

PAIN OR PLEASURE: THE ALLURE OF THE MASOCHISTIC YOUNG ADULT  
FANTASY PROTAGONIST, AS SEEN IN *TWILIGHT* AND OTHER TEXTS

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**Pain or pleasure:** The allure of the masochistic young adult fantasy protagonist, as seen in *Twilight* and other texts.

With a particular focus on the language of sexuality used within a select number of young adult paranormal romance texts.

### **Abstract**

There is a general misconception of masochism amongst critics and academics. Masochism is often analysed in a way that either regards it as a taboo subject, or wrongly identifies it as sexual abuse. Similarly, masochism is also presented in a highly negative way within young adult literature. In the cases where sexual abuse does happen within young adult literature, it is then excused and identified as masochism. There is a lack of research in this area that rightly identifies the differences between sexual abuse and masochism within young adult literature, more specifically within the paranormal romance genre. This MPhil critical paper thesis discusses the masochistic traits of female protagonists in the young adult paranormal romance genre and identifies a misconception of masochism as a whole, through the exploration of sexual language, eroticism, and death.

In conjunction with the critical paper, my young adult novel *Dark in the Deep* later became a platform to explore young adult paranormal female protagonists and the romantic relationships they form. Whilst forming my argument for the critical paper, the novel underwent changes to ensure the romantic relationships that were portrayed within the novel were honest and did not further encourage misconceptions or taboos. It was also important for my views, as a masochist, to be explored and compared with critics and academics from both a creative and critical point of view throughout the self-reflective chapter.

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## Introduction

I first read *Twilight* when I was fourteen (2007). Every girl in my year group at school had read the book. Several of the library copies were stacked with dog-eared pages and tiny hearts would sometimes appear by favourite quotations. I did not fully appreciate the hold it had on teenage girls at the time. Ten years later I reread *Twilight* with a different perspective and found myself questioning why the book and its famous relationships were so popular. I realised that there was *something* I wanted to discuss about *Twilight*, and perhaps the genre it fell into as well. Upon this realisation I spent many evenings immersing myself in the world of paranormal romance and revisiting some of my old teen favourites.

Paranormal romance is the subgenre of romance and speculative fiction and often incorporates an array of mythological or supernatural creatures. Romantic relationships are at the forefront of this genre and there is often an obstacle in the way of this relationship, usually in the form of a love-triangle between protagonists (Ramsdell 329). Protagonists, in terms of this study, are the leading or main character(s) of novels.

According to the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), young adult literature caters for ages thirteen to eighteen (Young Adult Library Services Association). It is also reported (Kitchener) that 55% of YA literature is bought by adults, which could be contributing to the rise in popularity of YA literature, and its subgenres. Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* saga (2005-2008) has been at the forefront of this movement.

Vampire books and YA literature, Deborah Wilson Overstreet argues, appeal to young adults due to the importance in discussing many issues, such as sexuality (Overstreet 14). Commenting on its popularity and echoing Overstreet's views, Heather Anastasiu argues that *Twilight* is popular due to the potential positive physiological adolescent issues it portrays (Anastasiu 5). However, *Twilight*, and the depiction of paranormal romance within young adult (YA) literature has often been debated amongst academics, with academic critics suggesting that *Twilight* reinforces gender roles and promotes relationships which feature sexual abuse and/or masochistic traits, and in turn,

questioning whether the female protagonists were also presented as masochists due to the emotional and physical pain they endure whilst in these relationships. Paranormal romance has regularly been berated by some commentators, such as Renni Eddo-Lodge, who call the genre regressive and antifeminist (Eddo-Lodge). In her article, '*Twilight* is not feminist: it's female masochism', Tanya Gold branded the *Twilight* saga as the "swelling of female masochism" and as "disempowerment fantasies" in the guise of fairy tales (Gold). Likening *Twilight* and other YA paranormal romance novels to fairy tales brings to light a number of underlying issues. Fairy tales, I would argue, are often the first type of fantasy novels available to children. Psychologist Bruno Bettelheim wrote in *The Uses of Enchantment*, that there is a value of fantasy and fairy tales for children and claims that these stories can often help children to project and overcome their anxieties and emotional conflicts. As Bettelheim suggests, children seek particular role models within these stories which he argues could have an impact on their life. (Bettelheim 5)

Linda Lee considers this impact fairy tales have on their audience, and believes:

Although many people associate fairy tales with children's literature, fairy tales have never been intended only for young audiences. Fairy tales, like romance novels, target an adult audience and address adult concerns. They invoke a fictional, fantasy realm and express a collective fantasy for their audience. Despite the fear of romance critics, the audiences of both forms [fantasy and romance genres] do not confuse reality with the fantasy presented; there is no element of belief in these genres. (Lee 56)

Lee comments that fairy tales are not just for children, nor were they every fully intended just for children. Lee further comments on how audiences of fairy tales, and in turn the audiences of the romance genre, fully understand that the fantasy presented is fictional. Lee, it appears, does not believe that children, or adults, are easily influenced by the stories delivered within these genres. By addressing "adult concerns", it could be argued that Lee is suggesting that the audiences, however, do share common issues with their protagonists. Furthermore, Lee believes that "formal aspects of these genres differ, but romances are structurally parallel to fairy tales" (Lee 57). However, some of the fairy tale origins that are loved by children and adults today, such as Cinderella and Little Red Riding Hood, have strong links to sexuality. Take Charles Perrault's '*Le Petit Chaperon Rouge*' (Little Red Riding Hood), which was written in 1697. This tale evokes a physical manifestation of predatory male sexuality hidden behind an otherwise innocent façade in the representation of a wolf preying on a young girl, of whom is asked to climb into bed naked with the wolf before she is devoured.

Furthermore, by analysing these parallels between romance and fairy tales, Lee discusses how:

Romance novels with the “love at first sight” motif problematize [sic] this by suggesting that the heroine is always already loved by the hero, and paranormal romances featuring alternate worlds or supernatural species often exacerbate this issue with their common use of destined romantic partners. (Lee 58)

This observation indicates that the paranormal romance genre has its own issues of romantic love between the human and supernatural protagonists. The idea of “love at first sight” is a common theme within paranormal romance and indicates that the sub-genre of paranormal romance has perhaps more in common with romance than fantasy. Although, in general, fantasy novels throughout the years have opened magical doors of escapism and fantastical desires for many readers, paranormal romance also offers this. Lee Tobin-McClain argues that paranormal romance novels are “uniquely responsive to audience needs and desires”, in this case the needs and desires of female audiences, and further argues that the genre “tells us more about women’s needs, feelings, and fantasies than any other genre of the fantastic” (Tobin-McClain 294). This unique relationship between the romance / paranormal romance genre and its audience is perhaps why sales were high following the success of *Twilight* and why I also became captive of the saga.

In many ways, as outlined above with Lee’s observation, young adult readers are also able to identify with the female protagonist of paranormal romance novels and strive to live vicariously through the books they read. Female protagonists are often depicted as being “ordinary” or “average” in almost every way; their relationships, appearance, and their goals in life, acting like a blank canvas for the reader to insert their own interpretation, or even self, into the character. The reader chooses YA novels as a form of escapism, where protagonists regularly seek their own version of escapism from their ordinary life; both achieving excitement and adventure, and romance in the case of the paranormal romance genre. YA literature also often features a high school setting, with classes, teachers, and school relationships. In the case for the select texts this study will focus on, the character also has a prominent family dynamic which often depicts a Western-ised concept of

everyday family life and conflict, which even involves having to undertake household chores. These apparently normalised situations within the novels act as a common branch between the protagonist and the reader. However, it is important to note that these qualities could be indicative of a Western, white, middle-class culture, a category in which the female protagonists of the selected texts fall, and do not fully represent the wider audience as a whole, and in turn, reinforcing societal norms rather than questioning them.

This relationship between book and reader comes at a time when, Meredith Cherland argues, girls read within a culture that is socially constructed around gender roles (Cherland). Debra Merskin echoes this by stating that: “girls interact with texts such as books in multiple ways that ultimately reflect expectations of their place in the social order” (Merskin 173). Similarly, Laura Soloman argues that, “it is important that young girls be able to find strong, female protagonists in fantasy literature” as “[y]oung girls are given many negative messages by the society we live in [...] Many girls are pressured to fit this impossible or dangerous stereotype [of romantic relationships], with little information to the contrary” (Soloman 2).

