by choosing to repress their urges, and Bella’s dissatisfaction with her body drove her to crave change and achieve it in the end.

Also, analysing the series by taking into consideration Mormonism has been fruitful for many critics. Lisa Lampert-Weissig presents the term “Mormon Female Gothic” to refer to works that fall under the Gothic genre but also use the framework of religion (Lampert-Weissig). She explains that Meyer’s writing is influenced by “the teachings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints”, by discussing how her “birth myth” differs from Shelley’s *Frankenstein’s*, in that it is somehow a redemption of the creature (Lampert-Weissig). Moreover, John Granger argues in “Mormon Vampires in the Garden of Eden” that Meyer’s books are a direct allegory of Mormon beliefs (Granger). He explains the symbolism of the meadow in *Twilight*: “The meadow was small, perfectly round, and filled with wildflowers – violet, yellow, and soft white” (Meyer, *Twilight* 226). He says that the “perfectly round” meadow is significant in the series as multiple important events happen in it, especially concerning Bella and her discovery of herself and her surroundings. However, Granger presents that the meadows mean something “more visceral and painful to American Latter-day Saints”, as three books were published in 2003 focusing on the “Mountain Meadows Massacre” of 1875. This massacre involves Mormons of Southern Utah who killed 120 people of all ages, which means that the books illustrate Mormons as violent, abusive and out for blood, all in the context of a meadow (Granger). Similarly, in her Gothic romance, Meyer presents a redemption of Mormonism in the form of selected disciplined and peaceful vampires, whose blood-thirst is suppressed to the extent that they blend in human society.

In addition, the analysis of Meyer’s works from a religious point of view starts from the cover of the first book. One of the most known stories of the Christian canon is the Original Sin and the fall from Eden, in which Adam disobeyed God and, unable to control the temptation, ate the apple from the Tree of Knowledge. As a consequence, his descendants are fated to lead a life of suffering, driven by guilt and sin (“original sin”). The cover of *Twilight*, the first book of the series, is usually discussed as being a representation of the Original Sin, as it paints a pair of hands holding a red apple; according to Jacqueline Swaidan, this is a symbol of Bella and Edward’s mutual temptation and forbidden love (5). Moreover, as discussed previously, Meyer’s decision to make the Cullen disciplined enough to choose not to live a life of violence can also be read in the image of the apple. Contrary to the bitten apple of Adam and Eve, the fruit on the cover is not damaged, referring to the capability of choosing to control oneself before committing a sin (qtd. in Swaidan 6). Clearly, the theme of control and discipline highlighted in *Twilight* can be linked to its importance in Mormon belief and Meyer’s need to paint it positively in a supernatural love story dedicated to teenagers.

For a book addressed to a growing demography, it is important to analyse the representation of sexuality in the series, especially from a religious perspective. As stated by Swaidan, the Judeo-Christian Genesis is intended to be the source of sexual education, from which believers must learn that female sexuality is dangerous, and this by seeing Eve as an emphasis of “destructive sexuality” (7). Being the assigned seductress, Eve convinces Adam to bite the apple, and similarly, Bella tries to convince Edward to let go of his rules and surrender to both of their desires (Swaidan 7). But in contrast with the story from Genesis, Edward chooses not to fall into temptation blindly and shows exemplary self-discipline throughout the series. In the context of religious symbolism, Edward is the vessel for Meyer’s cherished beliefs. In fact, Swaidan compares Edward to Christ saying: “Edward suffers physically as Christ suffered in his Passion. He suffers sacrificially as well: as Christ suffers for humanity, Edward suffers for the human Bella” (8). Moreover, she explains how abstinence from sexual activity and restraint makes him desirable among women (Swaidan 8). This mirrors what has already been explained before about Meyer’s use of reconstructed monstrosities in her Gothic romance, differentiating between the traditional vampires and the heroic ones. Additionally, and in accordance with the link between food and sex previously established, Edward’s resistance to temptation is also symbolised by his refusal to feed on Bella, although her blood calls to him more than anything, since he follows the way of the Cullens. Swaidan compares the Cullens to a coven led by Carlisle, the adoptive father, making him the leader inculcating the ideology that “desires of the body contradict Christian constructs of goodness” (8). This shows how Mormon and Christian beliefs are prominent in Meyer’s portrayal of sexual and food abstinence.

The focus on abstinence and religious morality makes the series fit into the conservative American tradition. Indeed, the Abstinence Clearinghouse overlooks the controversy of *Twilight*’s dark supernatural romance because of its emphasis on the refusal of premarital sex and championing of abstinence (Siegel 262). The Abstinence Clearinghouse is a “non-profit educational organization that promotes the appreciation for and practice of sexual abstinence through the distribution of age-appropriate, factual and medically-accurate materials” (National Abstinence Clearinghouse). Indeed, knowing the nature of the association explains its preference for a novel that further encourages abstinence among teenage couples, rather than teaching them about how their body functions. The opinion on *Twilight* is initially expressed by the evangelical Christian committee of Concerned Women of America, endorsed by its director Dr. Janice Crouse. It was then posted on the Abstinence Clearinghouse website to encourage young people’s abstinence as a way of protection against sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies (Siegel 262). With this perspective, it is interesting to investigate the success of the series among young women, especially since it does indeed perpetuate conservative ideologies in the guise of Gothic fiction. Furthermore, Meyer also glorifies a character who rejects his loved one’s advances and pushes for marriage as the only way to satisfy her multiple needs.

Aside from being a man of self-respect and discipline, Edward is the epitome of the traditional knight who also protects his lady's virtue. As previously discussed, in accordance with female sexuality in Christian tradition, Bella is unable to hide her attraction to Edward and tries to engage in sexual intercourse with him multiple times before their marriage in *Breaking Dawn*. Initially, marriage was the condition for Bella to transition to a vampire and ultimately become equal to Edward, but his proposal was not enough to convince Bella, as she could choose someone else to turn her into the perfect creature she wanted (Meyer, *New Moon* 477), but things changed when marriage became the key to sexual satisfaction. In *Eclipse*, this dynamic comes at the centre of the plot, as Edward finally declares that he cannot accept Bella's body unless they are married, aside from the fact that he dreads hurting her because of the obvious difference in endurance capacity (Meyer, *Eclipse* 393). In the third book, Bella's sexual desire reaches its highest limit, and again, she does not hesitate to express that having Edward is more important to her than nourishing her body, to which Edward warns her that he is capable of causing her pain. Bella then accepts his marriage, only if he accepts to surrender to her as a human before she turns (Meyer, *Eclipse* 393–395), which emphasises one more time the faulty human nature in comparison with the impeccable vampire one. Afterwards, the dialogue takes an old-fashioned turn as Bella describes it:

“I wasn't born yesterday.” He chuckled in my ear. “Out of the two of us, which do you think is more unwilling to give the other what they want? You just promised to marry me before you do any changing, but if I give in tonight, what guarantee do I have that you won't go running off to Carlisle in the morning? I am – clearly – much less reluctant to give you what you want. Therefore ... you first”. (Meyer, *Eclipse* 399)

Edward's whole reasoning follows the traditional view of the conservative American identity, reflecting his noticeably old age, as well as religious Mormon beliefs.

Besides, Edward expresses the outdated notions of gender norms in a relationship. In the long debate about premarital sex in *Eclipse*, he highlights that traditionally, she should be demanding marriage as a safety net rather than him (Meyer, *Eclipse* 400). To end the argument, he promises that he will yield to her sexual demands after their wedding, which leads to an interesting opinion on virtue and heaven:

“You make me feel like a villain in a melodrama – twirling my mustache while I try to steal some poor girl's virtue.” His eyes were wary as they flashed across my face, then he quickly ducked down to press his lips against my collarbone. “That's it, isn't it?” The short laugh that escaped me was more shocked than amused. “You're trying to protect your virtue!” I covered my mouth with my hand to muffle the giggle that followed. The words were so ... old-fashioned. (Meyer, *Eclipse* 401–402)

Bella, displaying the disorder of innate human sin in Mormon belief, is shocked by the fact that Edward is still holding onto the rules he has been living by even before he transitioned. As established before, Edward is the illustration of a pious gentleman, someone whom Stephenie Meyer gave all the traits of a man worthy of love and idolisation.