Soloman’s argument alludes to young adults being highly impressionable. Although at first glance many YA paranormal romance novels appear to be harmless, there are a number of potentially harmful portrayals of love that lie under the surface, which will be discussed in the following chapters. Tobin-McClain further states that these novels offer “exploration of unspeakable elements of contemporary gender identity and relationships”, such as anti-feminism and masochism (Tobin-McClain 300) and whilst in some areas this exploration is progressive, such as female protagonists asserting their independence, the relationships they get themselves into are far more damaging and regressive.

This critical study will explore the basic principles of heterosexual paranormal romance relationships and how these relationships and female protagonists often feature masochistic traits. Masochism is the tendency to derive sexual gratification from one’s own pain or humiliation (Oxford Dictionaries). I will also explore whether these masochistic behaviours are guises for glorified sexual

violence or whether the character could indeed be a masochist. The selection of texts, *Twilight saga* (Stephenie Meyer), *The Vampire Diaries* (L.J. Smith), and *Hush, Hush* (Becca Fitzpatrick), were chosen due to their relation to paranormal romance and the indication of masochistic behaviours displayed by the female protagonists. This study will also consider the language used to describe the characters' sexual encounters and their sexuality; the way in which the characters express themselves sexually. The way in which characters are depicted and the languages used for their thoughts and actions become an essential tool to question whether the masochistic traits are intended or if they are a guise or focused upon the characters within the select texts.

Considering this interaction between girls and texts, it is important to examine these factors as a highly romanticised portrayal of violence (as love) in the select texts and that these novels are, at best, a mild form of eroticised violence. Furthermore, I will question whether these texts celebrate or glorify sexual violence and whether these texts are as anti-feminist as they first appear as argued by many critics of YA paranormal romance fiction. Notably, Elizabeth Hand comments that in *Twilight*, "there's something distinctly queasy about the male-female dynamic that emerges over the series" (Hand). Anna Silver observes such criticisms, commenting:

Ultimately, any feminist critic hopes that female readers are canny enough to allow themselves to swoon into Meyer's fantasy of everlasting passion and devotion and, at the same time, become heroes in their own lives. (Silver 137)

This suggests that readers might enjoy the escapist elements of these novels without being influenced. However, Silver's use of "hope" implies that this is not always the case and is more of an indication that this is her view rather than fact. Criticisms such as these demonstrate a real concern that many critics and readers have regarding the *Twilight* series, and other YA paranormal romance novels, as well as how these novels portray female protagonists within the context of sexual relationships.



### The paranormal romance female protagonist: is she a masochist?

The paranormal romance genre builds on traditional romance, whereby the “paranormal” of the romance is generally between a human and a supernatural being of an otherworldly connection, such as ghosts, vampires, or shapeshifters. Pamela Regis’ widely accepted definition of the romance genre is: “the meeting between heroine and hero; an account of their *attraction* for each other [and] the *barrier* between them” (Regis 14). However, when the traditional becomes paranormal romance, the relationship extends through the paranormal elements. YA paranormal romance novels often feature what is perceived to be abusive relationships (physically and mentally) due to the female protagonist invariably experiencing sacrifice and enduring pain for pleasure, just so she can be with her supernatural lover. Andersen’s *The Little Mermaid* is an example of this. In order to be with the prince she loves, she trades her mermaid life, tongue and voice for human legs which are cursed to be so painful that it’s like walking on sharp knives and bleed constantly. After enduring such pain, the prince marries another, and the little mermaid dies. Relationships between humans and supernatural creatures explore the human’s vulnerability and inability to remain in a physically hurt-free relationship, which is highlighted through the emotional and physical pain inflicted on female protagonists within this genre. Beth Younger argues, however:

Romance novels help young women understand the experiences that can come with adolescence and romantic relationships. For example, when the romance narrative concludes with the severing of a relationship, young women can see that satisfying endings can exist without the obligatory attachment to a male partner. (Younger 75)

Although YA novels do portray a multitude of relationship types, paranormal romance still seems to portray the “beauty and the beast” heterosexual romances, whereby the relationship is nearly always doomed before it starts, implying that any severance of a relationship would not give a satisfying ending to the reader. Younger further argues that YA novels explore these romantic relationships found in romance novels, but widens the experience by revealing that these romantic interactions can be dangerous: “[t]hrough nontraditional endings, positive depictions of female sexuality, protagonist self-definition, and warnings about sexual abuse, these romance narratives challenge the cultural ideal that ties female self-fulfilment to a male partner” (Younger 75).

Interestingly, Younger implies that YA literature “warns” their readers about sexual abuse. While I do not disagree that YA novels portray sexual abuse, I do not believe that YA paranormal romance literature warns their readers of abuse, particularly in paranormal romance. Arguably, these relationships are glorified and encouraged and the female protagonists are often given the label “sexual aggressors”, not necessarily in a progressive or positive light. Shannon Russell, in her research, *Themes of Female Sexuality and Masculinity in Paranormal Romance Novels for Young Adults*, argues that “[w]hile paranormal romance novels have been growing in popularity, seemingly because they provide strong female characters and challenging gender roles, the surprising aspect of their popularity is, [...], that they are actually doing the opposite” (Russell 14). Within the selected texts, this critical study will explore how, while the texts do indeed provide female protagonists who are strong characters, they do not always challenge the issue that paranormal romance characters face; dangerous and glorified sexual violence.

*Twilight* is not an exception, and is arguably one of the most glorified and popular masochistic relationships on our shelves. *Twilight*'s popularity has also spawned thousands of erotica fan-fictions. To her own admission, E.L James wrote the early drafts of *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011) as a Bella and Edward eroticised romantic fan-fiction story, which was published on FanFiction.net (Business Insider). James' novel is full of sexual practices and focuses on the BDSM relationship (the practice of bondage, discipline, dominance and submission, sadomasochism) (Oxford Dictionaries), with original drafts featuring a non-vampire version of Edward as the alluring and damaged Christian Grey, and Bella as the sexually Anastasia Steele. After analysing the two texts, it's hard not to question whether James exposed the sadomasochistic subtext within *Twilight*.

*Twilight*, in particular, glorifies abusive relationships and portrays harmful issues of gender and romance to its young female audience. Debra Merskin likens Edward to a “compensated psychopath” whereby *Twilight* idolises Edward despite him being dangerous (Merskin 158). Whereas Meenakshi Gigi Durham calls Bella a “classic battered wife” (Durham 290). With these responses, it is important to identify the root of the problems within YA paranormal romances. Is Bella a “classic

battered woman”, as Durham claims, because of Edward Cullen’s psychopathic behaviour as Merskin suggests? Or is Bella a masochist at heart who adores her relationship so much that she’ll endure pain just to fulfil her sexual desires with Edward? It is important to identify the language used when describing the female protagonists and their sexual encounters within the paranormal romance genre as it will indicate whether they choose to achieve masochistic sexual gratification or whether they’re influenced to be masochistic by their male counterparts.

## Does the sexuality of female protagonists indicate masochistic tendencies?

Paranormal romance features supernatural creatures. When romantic relationships are created between humans and supernaturals, the human's wellbeing is affected in more than one way. Many female protagonists (Bella Swan, Elena Gilbert, and Nora Grey) within this genre are virgins, with little experience of any sexual encounter, other than kissing. Their clear inexperience and lack of knowledge before meeting their romantic counterparts can lead to dangerous situations; in turn creating a power / knowledge imbalance. Despite the female protagonist's inexperience, YA paranormal romance novels do explore the female's sexual desires; their sexual attraction and motivations for sexual gratification. When faced with the male, they often experience emotions that they don't understand, such as arousal for someone they know is dangerous and mysterious. One example being Elena's first interaction to Damon in L. J. Smith's *The Awakening*:

What am I doing? She thought in shock. I was about to let him kiss me. A total stranger, someone I met only a few minutes ago. (Smith 127)

His dangerous allure momentarily overwhelms Elena to the verge of letting him kiss her. She does not understand why but does accept that the allure is what led to her become aroused. From this we see the development of Elena's self-awareness of her own sexuality and perhaps what she is drawn to in a sexual context. As demonstrated within these select novels, the females want and actively encourage sex with their counterparts.

In many aspects, the female human seeks her independence; both Bella Swan in *Twilight*, and Elena Gilbert in *The Vampire Diaries*, strive for independence and often become a mother-like figure to a number of their peers and family members. Despite their independence, we see their reliance on their supernatural partner become stronger, and in some cases stronger than that of the bond with their family. They seek an authoritative figure as a romantic counterpart, but often struggle with submission. They constantly fight for their partner to remain in their lives despite the danger posed to their own life and their family.

Elena is a family-orientated young woman who often puts her family and friends before herself, however unlike Bella, she exudes confidence. Throughout *The Vampire Diaries* series, Elena

struggles with her desires for both of the Salvatore vampire brothers and her desire for living a healthy and old human life, much like Bella's love triangle with Edward and Jacob, her werewolf best-friend. However, there are moments where Elena succumbs to her desires and highlights her sexual longing for Stefan as they engage in a sexualised act of blood exchange.

It's time, Stefan, she thought. And, very gently, she drew his mouth down again, this time to her throat. She felt his lips graze her skin, felt his breath warm and cool at once. Then she felt a sharp sting. But the pain faded almost instantly. It was replaced by a feeling of pleasure that made her tremble. A great rushing sweetness filled her, flowing through her to Stefan. (Smith 186)

Here, Elena encourages Stefan to initiate this act. She pulls him in closer, guiding him to her neck, and feels a rush of excitement as he bites her. The feeling is described as pleasurable, despite the pain she feels or the blood that's drawn from the bite. This moment becomes Elena's sexual gratification and also becomes the start of their relationship and occasional blood sharing with Stefan. It's important to note how Elena is depicted in this moment and the lead up to their encounter. The language used is positive, such as "gently", "warm", "pleasure", and "sweetness". She is relaxed and trusts Stefan, far more than he trusts himself, even though Elena knows that at any given moment he could kill her if he wanted to. The words used almost excuse the act, despite the pain, there's pleasure, and because it's gentle and sweet that means it's acceptable. From this Elena's trust deepens, and she dismisses the negative attributes to the relationship as she becomes certain that she will end up being with Stefan, despite his claims that he is unsafe for her to be around or to be with her in a relationship. As their relationship develops, this could become a means of projecting blame on Elena, after all, Stefan warns her about the potential danger he poses towards her and this could become his excuse to absolve from the blame if his predictions of her getting hurt come true.

Elena kept her voice level. "You don't want to hurt me," she said positively.

[...]

"There's no need to force me," said Elena. She could feel her pulse everywhere now; in her wrists and the inside of her elbows – and in her throat. "I've made my decision, Stefan," she said softly, holding his eyes. "I want to." (Smith 184)

Stefan proceeds to liken him snapping a thick piece of wood, thicker than Elena's wrists together, as "Your fragile bones", slashing a pillow with his nails as "Your soft skin", and as his vampire canines grow he threatens her with "Your white neck". Yet, this does not deter Elena: instead "her unconscious took over" as "gently and deliberately, she drew that snarling mouth down to her own" (Smith 185). Despite Stefan's desperate attempts to push Elena away, she remains certain that she will be with Stefan and is confident that she and Stefan will be together romantically and sexually, regardless of his threats or clear sense of danger. Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, to summarise, coins the idea of humans struggling between Eros and Thanatos; Eros whereby you strive more towards the positives, such as producing creativity, normalcy, reproduction, connection, and self-preservation, and Thanatos generally the opposite i.e. self-destruction, aggression, compulsion (Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 46). If we focus on Elena's "unconscious" taking over in this moment, this implies she is more aligned to the Thanatos theory, despite her every-day life usually aligning more to Eros. Thanatos is often referred to as the "death instinct" (Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* xiv) and in this context of sexual blood sharing, Elena is certainly allowing this death instinct to take over.

Furthermore, she endures physical pain just to be with him, encouraging blood sharing, something that continues throughout their relationship, and her romantic relationship with other vampires, including Damon. These actions suggest that Elena does indeed have masochistic tendencies, as she takes pleasure from being bitten. The blood sharing is a sex-act between the two. However, the focus is not on the violence of the act itself; rather it is on the intimacy between Elena and Stefan. Despite the pain, she finds pleasure and continues to encourage Stefan to bite her to further demonstrate her trust and love for him. Stefan's behaviour is not indicative of a sadist as he does not enjoy hurting Elena, but, through her encouragement, the two continue to share moments like these, the pain not deterring Elena from wanting more with Stefan.

Similarly, Bella initiates her relationship with Edward. Caitlin Flanagan, writing in *The Atlantic*, argues that Bella is a “sexual aggressor” (Flanagan) and the relationship between Bella and Edward isn’t as dysfunctional as other critics claim. She states that:

The Twilight series is not based on a true story, of course, but within it is *the* true story, the original one. *Twilight* centers [sic] on a boy who loves a girl so much that he refuses to defile her, and on a girl who loves him so dearly that she is desperate for him to do just that, even if the wages of the act are expulsion from her family and from everything she has ever known. (Flanagan)

Surely, the very act of a girl sacrificing just about anything – including her life – to be with a boy is the sign of a dysfunctional relationship and character, much like William Shakespeare’s tragic *Romeo and Juliet*. It is important to note that masochism is not the dysfunctional part in this relationship. Bella’s desperate attempts to remain with Edward go far beyond pain and pleasure. Bella is frequently in danger and almost loses her life in *Twilight* when the vampire James decides to make Bella his prey. Fuelled by her desire for a sexual relationship, Bella becomes obsessive over Edward, perhaps more so than Edward is over her. In fact, Edward spends the majority of their time together telling Bella to stay away from him and repeatedly reminds her that he is dangerous: “It’s wrong. It’s not safe. I’m dangerous, Bella – please, grasp that” (Meyer, *Twilight* 166).

In *New Moon* we see Edward leave their town, Forks, after Bella is attacked by his adoptive brother, Jasper, at her eighteenth birthday party. He realises that he’s unable to protect Bella from his own family and decides that it’s best to leave her. Following this, Bella falls into months of deep depression where she withdraws from her family, doesn’t eat, or sleep, but instead pines over Edward, like an addict going through withdrawal. Her father observes: “[...] You’re... just lifeless, Bella” (Meyer, *New Moon* 95). In the moments after her breakup from Edward, she comments: “The sound of his name unleashed the thing that was clawing inside of me – a pain that knocked me breathless...” (Meyer, *New Moon* 82) and that “The waves of pain... reared high up and washed over my head, pulling me under. I did not resurface” (Meyer, *New Moon* 84). This imagery of a “thing” trying to escape from Bella could be interpreted as the unconscious or forbidden desires within her

trying to escape; they were otherwise repressed or satisfied when Edward was in her life. Following from this, the subsequent pages are left blank apart from the months October, November, December, and January, to signify time passing and the months where Bella has been unable to cope with Edward's departure. Bella's way of overcoming this pain is to carry out a series of dangerous activities. She starts to imagine Edward warning her off such activities, such as riding on a motorcycle with a stranger and cliff diving. Even without Edward in her life, Bella seeks pleasure from danger, and in turn, the emotional and physical pain that comes with; in turn making Bella feel more alive, which is arguably what Bella might not feel if her desires to become a vampire come to fruition.

Juliet Mitchell, author of *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, claims that the desire of the other "can be recognised but never satisfied, for, as the desire for what the other desires, it necessitates the wish to be the other one, or not to be different from the other one" (Mitchell 396). This can be seen initially with Elena and Stefan. Elena's first reaction after seeing Stefan is that she needs to be with him. She's described as valuing boys like trophies, even thinking "what was more important than boys?" (Smith 14) and reflects that boys "were like puppies. Adorable in their place, but expendable" (Smith 14). Elena's overall goal to be with Stefan is what ultimately causes stress and agony in her life. Through her involvement with Stefan, she is exposed to a highly complicated relationship with Stefan's older and more dangerous brother, Damon.

From the moment they meet, Elena and Damon have a dangerous relationship. The "darker" brother, Damon, exposes Elena more to her sexual desires and her taste for the mystery and danger that she later seeks in all of her relationships. Elena and Damon's first encounter highlights this:

Elena couldn't breathe. He was standing so close. Close enough to touch. She could smell a faint hint of cologne and the leather of his jacket. And his eyes still held hers – she could not look away from them. They were like no eyes she had ever seen, black as midnight, the pupils dilated like a cat's. They filled her vision as he leaned towards her, bending his head down to hers. She felt her own eyes half close, losing focus. She felt her head tilt back, her lips part.