Meyer's religious compass translates into her writing, as the fantastic elements of her story embody notions from her own beliefs. As a result of the religious influence on her characters, the following quote completes the puzzle of Edward and explains why he has been leading a life of discipline and order:

"No, silly girl," he muttered against my shoulder. "I'm trying to protect yours. And you're making it shockingly difficult." "Of all the ridiculous –" "Let me ask you something," he interrupted quickly. "We've had this discussion before, but humor me. How many people in this room have a soul? A shot at heaven, or whatever there is after this life?" "Two," I answered immediately, my voice fierce. "All right. Maybe that's true. Now, there's a world full of dissension about this, but the vast majority seem to think that there are some rules that have to be followed." "Vampire rules aren't enough for you? You want to worry about the human ones too?" "It couldn't hurt." He shrugged. "Just in case". (Meyer, *Eclipse* 402)

Despite being a creature deemed to be monstrous, especially in the traditional Gothic novel, Stephenie adds the religious aspect of Edward to the previously mentioned qualities, in order to make him the hero of her romance. Edward protects Bella physically from danger, which is usual in romance novels, but he wants to protect her spiritually by not damaging her "virtue". Additionally, it is clear that the notion of virtue is exclusively seen as female, and that the woman is the one deemed as worthy of protection, especially since Bella expresses her disdain to the idea by saying that her insistence on having sex makes her the villain threatening "a poor girl's virtue" (Meyer, *Eclipse* 401), not his directly. In fact, in the Old Testament, the chastity of a woman is highly important in the context of marriage: "A virtuous woman is a crown to her husband: but she that maketh ashamed is as rottenness in his bones" (Prov. 12.4). Then in the Book of Mormon, the quote says: "For I, the Lord God, delight in the chastity of women. And whoredoms are an abomination before me; thus saith the Lord of Hosts" (Jacob 2.28). Both quotes inform Edward's view on gender norms in virtue and marriage, making him the traditional gentleman who not only refuses to engage in premarital sex but also wants to protect his beloved in the eyes of God.

In accordance with the ideas discussed in the previous chapters, abstinence from bodily pleasures in *Twilight* includes food as well, which is also present in Mormon beliefs. Cristina Rosetti explains in her article, "Fast from that Which is Not Perfect: Food Abstinence and Fasting Cures in the Kingdom of God", the importance of food abstinence in religion. As a matter of fact, she mentions that it has been historically deemed as a way to discipline one's body and turn it into a "vessel more

capable of spiritual insight” (6). The dietary restrictions and food behaviours in *Twilight* have already been explained as means to assert the discipline and order of the characters. Accordingly, Bella uses hunger to command her emotions, and the Cullens revere rejecting normal nourishment to elevate their self-control and integrate into human society as perfect creatures. In the article, Rosetti documents the experiences of members of a specific Mormon group called the Davis County Cooperative Society, whose leader regularly held forty-two-day fasts for him and his followers (7). The leader of the Cullens is Carlisle, who is considered the adoptive father of the family he turned into vampires and the person who taught them to live the moral life: “It was difficult. Not many of us have the restraint necessary to accomplish it. But Carlisle has always been the most humane, the most compassionate of us... I don’t think you could find his equal throughout all of history” (Meyer, *Twilight* 251–252). Indeed, Carlisle is respected as the leader of the group, the way Mormon leaders are, and his restraint is exemplary that the Cullens cannot help by following his example.

In addition, the theme of group ideologies is present in Mormonism, *Twilight*, as well as disordered eating. First, family is seen as an eternal union in the Church of Latter-Day Saints, and it is a unit in which parents have the duty to teach their children the principles of religion (“Family”). This family is the smallest unit, as the leaders of the church then have the responsibility to pass on the ideologies by which the families live, the way Brother Elden did it as the founder of the Church or Brother Or tell from the Davis County Cooperative Society (Rosetti 7). The followers follow the rules set by the leaders in order to maintain the union, which is similar to the way the Cullens live. As explained before, Carlisle is considered the leader of the clan, and Edward speaks of him with respect and tries hard not to disappoint nor disobey him. After his first encounter with Bella, Edward explains that he dreaded the way he felt his appetite out of control: “When you walked past me, I could have ruined everything Carlisle has built for us, right then and there” (Meyer, *Twilight* 236). Afterwards, he adds that he was ashamed of himself and of how he would have committed something against his beliefs, and the way he was raised among the Cullens, making him seek their leader Carlisle for help (Meyer, *Twilight* 237).

Besides, Laura M. Brotherson explains how the tight relationship between Edward in his family makes him the hero he is. As a matter of fact, they not only taught him self-discipline and control but also helped him maintain his values; he cannot help but hold onto these values in his dynamic with Bella because doing otherwise would go “against his natural wiring” (qtd. in Shaw 234). The similarity between the people of the Davis County Cooperative Society and the Cullens is visible here as well. On one hand, the community is fasting to follow the example and strengthen their bond as a group that shares the same beliefs. On the other hand, Edward and the Cullens follow a special regimen because they belong to a clan, and it has been shown that people with eating disorders tend to group themselves. Natalie Robbins, the author of the article “The Influence of Group Dynamics on Eating Disorders”,

discusses the effects of group memberships on eating behaviours. She mentions a few studies arguing that individuals model their eating behaviours and food intake based on the behaviours of their group, and these tendencies appear in the presence of the said group, as well as in private (4). Moreover, as addressed in the first chapter, family and friends are also capable of influencing one's perception of themselves, and the same applies to the methods to achieve body ideals, as disordered eating has been found to be common among groups such as college sororities (qtd. in Robbins 4). This also explains why Bella succeeds in controlling her appetite perfectly as soon as she transitions, since her need to belong to the clan of the Cullens has been strong from the beginning, and that is the ultimate sign that she deserves to be one of them.

The *Twilight* Effect: The Influence of a Young Adult Book on its Audience

The success of the *Twilight* Saga can surely be measured in numbers, but the response it generated among teenagers globally gives a whole new meaning to statistics. With 160 million copies sold around the world, and the movie franchise grossing more than a billion dollars (qtd. in Tagsold and Decuir-Gunby 88), Stephenie Meyer's books marked the life of many adolescents, whose reaction made *Twilight* the sensation we know today. In fact, Alim Kheraj reports in his article "How *Twilight* Changed Fan Culture Forever" for *Vice* on the unprecedented response to a young adult book by the fans. He admits that the series and the movies were introduced at a time when "a new breed of fandom" developed ways to exchange within the group how they interact with the primary source, since the rise of social media brought new forms of communication (Kheraj). Also, he further explains how social media fandoms made fan culture more inclusive, contrary to traditional fan forums and blogs (Kheraj). But how can a book series have that much impact on its readers? Researchers of cognitive literary theory clarify how individuals relate and form bonds with the characters in the stories. Moreover, they elaborate on how not only do they absorb the information, but they are also capable of practising what they learn. This is why in the case of *Twilight* and its large fanbase and readership, it is important to discuss why its normalisation of body ideals and disordered eating behaviours is more harmful than a simple element of fiction.

Character Development: Reading and Learning

Besides being a Gothic romance, *Twilight* is essentially a young adult book series, since its main character is a teenager who is trying to navigate her identity and new environment, even though hers slightly differs from the regular adolescent since fantastic creatures play a significant role in her life. G. Robert Carlson defines young

adult literature as literature centring around the teenage perspective with protagonists, who depict their journey towards adulthood, and the obstacles and issues that they encounter on the way, while usually using first-person narration (qtd. in VanderStaay 48). All these elements make young adult books an accessible and important source of information for their target readership, as they give them a relatable character going through similar experiences and create intimacy and an emotional link by narrating from a first-person point of view. But for the young reader, the lack of real-life experience brings the difficulty of distinction between fictitious and factual information, and the sorting of what should be learned as truth and what should be discarded. Bella tells us her story from her perspective; and taking aside her relationship with a vampire, it is at its core a story about self-acceptance, friendships and coming of age, but the reader should pay attention to where it stops being relatable.

To analyse how readers react to and interact with narratives, one must understand how the mind reads stories. Mark Turner is one of the pioneers of cognitive literary theory, and he claims that in order to understand the way the human mind functions, it suffices to start with the “literary mind”, and the reason is that “the everyday mind is essentially literary” (7). The basis of Turner’s reasoning are parables: starting with “narrative imagining”, individuals understand all the events and objects surrounding them based on how they are organised in their mind, and that happens by means of projection (5). To put it in other words, Turner considers the information we absorb daily as stories that we store in our minds, and that each of these stories is then projected on new ones, and vice versa, in order to make sense of the new knowledge that we absorb. By considering parables the basic method to discover and gain information, it is easy to apply it to actual narratives. The young readers have their own experiences as teenagers, and this helps them project their stories on the protagonists. Due to the similarities between the characters and the readers, the projection is facilitated mutually, resulting in the completion of precedent knowledge and acquisition of new experiences from fiction.

In fact, starting from Turner’s principle of the parable, it becomes easier to understand how young adult fiction helps in the formation of teenagers’ knowledge and identity. In studying children and young adult literature, Maria Nikolajeva compares the interaction with real-life events and fiction and explains the process in both cognitive activities:

[t]he cognitive process of understanding the actual world around us implies structuring and restructuring, sorting and reconfiguring information, as well as storing away facts that are no longer relevant. All these actions demand attention, one of the most central cognitive functions. In fiction, a good deal of this information is already structured and organised, and all information is equally relevant. The structure and relevance is imposed on the reader, and the text deliberately emphasises the elements that need attention. (*Reading* 24)

This starts with Turner's notion of the parable but adds the significance of the information presented in fiction. With this addition, it is understood that for the teenage reader, the experience and knowledge presented in the text are to be projected and absorbed as a whole. Moreover, Nikolajeva highlights the importance of the knowledge gained from young adult fiction by teenagers, saying that it can help them obtain perspective on their "actions and reactions" and has the potential function as a medium of social and cultural education, as well as a mirror to understand oneself (*Reading* 25).