No! Just in time she whipped her head to the side. She felt as if she'd just pulled herself back from the edge of a precipice. What am I doing? She thought in shock. I was



about to let him kiss me. A total stranger, someone I met only a few minutes ago. (Smith 127)

By her own admission, Elena was willing to let Damon kiss her. Not only does she stress that she only just met him, she negates the fact that he's also a dangerous person, who moments ago, scared her as he emerged from the shadows:

She had to get out of this place, *now*. There was a real danger here, not just fantasy. Something was out there, something evil, something that wanted her. And she was all alone. [...]  
Her scream froze in her throat. Her muscles were frozen, too, held motionless by her terror – and by some nameless force. (Smith 125)

Again, we see masochistic tendencies within Elena. She knows there is a real danger and possibility of her being hurt by this mysterious stranger. Yet it is that danger which seems to appeal to Elena, alongside the lure of mystery. With this realisation, and her momentary lapse in judgement, the reader is exposed to a glimpse of Elena's true desires; where pain and fear become sexualised, and again where Freud's Thanatos theory becomes evident in Elena.

Interestingly, it is the sexual desires of these young adult female protagonists which seemingly lead them throughout their journey. In *Twilight*, the only way in which Bella can be fully satisfied in her relationship with Edward is by fulfilling her desires to have sex with him. Until *Breaking Dawn*, the fourth and final book in the series, where Bella and Edward finally consummate their marriage and relationship, Bella is constantly striving for a sexual relationship. However, Bella and Edward could not be more different in this regard. Bella is driven by a sexual force whereas Edward is driven by his desire to feed on Bella but often denies a sexual relationship with Bella. He describes this desire as a "hunger – the thirst – that, deplorable creature that I am..." (Meyer, *Twilight* 243) and calling her his own "brand of heroin" (Meyer, *Twilight* 235). He constantly withholds sexual acts, including kissing, and instead usually holds her in more of a fatherly or nurturing way, where he also watches her sleep and sings her lullabies. Due to the tone of Edward's actions, Bella, as Flanagan claims, is the sexual aggressor in this relationship as she is driven by her desire for sexual intercourse. Furthermore, driven by this, Bella becomes completely dependent on

Edward and views him as unattainable due to his immortality. From this we begin to see her rationale for wanting to eventually die and become a vampire herself, just so she can remain with him forever:

About three things I was absolutely positive. First, Edward was a vampire. Second, there was a part of him – and I didn't know how potent that part might be – that thirsted for my blood. And third, I was unconditionally and irrevocably in love with him. (Meyer, *Twilight* 170-171)

Their relationship and desires are not equal. Where Edward constantly reminds Bella of her vulnerability and that he is dangerous, Bella continually dismisses these facts; much like Elena and Stefan. Both Bella and Elena seem to be comfortable with pain and pleasure. Elena's experiences so far aren't portrayed entirely negatively and instead she seems to embrace the excitement that comes from the early stages of her relationship with Stefan. Despite Stefan's reservations, there is more of a trustworthy relationship developing. Bella and Edward's and Elena and Damon's relationships however are far more alarming. Here more neurotic elements emerge. Bella's obsession with Edward, and Damon's fixation on Elena put both of the protagonists in harm's way. The act of pain for pleasure becomes more about the pain and suffering.

## The male protagonists' depictions and sexuality – do they exhibit masochistic tendencies?

Although not shown as directly being dangerous from the way that they look, a male protagonist is often described as being handsome, muscular, and strong. Russell argues that this description “creates a male body within these novels that arouses young women due to both its physicality and capability for violence” (Russell 92). This is clearly evidenced by Nora Grey, from *Hush, Hush*, as she notes Patch Cipriano’s physical appearance:

Patch was dressed in the usual: black shirt, black jeans and a thin silver necklace that flashed against his dark complexion. His sleeves were pushed up his forearms, and I could see his muscles working as he punched buttons. He was tall and lean and hard, and I wouldn't have been surprised if under his clothes he bore several scars, souvenirs from street fights and other reckless behavior [sic]. (Fitzpatrick 101)

She identifies potential scars as “souvenirs”, and that these could come from fighting and aggression, yet this does not deter her sexual thoughts. Worryingly, Nora is also convinced that Patch not only stalks her, but wants to kill her. Yet despite this, Nora is continually sexually aroused by Patch. Nora directly places herself in danger, not unlike both Bella and Elena. These dangerous situations the female protagonists find themselves in arguably promote the idea that dangerous situations and men, and violence are all connected to sexuality. The violence and danger posed to these women is in direct relation to the love that they share/feel with their supernatural counterpart. Their sexualised description encourages the female protagonist to actively want and pursue a relationship, despite the likely acts of violence that comes with their strength and background. In achieving their goal of being with their chosen counterpart, they are exposed to a world of violence.

*The Vampire Diaries* highlights how this sexualised violence is not only exposed, but is actively forced upon Elena. Damon is described as oozing sex appeal and having a lean and muscular body. Damon’s obsession with obtaining Elena for his own objectifies her and she ultimately becomes a prize for him to win. He manipulates her dreams so she dreams of him, and has even

taken her blood without her knowledge as she sleeps. Damon implies that he knows what Elena is truly looking for from her sexual relationships by telling Stefan:

“Does she now? We’ll see about that. Perhaps she’ll find that real darkness is more to her taste than feeble twilight.” (Smith 190)

He enlightens Stefan to the moment where Damon and Elena first meet and almost kiss after he stalks her from the shadows of the gym. The darkness is a metaphor for the sexual gratification Elena is after but could also be interpreted as Damon’s own identity and his objectification of Elena. As their anti-relationship develops, Damon becomes the sexual aggressor, constantly tempting Elena to the “darkness”.

“I can waken things inside you that have been sleeping all your life. You’re strong enough to live in the dark, to glory in it. You can become a queen of the shadows. Why not take that Power, Elena? Let me help you take it.” (Smith 206)

However, despite Elena’s constant rejection, there is chemistry between the two. Elena’s response to spending an hour alone with Damon as a payment for him helping to retrieve something is seemingly fuelled by her hatred towards him:

“I’d rather cut my throat,” she said.  
“An intriguing thought. But I can do it so much more enjoyably.” (Smith 325)

Yet she actively goads Damon, taunting him, despite his proven dangerousness and tendency towards violence.

“Don’t push me, Elena.”  
She moved closer, so that she was almost touching him, and looked at him. “I think,” she said, “that maybe you need to be pushed.” (Smith 369)

This flirting with danger is what ultimately fuels Damon’s behaviour towards Elena. It also indicates Elena’s masochism; she’ll endure suffering at the hands Damon. The excitement that they both feel when taunting each other is what encourages this behaviour to continue throughout the

series. Arguably, the relationship that Elena has with Damon really shapes her to become a more confident and strong woman, with Damon even commenting to Stefan:

“You're wrong about her, you know. You think she's sweet and docile like Katherine, she isn't. She's not your type at all my saintly brother. She has a spirit and a fire in her that you wouldn't know what to do with.” (Smith 190)

Masochism, arguably, can be incredibly liberating and empowering. You can push your body to experience a range of emotions and sensations which enable the masochist to fully satisfy their sexual needs and desires, regardless if the sadist denies physical touch.

Strength and sexuality seem to go hand in hand in YA paranormal romance novels. Male protagonists are desired if they're strong, both physically and mentally. Roberta Seelinger Trites states “sexual potency is a common metaphor for empowerment in adolescent literature” (Trites 84). Patch's description, outlined previously, makes clear this empowerment and masculinity, especially when he and Nora share their first sexual encounter:

There was a glint in his eye that made me think I should be frightened of him...and I was. But that fright was equal part allure. (Fitzpatrick 123)

Yet, despite her fear, she does not deter him from getting closer to her:

He spread his hands on the counter, just outside my hips. Tilting his head to one side, he moved closer. His scent, which was all damp dark earth, overwhelmed me. (Fitzpatrick 126)

The stance he adopts and his actions cause Nora to be “overwhelmed”. Patch is clearly taking control of the situation and Nora is willingly allowing herself to be drawn by his sexual empowerment and desire. After multiple advances made by Patch, Patch and Nora have sex in the final chapter of *Hush, Hush*, and Nora is far more eager to engage in sexual activity.

‘More?’ he asked.

I curled my hands into his hair, pulling him closer. “More.” (Fitzpatrick 391)

The eagerness could be testament to their blooming relationship, where we see Nora becoming more sexually forward, or Patch's continued persistence to have a sexual relationship with Nora.

In his book, *The Masculine Self*, Christopher Kilmartin offers a psychological theory of masculinity, with the concepts of gender and masculinity analysed within a contemporary society. His book also

examines male issues, with emotion, mental and physical health, and violence, perhaps considering them as a form of masculine perspective. Kilmartin suggests that “women are reluctant to participate in sex and therefore respond to forceful men” (Kilmartin 226). Ergo, this match of an empowered and dominant male with a submissive females of the selected texts enables this sexual violence to develop. Which raises the question: is this an appropriate message for YA paranormal romance novels to convey? No, I argue that this is inappropriate, especially when, as discussed previously, these female protagonists are designed to be specifically aimed at an intended audience that is at an impressionable age.

Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* explores the individual reader's response and engagement with a text, by combining reader-response criticism with feminist psychology. On the subject of male dominance, Radway summarises:

Violence is acceptable to them only if it is described sparingly, if it is controlled carefully, or if it is *clearly* traceable to the passion or jealous of the hero. On the other hand, if it is represented as brutal and vicious, if it is extensively detailed and carried out by many men, or if it is depicted as the product of an obvious desire for power, these same women find that violence offensive and objectionable. (Radway 76)

In this alarming summary, Radway's analysis suggests that readers have a certain amount of acceptance of dominant males and submissive females, if the moments of violence are sporadic if they are linked to a character. This suggests that violence towards females is OK if it's presented in small doses, or if the male is the jealous type, as this clearly excuses his behaviour as jealousy alludes to deeper emotions of desire to be with that female. There also seems to be a fine line between forceful dominance and rape, although the two seem distinctively different in the eyes of the sample of readers.

Radway further comments:

Because he finds her irresistible, the heroine need not take any responsibility for her own sexual feelings. She avoids the difficulty of choosing whether to act on them or not. Although female sexuality is thus approvingly incorporated into the romantic fantasy, the individual ultimately held responsible for it is not the woman herself but, once again, a man. (Radway 76)

Rape and other violent sexual acts, in Radway's argument, are acceptable because the female protagonists are too tempting to be resisted. If this is the case, can we accept the violent sexual glorification and masochistic behaviours in the romances' subgenre of YA paranormal romance? Female sexuality is being celebrated within these texts, yet the act of violent and harmful male dominance is not being condoned; whether that is due to his sculpted, handsome good looks letting him off the hook, or because his mysterious "bad boy" persona is what really turns us on, the issue lies with the male depiction. Despite him being a negative influence, he's presented as a brooding and tortured soul who both the reader and female protagonist can feel sympathy for; because of his troubled past, his bad behaviour is excused, much like Heathcliff in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*.

Similarly to Radway, Tobin-McClain summarises the thoughts of readers of the romance genre but implies that readers are able to accept certain cases of rape within romance texts:

Forced or coercive sex allowed these readers to vicariously experience pleasure without guilt – because they identified with the heroines who had no choice but to be dominated. But now that the sexual revolution is old news, now that women's lives are not as circumscribed and limited – and historical romances have correspondingly become less sadomasochistic – why would the paranormal subgenre bring back the bodice ripper? (Tobin-McClain 301)

He also states that the paranormal romance genre provides the location for readers to enjoy these "secret pleasures", regardless of whether these sexualised violence acts connote "anti-feminism or masochism" (Tobin-McClain 302). Texts such as *Twilight*, *The Vampire Diaries*, and *Hush*, *Hush* engage with the taboo issue of violence and sex, using the female protagonists as a way of escaping into the world of paranormal romance, with little guilt over the pain and suffering inflicted on the female protagonists as it is in fact a safe means of sexual gratification for the reader. Perhaps this is why, as mentioned before, the male protagonist's behaviour is hardly ever condemned.

*Twilight*'s Edward is often condemned, however, primarily due to the nature of his relationship with Bella, which is different from the sexual aggression that we see in Patch or Damon. Instead, both Bella and Edward exhibit masochistic traits. The foundations of their relationship is

built on pain and suffering, with Tison Pugh commenting, “as if pain were the only reliable evidence of their affection” (Pugh 141). Although their masochism differs; Edward self-torments and struggles with his feelings towards Bella, and Bella regularly endures pain to be with Edward, their masochism does become a mutual pain. Pugh suggests:

The mutually masochistic dynamics of their love become a manner of communication for Bella and Edward in which they speak through pain: rather than transcending the torments of their love, they map out and enact the painful mutuality of their apparently inequitable affair, in which Bella continually presents herself as Edward’s inferior. (Pugh 142)

Vampires are not only dangerous creatures, but they embody sexuality and (un)death and perhaps sex and the “death” of the self, if we refer back to Freud’s Thanatos theory. This commentary suggests that Bella becomes an inferior, perhaps due to the masochism dynamic being unequal between the two. Although Edward possesses more of an emotional masochistic behavior, Edward does fill the role of the sadist. Masochism and sadism complement each other. Freud comments:

There is a masochistic component in the sexual constitution of many people, which arises from the reversal of an aggressive, sadistic component into its opposite. Those who find their pleasure, not in having *physical* pain inflicted on them, but in humiliation and mental torture, may be described as ‘mental masochists’. (Freud, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud 159)

Masochists seek emotional or physical pain, with the sadist an equal yet complementary contrast to that dynamic. In theory, the sadist wields a lot of power over the masochist, whereby they can either choose to fulfill the masochist’s desire for physical or emotional pain, or choose not to. Interestingly, the sadist can then deny themselves the complementary pleasure they too receive from the sadomasochistic relationship. This could represent the presence of a desire for both domination and submission within the male characters. They can inflict the pain and fulfill their own sadistic pleasures or deny themselves and in turn exhibit masochistic traits. Edward certainly reflects this in the sadomasochistic relationship that he seems to have with himself. Bella’s constant striving for a more sexual relationship often highlights the struggle Edward faces:



“Do you have any idea how painful it is, trying to refuse you when you plead with me this way?”

“Then don’t refuse,” I suggested breathlessly.

He didn’t respond.

“Please,” I tried again. (Meyer, Eclipse 448-449)

Their mutual masochism then encourages each other’s physical and emotional suffering, which they endure together.

## Prey and predator; masochist and sadist

The theme of prey and predator is widespread across the paranormal romance genre, with the female protagonist often the prey and the male supernatural protagonist as the predator. The definition of prey is an animal that is hunted and killed by another for food (Oxford Dictionaries), with the predator the one hunting. Most first encounters between the female protagonist and the male supernatural are formulated on the basis that they are hunted. *Hush, Hush* highlights this with Patch and Nora. Throughout the book Patch hunts Nora with the intention of working out who she is and then killing her. A glimpse of his predatory side is shown when Patch and the school's Coach discuss how Patch would approach a woman:

Coach: "All right, Patch. Let's say you're at a party. The room is full of girls of all shapes and sizes. You see blondes, brunettes, redheads, a few girl with black hair. Some are talkative, while others appear shy. You've one girl who fits your profile - attractive, intelligent and vulnerable. How do you let her know you're interested?"

Patch: "Single her out. Talk to her."

Coach: "Good. Now for the big question - how do you know if she's game or if she wants you to move on?"

Patch: "I study her," Patch said. "I figure out what she's thinking and feeling. She's not going to come right out and tell me, which is why I have to pay attention. Does she turn her body toward mine? Does she hold my eyes, then look away? Does she bite her lip and play with her hair, the way Nora is doing right now?" (Fitzpatrick 36)

He suggests to "single her out" and then "study her", the way in which an animal may single out its prey, study its behaviour, before making the first strike. He also suggests that by analysing body language and with the use of subtle manipulation, that he can gain her interest and inevitably her trust. This behaviour is also reminiscent of a sexual predator, as psychologist Stanton Samenow indicates:

In his approach to potential sexual targets, the individual regards himself as irresistible and seeks to have this affirmed. He is certain that any person whom he finds desirable will be attracted to him. A friendly smile may confirm that he is desired, and that he can proceed with his conquest. (Samenow)

Nora is very inexperienced when it comes to sex; she is a virgin and she does not seem to enjoy conversations with Vee, her best friend, who is very relaxed and open about her own sexual encounters. However, when Nora meets Patch, and the early subsequent meetings between the two, her desire to have sex with him is evident and she often feels the need to restrict herself around him. Throughout the *Hush, Hush* series, it seems that Patch is aware of this and often uses sex as a powerful tool to dominate Nora.