The first-person perspective is an important element in young adult literatureist because it helps with the immersion of the reader and with the identification of selfhood. The first sentence we receive from Bella is a confession: "I'd never given much thought to how I would die – though I'd had reason enough in the last few months – but even if I had, I would not have imagined it like this" (Meyer, *Twilight* 1), which already establishes Bella's vulnerability with the reader, even before introducing her as a character. According to Nikolajeva, the use of first-person pronouns makes the story more authentic, especially for inexperienced readers, who do not have enough knowledge about paratexts to distinguish between the author's self-experienced emotions and thoughts, and the character's completely detached ones (*Reading* 56). Also, as explained by Käte Hamburger, the pronoun "I" is the element that separates factual writings from fictional ones, therefore first-person novels, by using the "fictitious 'I-Origin'", posit as autobiographical novels (qtd. in Darriussecq 77). For the teenage reader who is still acquiring experience reading and does not have the necessary tools to detach from the narrative, the first-person perspective creates a space shared by the reader, the character and the author, in which the reader feels connected to the protagonist and receives the information as intimate truth. Furthermore, Michael Cart asserts that the first-person voice opens the possibility of identifying and relating with the character's experiences in a deep way, crediting Maureen Daly and her novel *Seventeenth Summer*, with instigating this perspective as one of the markers of the young adult genre (qtd. in Younger, *Learning Curves* 77).

Moreover, the cognitive literary theory focuses on patterns and our learning, interaction and identification with them; Mark Turner specifically refers to these patterns as "image schemas" (10). In the mental processing of stories, image schemas are an essential part of the projection that occurs in parables, and Turner explains that they are "skeletal patterns" that we use to organise our experiences in general (Turner 16). Furthermore, he clarifies that these schemas are a result of how we perceive our environment, as well as the way we interact with it, and this is by projecting image schemas we are already familiar with on those we want to understand, as long as both the source and the target are consistent (Turner 16–17). Applying this concept to young adult novels means that the readers project their own knowledge and experiences on the protagonists to understand the story. The process is effectuated inversely as well to help the readers make sense of their own

feelings. When the narrator is a teenager herself, it makes the story even more relatable, thanks to the compatibility of image schemas. Besides, since adolescents are in the process of building image schemas, the interaction with those present in writing entails rearranging and completing lacking experiences. This is addressed by Maria Nikolajeva in “Memory of the Present: Empathy and Identity in Young Adult Fiction”, saying that “[s]chema theory explains readers’ engagement with fiction through recognition of schemas or acknowledgement of deviation from schemas, the latter demanding attention and memory that allow adjustment and restructuring” (“Memory” 90). The image schemas that we construct by experiencing the world around us are also similar to those we gain from a world built linguistically in fiction.

Indeed, when it comes to fiction, language helps us construct image schemas and that by imitating the engagement of our mind with the real world. In *Reading for Learning*, Nikolajeva reports that fictional narratives use language to construct worlds, which is the basis of taking a theoretical approach in the analysis of literature (*Reading* 23). In fact, language is the medium by which the story is transmitted in fiction, and cognitively speaking, reading words affects the brain in a way that “simulates” the way we react mentally and effectively to real life (Nikolajeva, *Reading* 8). Additionally, this simulation is executed through mirror neurons, which is an important principle of cognitive studies: it has been discovered that a “neural mirror system” exhibits how when we perceive certain actions by our different senses, it resonates with our own motor systems (Zunshine 3). In other words, observing an event in our surroundings activates the responsible area for it in our brains, to the extent that the mind does not differentiate between whether the action is done by one’s own motor system or an external one. In relation to image schemas and fiction, these mirror neurons react to fictional narratives similarly to real-life events, as well as interpret linguistically built worlds by projecting them on our knowledge of the real ones (Nikolajeva, *Reading* 23). But it is also important to keep in mind that the projection is reversible. Similarly to smaller image schemas, the previously stored patterns help us understand the new ones, while the newly perceived worlds make sense of our precedent knowledge and complete it.

As a matter of fact, the cognitive process of interacting with fiction is reversible as well, as based on the previous idea, real life helps us contextualise fiction and then vice versa. Nikolajeva depicts the process perfectly, saying:

cognitive engagement with fiction is a two-way process: life-to-text and text-to-life (or put in a more scientific way, practice-to-theory and theory-to-practice). We use our real-life experience to understand fiction, and we gain experience from fiction to explain and understand the real world. As all dynamic systems, it is a powerful mechanism of learning. (*Reading* 25)

This cements the notion that fiction is a source of information for the reader, especially since fiction simulates real life, merging both facts and fantasy and giving the reader the task of sorting these pieces of information based on the extent of their

knowledge. For readers who are familiar with paratexts, the distinction between facts and fiction is made to then store the information respectively. However as aforementioned, the novice reader does not have enough experience with paratexts markers to do so, therefore the lines get blurred. When it comes to inexperienced adolescents who are trying to identify their own self and environment, facing a fictional “alter ego” representing them in a story helps them project and understand themselves. Yet they often face difficulties that arise from the lack of organisation of facts and fiction.

In fact, the inexperience of teenage readers affects their perspective of truth in fictional writings. To understand the limitations of being a novice reader, *Twilight* is a fitting example of a fantasy that merges facts and fiction to convey a message. Stephenie Meyer built a fantastic world with supernatural creatures with enough elements of the real world not to estrange the reader. This balance of elements is important, according to Nikolajeva, because it helps the novice reader not to feel alienated by the story, calling a world that is difficult to engage with a “xenotopic world”:

with a xenotopic world, readers are cognitively vulnerable. They have no prior knowledge of the possible world; they don’t know the rules. [...] The more difficult and demanding it is for the readers to orientate themselves in a possible world, the better for cognitive development. Within reason – encountering a completely incomprehensible world, novice readers are likely to give up. (*Reading* 43–44)

By taking place in a mundane setting and having a protagonist who could be any teenager dealing with change, *Twilight* makes it easier for new readers to immerse themselves into a story but also makes it harder for them to separate reality from fiction. Meyer’s series is similar to the fantasy that Nikolajeva inspects in her reasoning since it employs methods to create a world that simulates reality (*Reading* 44). In fact, although the story is about vampires and werewolves, the reader finds the elements of real life to relate to, namely insecurities, relationships and growth. However, the problem arises when the teenager is not aware that the possibility of ultimate control or considering complete change as a way for self-acceptance is not entirely factual as well. Therefore, without enough knowledge of factual information, the reader’s judgement of truth is clouded, and the involvement of real-life details in the story insinuates the reliability of other aspects as well, which leads to misinformation (Nikolajeva, *Reading* 26).

Beyond the Pale: Revising *Twilight*’s Body Ideals

As discussed in the first chapter, Bella is a teenager who internalises social standards of body ideals, which affects her actions and relationships over the course of the series. Considering thinness as a landmark of beauty is not singular to *Twilight*, as it has been represented in different sorts of media throughout history, but as society

progresses, one needs to revisit what has been normalised. The *Twilight* fandom is known for their attachment to the characters, and the emotional connection they have for them, which is made possible with the narrative techniques that make projection possible. Moreover, with the highlighting of Bella's struggle as an adolescent in a new environment, the novel simulates the struggle of many young readers and again blurs the line between the real relatable struggles, and those perpetuated by the element of fiction. Moreover, by enforcing the body ideals that are already overwhelmingly present in real-life media, it is difficult for the novice reader to differentiate between the perfect body and the supernatural one.

Belonging to the young adult genre, *Twilight's* representation of body ideals should be especially under scrutiny because of the scope of its success. Stephenie Meyer's books have the special feature of entering pop culture as a noteworthy phenomenon, and the devotion of their fans has made it into different discussions in positive as well as negative ways. Claudia Bucciferro calls *Twilight* a "cultural artifact" that should not be treated as a normal text; it is a series of fantasy books that has strong ties with real life, and, therefore, should be dissected in relation to social and cultural issues (4–5). Moreover, she highlights the importance of its investigation in terms of the engagement it gained from young readers globally (5). When it comes to numbers, Barbara Chambers and Robert Moses Peaslee report that in 2010, over 75000 people registered as members of the fandom on the *Twilight* official fansite (48), and the fandom grew continuously as the movies were released. Most importantly, such platforms for fans are used as spaces to exchange ideas and opinions about the source material, as well as content created around it. Scholars have investigated the subcultures, which are "some form of organized and recognized constellation of values, behavior and actions which is responded to as differing from the prevailing set of norms" (qtd. in Groover 81). Moreover, in fandom subcultures, members with shared interests apply what they appreciate about what they watch or read for the case of the *Twilight* books into their lives as well as establishing connections with the characters (qtd. in Groover 81). With characters who embody the solid, thin and unblemished body, the fans cannot escape absorbing these body ideals as the norm to achieve social acceptance.

Over the course of the series, we follow the story through Bella's perspective, which reinforces the reader's connection to the protagonist. It was previously explained that the novice reader, encountering the narrative "I" in fiction, is not aware of the paratextual factors and is automatically invested in the story on a personal level. What is interesting as well about Bella's narration, is that the reader feels included in her secret thoughts, since she confides in us and shares her true emotions, which is something she does not do with other characters. At the start of the first book, this divide between what the reader knows and what the other characters do is established: Bella is anxious about moving to a city that her mother fled years before, but she does not disclose the truth to her:

It was to Forks that I now exiled myself – an action that I took with great horror. I detested Forks. I loved phoenix. I loved the sun and the blistering heat. I loved the vigorous, sprawling city. “Bella,” my mom said to me – the last of a thousand times – before I got on the plane. “You don’t have to do this.” [...] “I want to go,” I lied. I’d always been a bad liar, but I’d been saying this lie so frequently lately that it sounded almost convincing now”. (Meyer, *Twilight* 4)

From the beginning, the reader is aware of the intimate relationship created by the narration that in some extent, readers are the friends that Bella trusts with her inner thoughts and emotions, which in return facilitates projection. In fact, this type of narration reinforces the merging of fiction and real life in *Twilight*, which is another aspect of the series that makes novice readers more vulnerable to the message conveyed. Sara K. Day mentions Bella’s use of the readers as confidants, saying that she plays the role of a “passive engaging narrator because she neither directly refers to her reader nor draws attention to the act of narration” (67). This means that the barrier of fiction and narration is broken, and the reader is immersed as a part of the fictional world.

Understanding the connection between fictional characters and readers consolidates the effect of their thoughts and feelings on our own. Blakey Vermeule explains the intricacies of emotional and cognitive connections to fictional characters in *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?*. He quotes Amy Coplan’s approach analysing the way readers connect empathically to these characters as they relate their thoughts and experiences:

The reader is neither fixed nor immobile; he is neither forced to mirror exactly the characters’ experiences nor forced to observe the characters’ experiences from the outside. Through the process of empathic connection, the reader simulates a character’s experience, but because he simultaneously has his own thoughts, emotions, and desires, his overall experience involves more than just that simulation. [...] Often the reader experiences sympathy as well as his own thoughts and feelings about the overall themes and messages of a narrative. These experiences are not shared by the characters and are not part of the reader’s empathic engagement, but can occur while he empathizes with the characters. (qtd. in Vermeule 42)

This addresses the simulation of experience that fiction incites in the reader, which is also focused on by cognitive literary critics and for its part highlights the interaction between the fictional experience of the character and the real-life experience of the readers. Previously, the difficulties that arise in the case of novice readers were related to the fact that they do not have enough experience to sort and organise what they acquire from fiction. This problem results in a stronger simulation, since the information transmitted by the character is absorbed without readjustments. As mentioned by Vermeule, the reader’s experience that is not shared by the character

intervenes in the way they empathically connect but with the lack of experience with teenage readers, for instance, the relationship with Bella is not influenced by informed judgement.

In addition, although Bella and the Cullens are characters we read about in words, our mind does react to them as to real people. This is where the image schemas of Mark Turner and the idea of possible worlds make sense of how we interact with books like *Twilight*. I addressed before the fact that the image schemas the reader encounters while reading language evokes the same motor sensors in the brain that the action would, which means that we potentially react to the possible worlds in fiction the way we do to real ones. In the aspect of how individuals interact with fictional characters, both Vermeule and Nikolajeva agree that we connect with fictional characters because of our natural need to understand each other and others (Nikolajeva 77). In fact, Vermeule points out that one of the reasons we connect with the characters in novels is “gossip”, meaning that the way humans are curious to know more about people that they never encountered before, fiction gives us a medium to socialise with characters with no limitations (xii-i). Socialising and getting to know others belongs to human nature, and with fiction, especially in the young adult genre, this is made possible by characters who open up about their thoughts, fears and emotions, and that the reader can know and relate to without the barriers of real-life human interactions. In the case of *Twilight* and with Bella’s passive engaging narration, the reader is fully engaged and immersed in her world and treated as part of her journey.

Furthermore, this means that the reader is part of a world where the thin and controlled body is favoured, and where self-deprecation is the norm if body ideals are not reached. Among the confessions that the young reader receives from Bella, many are related to her inferior looks and imperfect body. Even in *Breaking Dawn*, while they are about to be married, Bella is still insecure about her human body and confesses to the reader that her “fragile self-esteem” is a problem, as she continues to compare herself to other female vampires, and how they could be a better match for Edward (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 29). The reader, especially the teenage novice one, is connected to Bella due to all the aforementioned factors, to the extent that the relationship could potentially equate to friendship. Bella’s repetitive expression of dissatisfaction with her body further perpetuates the body ideals standardised by society, resembling the way it is common among peers to inculcate certain social and cultural beliefs. Bordo reports in *Unbearable Weight* that cognitive studies have dissected how societal dynamics and cultural determinants play a role in “the pressure towards thinness” or “indoctrination by the thin ethic”, and this is by means of exchange between media and the audience, and then between members of the audience (45). This peer pressure to adhere to social norms is witnessed among circles and in different relationships, while in real life it occurs in families or among friends, in the case of the fictional world of *Twilight*, the pressure is the inner circle of the characters and the reader.

With such a large readership and inclusive narrative techniques, *Twilight* is part of a genre that plays a role in perpetuating body ideals among teenagers. Beth Younger asserts in that the representation of body ideals in young adult novels influence women's perception of their bodies: "Young Adult fiction reflects girls' lives back to them, and this literature contains many representations of young women that reinforce negative body-image stereotypes" ("Pleasure" 46). Furthermore, the beauty standards that Bella represents and focuses on in the novel are solely European and white-centric, as she excludes the Quileute women from the faction whom she considers fit the perfect image she aspires to reach. In this regard, one might assume that only white readers would be affected by the pressure to fit the thinness norms, but Younger argues that the social pressure involves young women of colour as well ("Pleasure" 48). In fact, she also dissects how representation in the young adult genre is sorted into norms and "other", with the norm being thin white characters:

"Weightism" might be an appropriate term for this form of discrimination. Weight appears to function in the same way that white often serves as a "default" for race. When the race of a character is not specifically named, white is assumed. In these [young adult] novels, an unacknowledged assumption about weight functions similarly: If a character is presented and no reference is made to her weight, the reader assumes a "normal" – read "thin" – weight. Most often weight is mentioned only if the character is considered abnormal, i.e., fat or chubby, or if the character is thin as a reminder of the importance of being slender. Women and girls who are heavy are always identified as such. Even in otherwise progressive books, the fat person is marked as "other". (Younger, *Learning Curves* 5)

The "normal" traits and the "other" traits are clearly divided in *Twilight*, as none of the main characters is described as "fat" nor "chubby", and considering that Bella's plain human form is still skinny, being thin is the standard, but reaching perfection is then the goal. Moreover, when Bella describes the Quileutes, she makes sure to mention that their beauty is not normal, with the Eurocentric standard being the measurement. Based on Beth Younger's approach, *Twilight* cements the divide between "norm" and "different" in body ideals and encourages young readers to adopt what is considered a standard beautiful body.

The standard of beauty in the possible world of *Twilight* is looking like the Cullens, which Bella works on and craves until she finally dies for it in *Breaking Dawn*. The reader witnesses Bella's obsession with perfection progress from being jealous of Rosalie and Alice to wanting to become them, which she does at the end despite the danger and the pain. The idea that the perfect white, thin, strong vampires are the ultimate goal in *Twilight* is revisited in multiple young adult novels, with versions respective to the story and the genre, which spreads the message among teenagers of different backgrounds and interests. By becoming a vampire, Bella reaches the status that finally allows her to accept herself, and she confides in the readers that

she feels unchained from the shackles of the imperfect human body (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 360). Similar to the example of Bella in *Twilight*, Beth Young mentions other young adult novels in which “the thin and sleek figure that allows young women to attain a sense of power and control of their own destinies”, highlighting that it is a recurrent trope in the genre (“Pleasure” 52). Once more, Bella teaches the young reader that no matter how difficult it is to obtain the perfect body, gaining it is the key to success and happiness.

Taking into consideration that the connection established between the reader and the character could be considered on a peer level, and that these characters reflect real-life ideologies, it is possible to understand how the young adult genre should responsibly represent body ideals for teenage readers. As a possible friend from a possible world, Bella confirms that the soft and imperfect body is not enough to be accepted and respected, and this is even more validated by the length that she goes to become one of the revered Cullens. Furthermore, Bella conveys image schemas in the context of thin beauty culture, which the young reader understands by projecting on his own schemas that due to their lack of experience, are incomplete or weak and, therefore, internalises what they learn from the text. A study done to explain the factor of peer pressure in the feeling of body dissatisfaction concludes that culture, thin culture in this case, can be considered a schema of behaviours and ideologies transmitted by peers, members of the family and media (Akbar et. al. 328–329). In *Twilight*, these behaviours include comparison, harsh self-judgement and food restriction, all previously outlined as unhealthy tendencies that lead to faulty perceptions of the body. While teenage readers internalise the image schemas concerning body ideals from fiction, these can affect their own perspective of their bodies and by extension their behaviour around body ideals and food.