He trapped my hand against his chest and yanked my sleeve down past my wrist, covering my hand with it. Just as quickly, he did the same thing with the other sleeve. He held my shirt by the cuffs, my hands captured. My mouth opened in protest.

Reeling me closer, he didn't stop until I was directly in front of him. Suddenly he lifted me onto the counter. My face was level with his. He fixed me with a dark, inviting smile. And that's when I realized this moment had been dancing around the edge of my fantasies for several days now. (Fitzpatrick 126)

Here we see Patch clearly dominating Nora. The use of “cuffs” and “captured” are telling, and the use of “reeling” conveys the imagery of a person reeling in a fish. As the scene develops, Nora’s internal conflict between her perception of Patch and the idea of having sex is evident:

His scent, which was all damp dark earth, overwhelmed me. I inhaled two sharp breaths. No. This wasn't right. Not this, not with Patch. He was frightening. In a good way, yes. But also in a bad way. A very bad way. (Fitzpatrick 126)

Nora is clearly afraid of Patch and what he may be capable of. She struggles to comprehend why she’s not listening to her own advice and pushing him away. His alluring demeanour also contributes to her unease. Considering Patch’s conversation with the Coach, it is clear that he has singled out Nora in a predatory way. Unlike the other texts examined within this study, Nora genuinely struggles with knowing that Patch is dangerous and actively tries to stay away from him, nor does she encourage his advances. Alarmingly, despite this, Nora and Patch still enter a romantic relationship making the case that with enough sexual dominance and persistence, the predator always gets his prey.

In *The Awakening*, Elena is different from the quiet Nora Grey and shy Bella Swan and is instead described as outgoing, popular, and optimistic. However, she also possesses several negative

traits. She is sarcastic, bossy, and at times, self-centred. She is described as knowing what she wants, including when it comes to her choice in boyfriends. Upon seeing Stefan, her friends tease her:

“Uh-oh. Elena’s got that look again. The hunting look.”  
“Short-Dark-and-Handsome had better be careful.” (Smith 12)

The theme of “prey” and “predator” is also found in *Twilight* and Merskin comments that Bella and Edward “do a dance of predator and prey and victim and violator” (Merskin 169). This is evident between the two:

“And so the lion fell in love with the lamb...” he murmured. I looked away, hiding my eyes as I thrilled to the word.  
“What a stupid lamb,” I sighed.  
“What a sick, masochistic lion.” (Meyer, *Twilight* 240)

Edward as the “lion” and Bella the “lamb” evokes strong imagery of the predatory relationship between them. Even when they first meet there is strong predatorial behaviour exhibited by Edward. After smelling her for the first time he is absent from school for many days whilst he feeds on animals, seemingly feeling that his hunger would be uncontrollable around Bella. This is not too unlike Nora smelling Patch in a raw animalistic way. In spite of this, through his desires to get to know her, he displays the masochistic behaviour of struggling between his love for Bella and the almost self-torture of being around her. Despite his daily battle between his love for Bella and his hunger for her blood, Bella continuously asks and begs Edward to sire her (the act of becoming a vampire) and often remarks unhappily that her body is aging and dying in comparison to his eternal life. She fears growing old whilst he remains young and beautiful.

In *New Moon*, Bella’s fears are realised during a dream before her birthday. She misidentifies her grandmother with Edward and soon realises that the old woman staring back at her is an older version of herself:

Uncomprehending, I raised the hand that wasn’t wrapped around Edward’s waist and reached out to touch her. She mimicked the movement exactly, mirrored it. But where our fingers should have met, there was nothing but cold glass...

With a dizzying jolt, my dream abruptly became a nightmare.  
There was no Gran.  
That was *me*. Me in a mirror. Me – ancient, creased, and withered. (Meyer, New Moon 5-6)

Her nightmare is a clear theme of death / dying and a sacrifice Bella must make in order to achieve sex and immortality. Anthea Taylor comments that the *Twilight* series centres on “the insecure, physically inept Bella Swan and her romantic attachment to her dark yet deep, smart, rich devoted (or rather obsessive) vampire, Edward Cullen” and further argues that Bella “all too willingly becomes part of an idealized [sic] vampire community” (Taylor 33) and accepts the fact that vampires are real without any hesitation or question. Bella’s naivety and blind acceptance that the Cullens are “good vampires” – as they do not eat humans – is in part the central issue as to why Bella is constantly facing danger. Her mere association with the family is enough to spark the interest of other vampires. Yet despite her life being at risk, and theirs for their mutual association with a human, throughout the entire series Bella remains loyal to the family. Bella is dependent on the Cullens, more so than her own family, and often puts their interests before her own. Bella even states that she “would rather die than stay away from Edward” and realises that:

“[...] at any moment it could be too much, and my life could end – so quickly that I might not even notice. And I couldn’t make myself be afraid. I couldn’t think of anything, except that he was touching me.” (Meyer, New Moon 142)

As discussed earlier, when Edward and the Cullen family leave Forks, Bella is distraught and becomes depressed and withdraws herself from friends and family. Literally drained from the experience, she still remains fiercely in love with Edward. Worried that Bella attempted to commit suicide after seeing a vision of her jumping off a cliff, Alice, Edward’s adoptive sister observes: “Our leaving didn’t do you any good at all, did it?” (Meyer, New Moon 389). Bella attempts to reassure Alice that she was fine during her and Edward’s separation, commenting: “Look, I’m doing my best” (Meyer, New Moon 389) but admits: “It hasn’t been easy. I’m working on it” (Meyer, New Moon 389).

This dependence on Edward and her all-consuming love for Edward is perhaps a negative image of love, reinforcing that when your boyfriend leaves you, this is the appropriate behaviour to display. Her withdrawal from life and the inability to function without Edward suggests she is literally “killing” her independent self, in turn, highlighting another representation of the masochism within her.

In *Breaking Dawn*, Bella and Edward finally have sex. Upon seeing her bruised body, Edward is horrified and says, “Look at yourself, Bella. Then tell me I’m not a monster” (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 88). Bella complies and studies herself in the mirror:

I made a quick assessment, stretching my body automatically, tensing and flexing my muscles. There was stiffness, and a lot of soreness, too, it was true, but mostly there was the odd sensation that my bones all had become unhinged at the joints, and that I had changed half-way into the consistency of a jellyfish. It was not an unpleasant feeling. (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 88)

Her self-assessment is alarming. She describes what appears to be a horrific sexual encounter, yet doesn’t see the bruises or her pain as a bad outcome:

[...] large purplish bruises were beginning to blossom across the pale skin of my arm. My eyes followed the trail they made up to my shoulder, then down across my ribs. I pulled my hand free to poke at the discoloration on my left forearm, watching it fade where I touched and then reappear. It throbbed a little. (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 88)

Edward understands that their sex caused these injuries and tries to apologise to Bella that he caused her this pain. However, Bella seemed to have enjoyed being injured by him, even trying to recall if it was actually painful to begin with.

I tried to remember this – to remember pain – but I couldn’t. I couldn’t recall a moment when his hold had been too tight, his hands too hard against me, I only remembered wanting him to hold me tighter, and being pleased when he did... (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 89)

Unable to understand Bella’s passive attitude towards her injuries, the two argue and it is not until she takes a moment to assess Edward’s feelings that she admits to herself, “I was feeling more of the soreness now, but it wasn’t that bad” (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 91), however she still dismisses the pain by likening the feeling to “the day after lifting weights” (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn*

91). She only admits to the pain when she realises that it is no longer associated with her sexual experience with Edward, who remains mortified by hurting her.

It is this behaviour, of Bella marvelling at her bruised body like badges of her sexual prowess, in awe of losing her virginity, that academic critics blame *Twilight* for glorifying abusive relationships. Regardless of Edward's horror over inflicting pain on Bella, they both knew and understood the high likelihood of this happening, yet both still continued regardless. Melissa Ames comments that "Bella's self-blame for the injuries she obtained during consensual intercourse, sounds all too similar to rape victims who blame themselves for being assaulted after the fact" (Ames 7).

Durham further reiterates by stating:

But, like a classic battered wife, Bella figures out ways to hide her bruises and glory in the experience of sex, as physically painful and potentially life-threatening as it is. The bruising is portrayed as an expected and acceptable aspect of heterosexual intercourse.