A Vampire’s Hunger: Uncovering Disordered Eating

After clarifying the way the human mind reacts to literature, and how the reader absorbs information from fiction, the focus now is on why a successful novel like *Twilight* should not normalise eating disorders for a young target readership. The connection established between the novice reader and Bella creates a medium to learn about coming of age as a teenager, and so far, I explained how she perpetuates body ideals and internalises body issues. For the adolescent, to whom Bella is a protagonist with a clear goal, having a less than perfect body is an obstacle to inclusion and acceptance, and the solution is changing one’s body radically. In fact, Stephenie Meyer uses Bella to convey that we have a choice, which is informed by her own beliefs, and that we can model our bodies in order to accept it. Self-control and restrictions are staples of the vampire lifestyle in *Twilight*, and hunger distinguishes the disciplined from the savage, which already showcases what standards one should abide by to be loved and respected. In precedent chapters, the relation between body dissatisfaction and eating disorders has been discussed, alongside the normalisation of unhealthy eating behaviours in the novel. Due to the vulnerability

of novice readers to the influence of fictional texts, young adult novelists should carefully craft texts to teach a growing audience about real and normal relationships with food and oneself.

First, the use of hunger as a sign of discipline and control is a common theme in *Twilight*, portrayed not only by the vegetarian vampires but also by the reader's possible friend Bella. In the multiple instances in which Bella refuses to eat, she only admits that it is related to her overwhelming emotions to us, readers, confessing her need for control, using nourishment to the people she let into her inner thoughts. The thin ideal as portrayed in Stephenie Meyer's writing, in combination with restrictive diets, is a clear symbol of the way media encourage women to take the necessary measures to adhere to social standards. As a matter of fact, Beth Younger completes the idea of normal and "other" in young adult novels with how it affects readers and their eating behaviours: while pursuing the unattainable ideal of thinness propagated by the media and the culture of consumerism, numerous young women, as well as children, unfortunately, experience the damaging effects of eating disorders (*Learning Curves* 5). She also mentions a study conducted in 1986 on nearly five hundred school girls which revealed that 81 per cent of ten-year-olds had attempted dieting at least once, which proves that these body-image concerns persist as an ongoing challenge for women in Western society, significantly impacting the well-being of young women and girls (Younger, *Learning Curves* 5).

Indeed, adolescents are especially vulnerable to body dissatisfaction and disordered eating, and with a main character who embodies both problematics and reaches her goal at the end, this demography is faced with an example of an unhealthy pattern leading to a positive outcome. With not enough knowledge about themselves or the realities of society and healthy behaviours, the novice readers not only absorb the image schemas of the ideal body but also the different behaviours that the characters adopt to emphasise this body. Adolescence itself is a challenging period, since it marks the change from childhood to adulthood, and is overflowing with physical and psychological changes that the individual has to navigate and recognise as a necessary part of puberty (Massey-Stokes 335). The normal teenager has no control over the changes that they go through, which is a source of frustration for many; Massey-Stokes asserts that "[m]any of these transitions can jeopardize adolescents' health and wellness—physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially" (335). Yet teenagers are not aware that these changes are a mandatory step of growth, and therefore do not have the tools to deal with them in a healthy way. However, with characters like Bella, the image schema of growth is altered. I previously explained how Stephenie Meyer, due to her Mormon background and beliefs, illustrated her characters to be in control of their bodies and of how they can model it in the image they wish. In the same manner, Bella reaches her goal of modelling her body to perfection by changing its nature. Bella portrays a teenager in the middle of transitioning to an adult; she hates her soft body, overwhelming emotions, and intense sexual desire, but is able to choose how to control these otherwise normal symptoms of adolescence.

Moreover, restrictive diets and radically changing the body are both means to regulate the growing pains that Bella goes through, perpetuating the idea that teenagers have the possibility to solve their problems through control. As stated in the earlier chapters, beauty, thinness, and restrictions are linked in *Twilight*: the protagonist is enamoured with a special vampire who succeeds in integrating the human community by refusing to surrender to his nature, and chooses to suppress his appetite to elevate his character. Due to her intense emotions and dissatisfaction with herself, Bella is convinced that the only way to self-acceptance is becoming a vampire as well, which ultimately happens, but in the meantime, she does use hunger to monitor her strong feelings. Being aware of the social implications of these schemas in *Twilight*, one can connect Bella's behaviours the dietary regimens and procedures that are encouraged to achieve the perfect body and usually involve disordered eating tendencies. According to Marilyn S. Massey-Stokes, the idealization of thinness and the fear of gaining weight, which often leads to regular diets, present a significant risk for developing eating disorders (335). Furthermore, eating disorders rank as the third most prevalent chronic condition among adolescent females in the United States and are strongly influenced by the propagation of unrealistic body ideals (qtd. in 335). Massey-Stokes also reports that more than a third of teenage girls engage in damaging participating in detrimental "methods of weight control and weight loss such as chronic dieting; excessive exercise; self-induced vomiting; and abuse of laxatives, diet medications, and water pills" (qtd. in 335). In parallel, Bella also puts her body in danger in order to gain the perfect body, and the positive result as represented in Meyer's series does not accurately reflect the reality, which might not be as clear to the inexperienced reader.

In her pursuit of internal and external approval, Bella disregards the different consequences that could arise from ignoring her hunger, as well as accepting to put her life in line for the unblemished vampire physique. This aspect of *Twilight's* protagonist merges cues from real life and fiction since her dissatisfaction with her body and ambitious search for solutions are a reflection of real-life issues, but becoming a vampire is only a symbol of what could be the perfect yet unrealistic body according to society. In concordance with what I outlined previously, Massey-Stokes clarifies that body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem, combined with unhealthy methods of weight regulation, potentially develop into clinically diagnosed eating disorders (336). As a matter of fact, she points out that diets are also considered a "precursor to eating disorders" (qtd. in 336), which yet again is overlooked by teenagers and adults with not enough awareness about the topic. What is also overlooked is the negative impact of restrictive and disordered eating on the individual; the light representation of inconsequential hunger in *Twilight* is only a reflection of the banalisation of it in media. On this point, Susan Bordo expresses how the media portrays constant hunger as a normal and acceptable behaviour: "to be continually hungry is represented as a normal, if somewhat humorous and occasionally annoying, state with no disastrous physical or emotional consequences" (108). But Massey-Stokes

mentions a long list of side effects of restrictive eating, which causes a degradation in physical and mental health alike, affecting all aspects of the individual's life (337).

Besides, hunger in *Twilight* concerns food appetite and sexual desire alike, presenting a positive image schema for control, and highlighting the elevation of abstinence from pleasures in general. Aside from the trivialisation of ignoring hunger cues, and making food restriction a sign of civilisation and discipline, Stephenie Meyer makes abstinence a staple of the central relationship in the story. As described earlier, sexual and food behaviours are usually used interchangeably in media; Bordo explains that the image of women eating in media is more than a metaphor, but rather a representation of "the sexual act" (117). She also adds that this act "when initiated and desired by a woman, is imagined as itself an act of eating, of incorporation and destruction of the object of desire" (Bordo 117). Most importantly, she emphasises the necessity of restricting and monitoring women's sexual desires, as they present a threat of consuming and draining the physical and spiritual essence of men (Bordo 117). In the same way, while Bella stays in control of her food consumption and chooses not to eat, Edward takes control of her sexual desire by suppressing it. As aforementioned, the vampire embodies virtue and morality in the novel, portraying the archetypal female in literature, and mirroring Meyer's beliefs as a Mormon. With respect to this matter, Beth Younger reports that young adult novels usually paint discipline, accountability, authority and sexual faithfulness in thin characters, while the "heavier and voluptuous" personas incarnate disorder, submissiveness and sexual deviance (*Learning Curves* 7). Younger also proposes that the example of transitioning from a thin to a fat body in young adult novels signifies a loss of control over one's life in general and over their weight and sexuality specifically (*Learning Curves* 7–8). In *Twilight*, the opposite happens, but it only serves as a confirmation of Younger's claim: Bella transforms from a faulty human to a perfect vampire, and with that comes complete control and discipline.

However, it can be argued that eating disorders are clinical illnesses and that fiction and literature cannot be retained as an inciting factor for a disease that society suffers from, which removes the implication of social standards in the clinical model. Indeed, *Twilight* is merely a reflection of normalised behaviours in everyday society, but feminists do argue that diminishing the role of internalised body ideals in the adoption of unhealthy eating behaviours puts a limitation in solving the problem. According to Susan Bordo:

the deepest implications of the feminist challenge to the concept of pathology are continually resisted. For example, rather than acknowledge how normative the obsession with body weight is in our culture, Michael Strober, editor of the *Journal of Eating Disorders*, suggests that "the intensifying preoccupation with body shape and dieting so common in nonclinical adolescent populations" may be "indicative of a symptomatically milder or partial expression of the illness." The difference, I would suggest, is not merely semantic. Rather, Strober is so intent on retaining the notions of "illness" and

“disease” that he is willing to “medicalize” the majority of adolescent women into the bargain. (64)

In other words, if we follow the medical model, Bella’s obsession with the perfect body and suppression of hunger cues are deemed as the only symptoms of disordered eating. Nevertheless, this view is a significant image schema that the novice reader stores, but it is still taken out of the bigger context where the eating disorders themselves arise from the obsession with the perfect body. In fact, Bella died to become an ethereally beautiful creature, meaning that the body ideal incited the drastic measure.