Thus, the rhetoric of Bella's body is construed through physical pain, again and again; other girls' bodies are similarly targets of battering, assault and injury. It is not until Bella herself becomes a vampire that these torments of the flesh cease. But human girls, in these tales, are natural and easy victims of male-perpetrated violence—and in most cases, they come to accept and even enjoy it. (Durham 290)

Durham argues here that female protagonists in YA paranormal romance are so often abused that they eventually accept their fate and turn this pain into pleasure and suggests that the "cultural emphasis is frequently on preserving the relationship or naturalizing the situation, so that breaking the cycle of violence becomes difficult, if not impossible" (Durham 290). Bella covers her bruises and feels ashamed for how the pain gives her pleasure; this imagery evokes the idea that masochism, and in this case, sexual masochism is negative and women who seek masochistic relationships should be ashamed of themselves. She's presented as more of a victim than a woman who is comfortable with her sexuality. Female characters' sexuality and masochistic self should be embraced and presented positively within YA literature in general. My personal and creative writing point of views on this matter became apparent whilst writing my own novel. Female sexuality should be embraced and furthermore, whether it is a character or your own self, sexuality should

not be considered taboo or something to be ashamed of and presented in a way which is balanced and truthful for the reader.



## Self-reflection

Reading and writing has been a crucial and meaningful part of my life. I had a fairly sheltered childhood. I was the youngest with a large age gap between me and my brothers (thirteen and eleven years difference). Most of my life I have felt like my parents gave me rose-coloured glasses and if they broke, for whatever reason, they would give me a new pair. I was encouraged to watch Disney films over the 80s action movies my family enjoyed, and scenes featuring sexual intercourse were immediately switched off the TV.

My childhood and teenage years were split over two very different cultures; small town Bacchus Marsh, Australia, and a rural village of the South Wales Valleys. The adjustment was tough. In Australia I went to a private grammar school, in Wales I went to a state school. At GCSE level (ages 13-14) we had our first teenage pregnancy of our year group. She was fourteen when she gave birth; I had never fully imagined that a girl my age would be capable of having sex, never mind having a child. I asked my parents about it and they responded with “You’ve had such a sheltered life.” Suddenly I felt unprepared for life in general. I felt very out of place throughout my teens and became disconnected from my life and people around me. I could not share the childhood memories of my peers, I did not grow up with them, and I was not fully accepted by the rest of my year group because I was so different and found it difficult to relate. In recent years, I have come across the term “third culture kid” (TCK) and finally felt that this was a category I could identify with. TCKs are children who are raised in a culture/country during a significant part of their early development years which differs from their parents’. In turn, the “kids” are then exposed to a greater variety of cultural influences and differences (David C. Pollock).

Laura Cockburn suggests:

Many TCKs are raised where being physically different from those around them is a major aspect of their identity. Even when external appearances are similar to either their host or come culture, TCKs often have a substantially different perspective on the world from their peers. (Cockburn 477)

This different perspective was evident, especially given that the culture I had grown up in in Australia was going through its own postcolonial shift, with changing attitudes towards the UK, where my parents come from. Interestingly, Peter Barry comments:

Characteristically, postcolonial writers evoke or create a precolonial version of their own nation, rejecting the modern and the contemporary, which is tainted with the colonial status of their countries. (Barry 194)

I do not consider myself to be a postcolonial writer, however I do enjoy embracing the modern and contemporary and discussing the cultural shifts that I felt throughout my life. During my undergraduate degree, I wrote about these cultural differences, drawing inspiration from *By Then I Was Thirteen*, by Derrick "Taffy" Rees, a memoir of a Welsh boy who, after seeing a newspaper article advertising free passage to Australia, took his two younger sisters and set sail in 1938. He talks about the barriers of speech, food and climate, things I struggled with when I initially moved to the UK. The majority of my life I have felt very disconnected and struggle to relate to other people, unless they too share similarities to TKCs. This struggle often affects how I write as I do not know how to write for other people's enjoyment. I find Paranormal romance offers an escapism and something I desperately sought when I was younger. However, I have never been a particularly romantic or affectionate person but enjoyed the idea of what romantic relationships looked like in books and perhaps fell in love with the idea of the type of relationships that this genre offered. I began avidly reading YA paranormal romance novels when I was fourteen, at the height of *Twilight's* popularity amongst girls my age in school. We would trade fantasies about the Cullen boys and long for a handsome stranger to walk into our school canteen and take interest in one of us. The fantasies often ignored the possibilities of getting hurt, or even killed by the monsters in these books, because *ours* would be *different*; they would be the caring and passionate.

For the critical study I knew I wanted to focus on YA paranormal romance novels as they were such an important crutch when I needed them during the period of disconnection I felt. The books helped me through anxieties and offered a place for me to be completely on my own,

content, and untroubled. In my early twenties I reread a number of my old favourites and became alarmed by the relationships and how they were portrayed. The underlying tones of danger and devotion surprised and interested me, especially as this coincided with the time where I battled with the urge to re-write the majority of my novel; a battle which was subsequently lost. The early drafts of my novel did not reflect the new perspective I had on life and the journey I was forced onto certainly had a knock-on effect with how I write today.

My passion for writing began when I was fifteen. I mostly dabbled with short stories and started writing fan-fiction once I discovered *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. I am in awe of Joss Whedon's writing and characterisation. Throughout the series the audience is exposed to a number of complex emotions. Buffy's journey from her mid-teens to adult life is something I really related to; she moved from California to Sunnydale, thus moving schools and not knowing anyone; her need to put others first before herself; and the emotional and physical abuse she suffers in all of her significant relationships (Angel, Parker, Riley, and Spike). I also strongly identified with her best friend, Willow, who was a shy and nerdy high school girl who blossoms into a confident woman, who also experiments and discovers her sexuality in her adulthood. Willow's character has become the main inspiration for how I want my central character, Roslyn, to be. In *Buffy* we see one of the first lesbian relationships portrayed on TV, the audience experiences the excruciating pain of Buffy losing her mother, the stereotypical bickering between teenage friends and siblings, and the depression and self-hatred that Buffy faces after being brought back to life. When Buffy loses her virginity to Angel and he becomes the evil and manipulative demonic version of his true self, she is disregarded by him. I definitely sympathised with this and wondered whether Whedon was highlighting one of the many issues some women face after having sex for the first time i.e. the danger of being objectified. In my case, not only was I disregarded, but I was left with a lot of emotional and physical abuse. Whedon's writing has always exposed the true horrors of horror, and that's the real world within it; the monsters are a manifestation of these horrors. The complexity of the show's characters is the

main motivator behind my writing. I do not like to use the rose-coloured glasses my parents gave me as a child. Instead, I prefer being honest with my writing.

During my undergraduate degree, as discussed previously, I wrote a memoir which focused on the cultural differences I faced after moving between two countries, but also the delayed grief and emotions I felt towards my mother having breast cancer, the emotional abuse I received from my maternal grandmother, and the early stages of my eating disorder. As a side project to the MPhil, I'm further developing this memoir to incorporate my changing attitude and new experiences since moving and living in Glasgow. Writing non-fiction/memoirs has become my own therapy session. I spend a lot of time thinking and when I write for a particular genre I become frustrated and constrained. Conscious of the audience's needs and general themes within particular genres becomes distracting and I often draft and redraft. I plan in great detail what I'm going to write in a chapter and map timescales and often I get stuck in this loop without ever successfully finishing the chapter or scene. When I write non-fiction, it's more of a constant and clear stream of my thoughts.

Challenging myself to write a YA paranormal romance novel in 2012 has really shown me what type of writer I am, and like my novel, I have developed a stronger sense of who I am in general. I am far more comfortable with writing in a memoir style and then fictionalising the content to fit within the genre. I began planning and re-writing my novel in 2015, after my attitude towards YA paranormal romance novels had changed. The YA paranormal romance novels I had reread repeatedly were still fresh in my mind and had become considerable inspirations for the foundations of my early character developments and storylines, as I was new to writing for young adults. I soon realised that, from a different perspective than my teen views, I was unhappy about the representation of female protagonists and the dangerous and violent relationships that they are exposed to. I wanted my characters to have genuine flaws, rather than the rigid and one-dimensional characters I had originally created. They had no depth, and I strongly believe that I had difficulty writing about sex and relationships because I'd not yet admitted to myself that I was unhappy within my own relationships, that I hadn't fully experienced the emotions I was trying to

convey within my characters, and that I wasn't admitting or accepting what I had been through since I was fourteen.