Indeed, looking at eating disorders from a strictly medical perspective and ignoring the social implications removes a number of central factors. Restrictive eating and excessive dieting and exercising result in multiple physical and psychological dysfunctions alike: extreme fatigue, hair loss, hormonal imbalance, in addition to mood swings, low confidence, depression, an increased body dysmorphia and an obsession with body image (qtd. in S. Massey-Stokes 337). This means that the eating disorder is like a trap, and the person suffering from it is in constant pursuit of perfection that is made impossible by the list of disturbances caused by the disorder itself, therefore the fixation on appearance and thinness could stem from the unhealthy eating behaviour, but not exclusively. Eating disorders are a multifaceted and complex phenomenon that should be studied in their social and cultural context as well; their understanding requires considering the social pressure and cultural upbringing that act as an external force. Susan Bordo addresses the study of eating disorders “beyond the medical model” saying that this latter considers the body as a passive receiver of the disorder, but an active pursuer of thinness because the patient does not prescribe the meaning of it by themselves, but rather tries to embody what they have been taught (67). Moreover, slenderness is not simply a physical or medical condition, but it is a complex signifier in our society that measures status, intellect, and class, (Bordo 55), which imposes the intricate schema in which eating disorders should be dissected. Bordo asserts that because of the complexity of thinness as a social construct, deciphering eating disorders, anorexia in the example she mentions, mandates “not technical or professional expertise, but awareness of the many layers of cultural signification that are crystallized in the disorder” (67).

With regards to *Twilight*, the implication of social pressure in the eating behaviour is clear and should be considered in the aspect of influencing the reader as well. On one hand, Bella does judge herself in terms of socially dictated body ideals: thin, but not thin enough, not as pretty as the women in magazines, and not strong enough to be a Cullen. Her focus on hunger stems from her need to control something in her chaotic life as a teenager; the inner feeling of something familiar helps her navigate the changes occurring in her body and surroundings. Nonetheless, this coping mechanism is influenced by external factors such as the media or even the pressure of matching the level of the Cullens to become one of them. On the other

hand, when studying the Cullens and their dietary restrictions, they are, in fact, not a result of their unusual vampire nature, but that of a social pressure to adapt and be included. As a literary text, *Twilight* disrupts the traditional Gothic abjectness of vampirism by making the Cullens good, and by painting them as more prone to accept their hunger and suppress their appetite. As an image schema, this could be translated as hunger being a quality that makes people accept and respect individuals more than others who are not able to live in constant repression. The young reader not only internalises the body ideals but also the unhealthy methods, and this is why the analysis of the context is important in the study of eating disorders.

Besides, what further asserts the effect of a narrative on readers is the extent of immersion in the story, which can be deduced from the reaction of fans to *Twilight*. Aside from attending conventions and creating blogs, the members of the *Twilight* fandom are also known for their creative takes on the source material, writing fan fiction to keep their characters alive. Juli Parrish takes a meticulous look at the fan fiction written about Bella, specifically during her depressive episode in *New Moon*. In “Back to the Woods: Narrative Revisions in New Moon Fan Fiction at Twilighted.net”, she refers to how Henry Jenkins describes fan fiction. He outlines that they are a chance to “play with the rough spots of [a] text – its narrative gaps, its excess details, its loose ends and contradictions – in order to find openings for the fans’ elaborations of its world and speculations about characters” (qtd. in Parrish 175). This means that the readers use their imagination to further expand the story by either using the missing information and filling the gaps themselves, or by interpreting the existent content to create stories based on how they see each character. Furthermore, Abigail Derecho specifies that these works are added then to the larger body of the source material, because they are directly situated in that world: “all texts that build on a previously existing text are not lesser than the source text, and they do not violate the boundaries of the source text; rather, they only add to that text’s archive, becoming a part of the archive and expanding it” (qtd. in Parrish 177–178). This means that not only are the fans inspired by *Twilight* as a series to create new stories, but also participate in completing it and enriching the world that they grew fond of, in this case, a world where body image and eating behaviours are omnipresent.

Indeed, among the different themes that *Twilight* fans address in their writings, Bella’s suffering from anorexia is quite common. Stephenie Meyer does not openly address eating disorders in the series, but as explained in the preceding chapters, the different behaviours that the characters adopt could be interpreted as common disorderly patterns. These image schemas not missed by the readers who do have enough knowledge to decipher them, go unnoticed by those who are not familiar with them. Young adult readerships are not homogeneous and include both novice and experienced readers, and those who are aware of the internalised body ideals and unhealthy eating habits chose to express their concerns in writing. As a matter of fact, Emma Dunn’s analysis of a number of *Twilight* fan fiction reveals that the genre, being an interactive platform for the readers, gives young female fans the

opportunity to assert their own perspectives. Furthermore, they do so by explicitly addressing the underlying anorexic ideologies embedded within both the original *Twilight* texts and the broader landscape of post-feminist girl culture (123–124). The fact that some readers recognised the implicit patterns of unhealthy behaviours in Meyer’s novels is a sign that they exist, and, therefore, are perceived by both the experienced and novice readers, but the reaction of each is different.

In fact, the fans who recognise the image schemas do see the importance of addressing the problem of eating disorders rather than treating it as a method to fit social norms. Based on the aforementioned notions of cognitive literary theory, we process image schemas to gain knowledge, and that by absorbing, rearranging, and contesting based on our previously stored patterns. The experienced readers in the case of fan fiction are those who are aware of the dangers of eating disorders and want to exchange their experience with peers. Emma Dunn remarks that most of the authors of fan fiction with a focus on anorexia are themselves suffering from it or in recovery:

Many fan fiction authors write about topics that are personal to themselves, and the writers in my case study are no exception to this trend; all three self-identify as having, or having experienced, mental illness, and two of them self-identify as having had an eating disorder specifically. These writers use the “Author’s Notes” section of the FanFiction.Net forum to call on readers explicitly to interact with their texts, exemplifying Janice Radway’s notion of “intersubjectivity,” wherein girl writers gain agency through communication and coalition-building with other female subjects (148). The Author’s Notes function, therefore, affords writers and readers the opportunity not only to interact with one another but to build empowering narratives together by working through challenging topics – in this case, eating disorders – dialogically. (Dunn 124–125)

The fan fiction platform offers the fans of *Twilight* who seek to exchange and spread awareness about the representation of disordered eating with others, whether these are novice or experienced readers. The Author’s Notes mentioned by Dunn are an important side of the written works because they contextualise the paratextual aspect of the text that might be missed by the novice reader. While in *Twilight* the literary tools merge fiction and reality, and blur the distinction for readers who are not equipped to see it, fan fiction gives the authors the opportunity to express themselves clearly as creators, setting themselves apart from the characters for the reader.

For instance, the work by NemeaSunday on FanFiction.net includes multiple notes in which they open up about their struggle with anorexia and addiction, as well as the difficulty of writing about these topics. The author says: “thank you if you’ve loyally read the story so far. More out if you’re suffering from any ED, I hope you get better and well enough to live again. I cried writing this chapter because I suppose it was a pivotal point. The turning of wanting to starve to wanting to get better” (NemeaSunday “Chapter 8”). Adding this corpus of writing to a canon

about the idealisation of hunger and control is necessary, because it gives another perspective on these topics, yet remaining within the same context of the source material. In fact, contrary to the experience that the readers project from the original series, which is embodied by Bella, the one in the fan fiction is more real, and the exchange is more tangible through the comments and notes. NemeaSunday is a person who experienced reading *Twilight*, which is an essential shared experience among the audience, and according to Emma Dunn, most of her fellow fan fiction writers are young women, which covers most of the target readership (Dunn 123). This makes the experiences of these young authors and readers relatable, and, therefore, enlightening about the reality of the shiny slenderness in *Twilight*.

Some may contend that the influence of young adult novels on the psyche of teenagers is not to be feared, as a section of the fandom recognised the implicit messages and even used their creativity to contest it. In fact, we are all subjected to different body ideals, yet some of us react to them differently than others, which might undermine the claim that social pressure results in internalised unrealistic standards and unhealthy behaviours. In a more specific way, the members of the *Twilight* fandom are all at the receiving end of the text, but as shown by fan fiction and exchanges on the different forums, not everyone is prone to be influenced by the behaviours represented by Stephenie Meyer. Susan Bordo herself reports the question that most would ask about this contradiction: “how can a cultural analysis account for the fact that only some girls and women develop full blown eating disorders, despite the fact that we are all subject to the same sociocultural pressures?” (61). The answer, again, is simply that society, as well as fandoms, is not homogeneous groups constituted of people with the exact same background (Bordo 61). Even though they share multiple aspects, the members of the *Twilight* fandom come from different backgrounds and have gone through different experiences that built the image schemas that they project and use to navigate the fictional world created by Meyer.