At seventeen, I was sexually assaulted by my first boyfriend, and found out I was a masochist. I remember thinking on the bus ride home, with tear stained cheeks and a stone-like feeling in my stomach, that a part of me enjoyed the most brutal thing to have happened to me, and really did not know how I should feel or process my emotions. I felt betrayed by my own body; how could it take pleasure from being restrained and forced? How could I get turned on by my angry cries of "NO!" and "STOP!" being ignored? I was a virgin. I had kissed people but was fairly inexperienced sexually. This experience was life-changing. There was a noticeable shift in my attitude in general and every aspect of my life had changed. I began reading anything other than YA paranormal romance as the handsome and alluring monsters reminded me too much of my own monster, and the school discussions we used to have seemed unappealing. I could not write scenes where people were happy, instead I preferred writing short-stories, inspired by Dan Rhodes' *Anthropology* collection, where I wrote about the breakdowns of different types of relationships. In 2015 I first started accepting the assault and wrote a short story entitled *The Journey* whereby I started experimenting with writing realism and fictionalising the content, depicting my own rape but in a way that I could distance myself from it.

In the past few years and following the breakdown of my seven-year relationship, I have been able to fully explore my masochism and try to understand my body. Masochism, to me, is not about being a victim or receiving pain for pleasure. I enjoy being bound and choked, amongst other practices, but the act doesn't make me feel helpless, rather, it is a freeing and liberating experience. I have also come to realise that it is not necessarily to do with receiving pain, but more so that I have a curiosity for the range of sensation that my body can endure. Sensation is a more general term I prefer to use rather than "pain". As psychoanalyst, Theodor Reik observes, "Pain, ordinarily avoided, is the very aim of masochism. Not only is masochism not "escape from pain and discomfort" but it is the exact opposite, a desire for them, an actual "pull" towards them" (Reik 1). Different sensations

cause different reactions and within a consensual sadomasochistic relationship, I enjoy discovering new things about my body. I liken this feeling to how I write; accepting who you are as a person and the experiences you have been through, allows me to become a liberated writer. I value writing from a realistic point of view and truly showing the reader what and how my characters are feeling.

The idea that masochism is presented as a negative within novels is something I struggled with whilst undertaking this study. As I identify as a masochist, I felt that a lot of YA paranormal romance novels do not portray the reality of a sadomasochistic relationship. Instead, sexual acts aren't necessarily highlighted as something the female protagonists willingly wants to be involved in. I felt that a lot of YA paranormal romance novels use pain and pleasure as a way of justifying the sexual harassment or sexual abuse that female protagonists are exposed to within their relationships. Jessica Benjamin writes in her paper, 'Master and Slave: The Fantasy of Erotic Domination', "Masochism is a search for recognition of the self by an other who alone is powerful enough to bestow that recognition" (Benjamin 286). Although a sadomasochistic relationship is fairly genderless where the roles of either the sadist or masochist can be any gender, in YA paranormal romance novels, the female protagonist often falls into the masochist role. In this sense, Benjamin's argument implies that it's the female protagonists' sexual gratification from pain that can be dependent on the male protagonist's sadism. *Twilight's* Bella is arguably the most masochistic female protagonist within YA novels. We see her revelling in her sore and bruised body, following sexual intercourse with Edward, and her literal desire for (un)death. In her post-sex scene, Edward makes Bella ashamed of her bruises, thus presenting a negative image of masochism, a sexual preference that Bella could identify with. Although I do not intend to fully explore the sexual relationship between my two main characters, I do not wish to follow the same direction as the novels within this study in presenting an abusive teen relationship either through rose-coloured glasses or to ensure there is a conformity to paranormal romance gender norms.

## Conclusion

This critical study aimed to explore the basic principles of heterosexual paranormal romance relationships and how these relationships and female protagonists often feature masochistic traits. In turn, this study also assessed whether these masochistic behaviours are guises for glorified sexual violence or whether the character could indeed be a masochist. From my research, I have argued that YA paranormal romance novels do not promote healthy relationships. In the selected texts a reader finds instances of manipulation, dominance, and violence. It is hard to suggest that the female protagonists were designed to be masochists in the first place. Critics and scholars, as outlined in this study, argue that these characters must be masochists because there is an element of pain and pleasure in a sexual context. There are moments of sexual gratification, such as Elena's blood sharing with Stefan, however the sexual violence that is cast upon the female protagonists creates inequality within the relationship. All three female protagonists fall prey to the hands of their predators and through some subtle, and not so subtle manipulation, all three succumb to their alluring counterpart.

On reflection, whilst undertaking this study my research highlighted that there is a general misconception in how critics and scholars define masochism, thus presenting difficulties in defining masochistic traits. Psychologists analysing masochism, such as Roy Baumeister comment on how they view masochism as "paradoxical, incomprehensible, and bizarre behaviour", (Baumeister xi).

Baumeister comments:

What intrigued me most was that the evidence about masochism seemed to contradict many of the most common and fundamental assumptions in the psychology of self[...]. In particular, masochists apparently seek to relinquish control and esteem, whereas most research shows that people generally seek to increase their control and esteem. (Baumeister ix)

This could be why academic critics and other commentators insist that it's the female protagonists who are the sexual aggressors, as they seek to increase their "control and esteem". His

comments on this contradiction are interesting, as there seems to be a general contradiction with how masochism is viewed and defined with Baumeister further commenting that:

The term *masochism* was originally coined to refer to a pattern of sexual behavior [sic], but it later began to be used to refer to a variety of nonsexual behaviors [sic]. The description of nonsexual behaviors [sic] as masochistic is based on argument by analogy, and yet analogies cannot be made effectively if the core phenomenon is misunderstood. (Baumeister x)

In the case of the select female protagonists of this study this theory could be applied. As discussed, the female protagonists do endure pain and suffering without it being sexual in orientation. The driving force is sexual, however, as the female protagonists usually suffer to be with their supernatural counterpart. Take Bella, for example: for wanting and loving Edward she almost dies at James' hands, and Elena dies twice due to her association with the Salvatore brothers. In *Psychology Today*, Paula Caplan reflects on her book, *The Myth of Women's Masochism*, and explains how women are described as enjoying suffering and argues how this is an "absurd and misogynist claim" (Caplan). She breaks down her thoughts on masochism and summarises:

I also explained that the entire concept of masochism, of enjoyment from pain, was absurd, because pain is by definition not pleasurable, and to claim that it is, is to attribute bizarre feelings to people. Women were especially likely to be described as masochists, because they had (still have) been more likely than men to be taught to put other people's needs ahead of their own, they were discriminated against in the workforce and thus were often underpaid and denied deserved promotions, and they were more likely than men to be battered by their partners. Describing them as masochistic, as presumably bringing suffering on themselves and actually enjoying it, needing it, was a dangerous way to mask these various forms of bias and oppression, to engage in victim-blaming (Caplan).

Caplan suggests, like many psychologists, that there are many forms of masochism, and in the case of her research, she comments on how there is a general form of masochism; people suffering to endure mundane tasks as one example, and sexual masochism as another. It also suggests that emotional masochism may lead to actual abuse, as we see within the selected texts. During this study, I found there is an overlap between the two (sexual and emotional masochism), suggesting that the two are intertwined, which again I feel adds to the misconception. From the research presented, it seems masochism is still a fairly taboo subject and YA paranormal romance is



marketed in such a way that promotes this taboo, using terms such as “forbidden love” to gain the reader’s attention, with the likes of Barnes & Noble, as an example, posting online lists of their favourite “forbidden love” young adult literature (Adler). Masochism is also used as a way of excusing the abuse that YA female protagonists endure as it offers a level of excitement, suggested by Kilmartin and Radway’s comments on readers accepting sexual violence due to this excitement. From my research I have discovered that there are moments of sexual gratification for the YA female protagonists. The imbalance and perhaps misidentification of masochism is worrying, only further reinforces the conclusion that YA paranormal romance females are, for all intents and purposes, broken and beaten all for the sake of the reader’s escapism and excitement. As this critical study demonstrates, this only furthers a widespread misconception of masochism (and sadomasochism), that masochism is just sexual abuse, in relationships that feature within the YA paranormal romance genre.

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