Once more, defenders of the strictly medical model argue that the sociocultural analysis of eating disorders is not concluding, since the results of cultural influences are not exact. Bordo faces this claim by mentioning that in order to understand the extent of vulnerability of individuals to certain disorders, one must research the “distinctive underlying pathology (familial or psychological)” (61), which is part of the sociocultural factors that critics concern themselves with. To Bordo, the defenders of the sociocultural model misinterpret feminist ideologies as defending an “identical cultural situation for all women”, instead of denouncing the system of gender construct as a whole (61). To her, these people assume that society is subjected to a unique culture, and the difference is that different cultures are exposed to “homogenizing and normalizing images and ideologies concerning “femininity” and female beauty. Those images and ideologies press for conformity to dominant cultural norms” (Bordo 61). In other words, individuals from different cultural backgrounds are forced to follow a similar pattern in order to fit the social mould, but each would react differently based on their own beliefs and knowledge.

As an example, while some fans were more aware of the dangers of eating disorders, others embraced the *Twilight* diet to have something in common with the characters they idolise most. As clarified, some of the authors of fan fiction used the platform to express their concern about the character they love and exchange their own struggles as people who either suffer from eating disorders or are familiar with the pain it brings. On the other hand, some fans used the different platforms to further spread the restrictive diet and adapt it to real life. In the Eating Disorder Support Forum, on November 7th 2016, the user zimniysoldat released a post that is now seen by more than 4000 people:

This is a themed diet made due to member request. It isn't perfect or amazing, but enjoy whatever this is. Feel free to swap around the days, and if you are vegetarian/vegan/have other dietary restrictions not compatible with this, feel free to edit it to your needs, e.g. swapping soy milk for dairy or tofu or another meat substitute for fish or meat.

Day 1 – Bella has just moved to Forks, Washington, to spend time with her father after her mother gets remarried. This also means that she's going to be starting a new school. Knowing nobody at this school, AND being a newcomer in the middle of the year is difficult, and likely a nervous time. Today, keep to about 300 calories. After all, you're too nervous to eat!

[...]

Day 3 – A group of teens go to the beach to hang out and surf, and while there, Bella runs into Jacob, who tells her of an interesting legend regarding the Quileute tribe and the Cullen family. If this legend is to be believed, then the Quileutes are werewolves, and the Cullens are vampires, with both groups having entered into a treaty quite a few decades prior to this. It's just a legend, right? Even so, Bella can't help but look up some of these legends online, just to see what's going on. Today, eat some foods that you usually associate with hanging out on the beach, such as sandwiches, but don't over-indulge yourself. Limit yourself to 500 calories. Try to do some workouts, preferably swimming. You wouldn't want to look awful on a surfboard, would you?

[...]

Day 5 – Returning Bella to Forks, Edward and Bella discover that a longtime friend of her father was recently found dead, of a suspected animal attack. Edward leaves, suspicious that it wasn't just an animal attack. At home, Bella begins to read through the book of legends, and begins to suspect that Edward's family are actually a clan of vampires. Bella confronts Edward with the fact that she knows about the legends, and asks if he really is a vampire. He states that he is, and shows her that he sparkles in the sunlight. He makes

a point of telling Bella that his family can be considered ‘vegetarian’, because they don’t consume human blood. Today, eat a vegetarian diet, and consume a lot of tea. Keep it to roughly 700 calories. (zimniysoldat “*Twilight* Themed Diet”)

In general, the post consists of a description of the activities and the calorie intake that the members should try to respect for fourteen days, all inspired by Bella and the Cullens. The example shows that the diet follows the patterns portrayed in the novels: food restriction when one is feeling overwhelmed, a specific diet to resemble the Cullens, self-consciousness and obsession with body image, etc. While some used their image schemas to identify the danger and subvert it, others absorbed the image schemas and mirrored it, both reactions still following the process discussed by cognitive literary critics concerning interacting with literary texts.

Besides, similarly to the engagement that takes place between writers and readers in the Author’s notes, these diets are also a platform to be inspired by fellow fans seeking efficient and fun regimens. The aforementioned post has several comments, all expressing their excitement to start these diets, saying that the *Twilight* theme makes it even more motivating (zimniysoldat “*Twilight* Themed Diet”). This is where the influence of the novel and that of the peers connect, following the sociocultural model that has been discussed. The exchange of themed diets in these platforms reflects the standard example of group ideology in eating disorders, with people within groups who tend to mirror each other’s eating tendencies. In addition to that, these people mirror the behaviours represented in their beloved novels, which continues the chain of influence. As a matter of fact, this practice belongs to what is known as “Pro-Anorexia” or “Pro-Ana” groups, which are “online exchange platforms used to encourage or trigger eating disorders through socialization processes” (qtd. in Lai et al. 1). Conversely, the exchange that happens in the comment section of such posts is indeed inspired by the restrictive body ideals and disordered eating behaviours that Meyer’s novels reinforce and participates in further propagating them among other members through this process.

When it comes to *Twilight* themed diets, the fans use such blogs in order to share their methods to impersonate their favourite characters’ philosophies and behaviours, as well as their love for the series, which is similar to the practice of Pro-Anorexia blogs. The authors of “Why People Join pro-Ana Online Communities? A Psychological Textual Analysis of Eating Disorder Blog Posts” explain the functioning of these blogs:

The Pro-Ana online communities [...] are mainly composed by anorexic girls or girls who would like to have the disease and that seek online advice to lose weight, to secretly fast (Margherita, 2013; Stapleton et al., 2019) or to look for a brutal trigger, a “companion” to push them into the eating disorders tunnel (Day, 2007; Riley et al., 2009) [...] In addition, in these communities it is possible to find a lot of information about the calories contained in various foods, weight loss challenges and even commandments that must be

respected by members (Riley et al., 2009). [...] these communities offer the appeal of social distinction in the group and the creation of a new reality with specific and shared rules (Allison et al., 2014). Previous literature shows how the Pro-Ana people are not prone to consider anorexia as a disorder, suggesting a distortion of the cognitive-emotional components of reality. (Provenzano et al., 2020; Strife & Rickard, 2011) (Lai et al. 1)

By creating their own group, the faction of the *Twilight* fandom that adopted the unhealthy behaviours portrayed in the series created their own reality as well, following the pattern of the Pro-Ana groups discussed in the article. This reality consists of respecting rules and favouring restrictive control and self-discipline to achieve a body that is worth admiring, as they learned from the young adult novel they were given. This opposite side of the fandom shows that although we are all subjected to the same images, we behave according to the way we process them. Furthermore, the fact that some are less sensitive to these images than others does not mean that they are not dangerous, but rather that it is important to raise awareness about this lurking danger. An aware readership, strengthened by a realistic approach to body ideals and eating disorders, is less likely to engage in behaviours that harm their bodies for the sake of acceptance.

Conclusion

While *Twilight* might seem to be a simple love story for teenage girls, dissecting it under different lenses helps to unveil the plethora of themes hidden in between. By employing feminist, cognitive, and other literary lenses, we can unfold the complex layers of the narrative and highlight its implications. As outlined, beyond the fantasy aspect of Stephenie Meyer's novels is an extremely real issue linked to body ideals, which results in various disorders that threaten individuals in general, and adolescents specifically. In fact, from a feminist perspective, the pressure to conform is prominent throughout the series; whether it is concerning appearance, sexuality or overall behaviour, *Twilight* mirrors the canon of social rules that define the perfect individual. In parallel, the cognitive literary theory gives an insight on how the brain interacts with fiction, and why young readers are more likely to be influenced by it. As a matter of fact, reinforcing restrictive body standards and normalising eating disorders in a work targeting a young audience is not a trend necessarily started by *Twilight*, nor did it end with it. However, it is noteworthy to address the effort that some authors put into subverting the ideologies spread by former successful novels.

First, to return to the initial subject of *Twilight* as a gothic romance addressed in the introduction, I would like to draw attention to how Stephenie Meyer uses the basics of the genre in her own way. As aforementioned, the traditional Gothic is marked by "its liberal skepticism about gender and consumer politics. [...]". Then as

now, the Gothic is about the fear (and sometimes the wonder) of the past returning;" (Budruweit 270). Conversely, *Twilight* seems to be resistant to new ideologies and uses horror to reinforce social and cultural structures. In fact, Kelly Budruweit suggests that the series uses the Gothic genre and its staples as an approach to deal with gender and consumer politics, yet does so in a way that ultimately reinforces rather than question conservative views (285). One of the evident social constructs discussed throughout the thesis is the unrealistic body ideals, and how they are implemented as achievable goals that individuals have to reach to be highly regarded. Bella internalises these standards, acts on them, and manages to achieve them as her happily ever after at the end of the series, confirming the social ideologies concerning the body in the consumerist society. Moreover, Stephenie Meyer glosses over restrictive diets and disordered eating as a means to achieve these ideals, avoiding addressing them progressively as physical and mental health issues.

Regarding conservatism in *Twilight*, discussing Meyer's religious background and its influence on her writing is primordial to understanding her views on the issues she unintentionally highlights in her story. Control, in general, is a central theme in the series, especially when it comes to the body: its appearance, nourishment, and different desires. As highlighted before, Mormon beliefs maintain that humans have the possibility to choose a life of discipline, and this discipline starts from the body. Moreover, as food and sex are related in the novels, the essence of food abstinence and chastity are used interchangeably to convey Meyer's conservative message. The fear of deviation and loss of control is her way of subverting change and instilling older traditions using gothic elements, which is particularly noted in the relationship between Bella and Edward. The conservation of marriage structure and rejection of premarital sex in a supernatural romance can be interpreted as a device to use a popular genre to perpetuate traditional values.

Besides, a feminist reading of *Twilight* puts these conservative views of the body under the spotlight, making them more questionable than mere plotlines in a vampire romance novel. The control over women's bodies in the patriarchal society is one of the common themes discussed by feminists, and Stephenie Meyer takes control seriously on different levels. First, Bella rejects the changing adolescent female body, making its disorder the true fear in Meyer's Gothic, and its salvation is becoming a vampire. Moreover, Bella's sexual desire is another aspect of her faulty human body, which gets restrained by Edward's virtuous and disciplined nature. Indeed, the author of "*Twilight* Follows Tradition: Analyzing 'Biting' Critiques of Vampire Narratives for Their Portrayals of Gender and Sexuality" explains the view on gender and sexuality through feminism in *Twilight*:

Beyond the troubling gender portrayals present in the book, other critics have taken offense to the way the series deals with sexuality. Although teen sexual desire is a common motif of Meyer's *Eclipse*, the underlying message present is that sex is sinful and off limits (Jost, 2008). This is seen repeatedly as Bella's advances are cast aside by Edward, who wishes to preserve her

virtue by waiting until they are married to first have sexual intercourse.
(Ames 40)

In addition to this conservative perspective on body and sexuality, *Twilight* is also a confirmation of the possibility of changing and controlling one's appearance through restrictive diets and other procedures. This aspect is apparent in the different eating behaviours portrayed by the characters, as well as Bella's ultimate transformation. The illusion of complete control and discipline as a means to success is perpetuated in the novels and proposed to the teenage audience as a solution to their growing pains.

With these elements converging, *Twilight's* conservative ideologies are proposed in the form of a gothic young adult novel for a teenage demographic to consume. Religious beliefs aside, Stephenie Meyer is deferring the abject in the novel to make certain aspects more palatable than others, thus focusing on different fears informed by her own culture. In fact, and as I mentioned before, *Twilight's* vampires are not the monstrous element, as they posit as heroes with high moral character, making the traditional gothic monsters a symbol of beauty and discipline. Similarly, the return to the past, which has been the focus of deconstruction in the Gothic (Budruweit 271), is now presented as a positive aspect making conservatism acceptable in the form of a fairy tale love story. As a result, based on the different notions of cognitive literary theory, the reader is not only able to connect with a character that is learning about herself and social relationships but is also presented conservatism as a means to perfection and social acceptance. The societal pressure to adhere to gender roles and body ideals, in addition to the normalisation of unhealthy behaviours, are principles that the young reader who does not have enough knowledge of the real world could absorb without critical judgement. Assuredly, different minds react to literature differently, and the defining factor is experience. We navigate the world around us with the information available to us from previous experiences, and the lack of it constitutes a limit to how we engage with new information. Furthermore, the reaction of the *Twilight* fandom is an illustration of these differences: the experienced readers, who are familiar with eating disorders and unrealistic body standards, critically engage with the source material and propose a platform to discuss the apparent issues with other fans. Conversely, those who are not aware of the dangers of such principles mirror the behaviours they encounter in *Twilight* and subsequently reiterate these ideologies in their groups.

All these elements and perspectives can also be fruitful for other research areas, as *Twilight's* embedded conservatism touches on more than the body and its functions. For example, the championing of heterosexuality and the traditional family is an interesting aspect to dissect in terms of queer theory in addition to the previously discussed perspectives. In a similar pattern, Kelly Budruweit asserts that contrary to the Gothic criticism of "the darkness behind normative structures", *Twilight* uses horror to bring back "cornerstones of marriage, heteronormativity, and moral cap-

italism” (271). She also adds that Stephenie Meyer’s series revises identity as essentially patriarchal and heterosexual, bringing these principles as comfort and hope in her Gothic (Budruweit 273). As a matter of fact, Edward is the virtuous protector, and his relationship with Bella is what anchors her in the hectic process of transitioning from childhood to adulthood. Most importantly, Bella’s ultimate wishes are only made true after applying the traditional rules of marriage followed by pregnancy, making her transformation a reward for adhering to social standards.

Furthermore, addressing queerness in *Twilight* is also intriguing concerning its questionable portrayal. In contrast with the glorified heterosexual marriage, Meyer gives a glimpse of what a lesbian couple could look like in one specific group of vampires. Kelly Budruweit mentions the example of the Amazons:

Bella describes Senna and Zafrina as “fe[ll]ine” (612), and she claims, “I’d never met any vampires less civilized” (613). Unlike the others, these women are not attached to men, and Bella compares their intimacy to a heterosexual couple: “Senna was always near Zafrina, never speaking, but it wasn’t the same as Amun and Kebi. Kebi’s manner seemed obedient; Senna and Zafrina were more like two limbs of one organism – Zafrina just happened to be the mouthpiece”. (613), (280)

Homosexuality is portrayed as foreign and disorderly; a direct opposite to the discipline and civility of the heterosexual relationships that mark the series. Also, Meyer tries to apply the heterosexual mould to this relationship, which makes it stand out as “other” compared to the usual couples in the story. To this aspect, Anne Rice takes a different approach in *Interview with the Vampire*, which critics have celebrated for its subversion of gender roles, heteronormativity, and conservative representation of sexual intercourse (Ames 45).

Besides, while dissecting the negative representation of body standards, eating disorders and sexuality in *Twilight* raises awareness of such issues in the young adult novel, it is also helpful to draw attention to the positive portrayals in the genre. From a cognitive perspective, presenting adolescents with the right tools to navigate their identity and growth is essential for their development. Furthermore, since young adult novels are an accessible and fun means to teach, the importance of messages they convey is important to criticise or celebrate when needed. For instance, the graphic novel *Heartstopper* by Alice Oseman was adapted into a series on Netflix in 2022. In terms of success, Oseman has achieved numerous recognitions for her books, with wins and nominations for highly regarded awards such as “the YA Book Prize, the Inky Awards, the Carnegie Medal, and the Goodreads Choice Awards” (Oseman, “About”). In addition, she was honoured as the Attitude Person of the Year in 2023 and named The British Book Awards Illustrator of the Year. (Oseman, “About”). The story that initiated such achievements follows Nick and Charlie, who are two teenagers navigating the troubles of growing up in a society where different normative and restrictive rules need to be followed while navigating their own friendships, sexuality, and inner self. Taking the fantasy elements aside,

the protagonists of *Heartstopper* and *Twilight* have a lot in common: struggling with their identity and trying to cope with change and pressure, yet the aspect of disordered eating is treated as a problem in one and a solution in the other.

Other than the queer and diverse representation, the most important theme relating to my thesis is the eating disorder addressed in *Heartstopper*. In fact, the main character in Alice Oseman's story is fifteen-year-old Charlie, who, after being outed as gay at school without his consent, received a wave of bullying from his classmates, causing real damage to his mental health (Oseman, *Heartstopper* 630–633). The first signs of Charlie's eating disorder appear in the third volume during a school trip to Paris. While walking around the city, his boyfriend Nick asks him if he wants ice cream, to which he responds, "I'm still kind of full". "But...you barely ate any lunch, though-" says Nick, causing Charlie to protest "What? Yeah I did!" (Oseman, *Heartstopper* 699). This conversation starts putting attention on Charlie's unhealthy attitude towards food, treating its rejection as a problem rather than a quality. After fainting due to the lack of nutrition and hydration, Charlie faints, and Nick confronts him on why he refuses to eat: Charlie explains that the habit started during the bullying period and that he feels that his appetite is the only thing he is able to control in his life (Oseman, *Heartstopper* 776). This is similar to what has been said about Bella as well, as both characters use hunger to control the chaos happening in other aspects of their lives. In Charlie's case, it is the loss of control over his identity and self, since an important step of his self-discovery has been taken away from him by being out to the world against his will, making his sexuality a topic for gossip and critique. But contrary to *Twilight*, *Heartstopper* addresses this unhealthy habit as an issue that needs to be discussed and solved, raising awareness about eating disorders for a young audience, while Meyer considers it a choice to discipline oneself and be elevated in society.

All in all, while writing my thesis, not only did I discover new facets of *Twilight* as a series that I had fun reading 12 years ago, but I realised the true importance of young adult books for adolescents. In fact, what matters most is the message it sends, and with more works like *Heartstopper*, authors can teach the newer generation about themselves in a healthy way and provide them with a vast palette of characters that mirrors the real heterogeneous society in fiction. Moreover, with their easily accessible and understandable forms, young adult books are more likely to be read by adolescents than classics, giving the genre more potential to educate these readers than the classics belonging to high literature. Marci Glaus, the author of "Text Complexity and Young Adult Literature: Establishing its Place", proposes young adult books as an alternative literature to be taught in schools. She explains that due to the relatable characters and the relevancy of their experiences, these books are more likely to attract students' attention than "canonical texts written primarily for educated adults" (Glaus 408). Furthermore, when the themes are addressed carefully and critically, these novels provide the novice readers with the necessary "possible experience" to navigate their own reality, and thus discover themselves in a well-balanced way."

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