THE TWILIGHT OF OUR YEARS:
TEXT, IDENTITY, AND READER SUBJECTIVITY

A Dissertation in
Curriculum and Instruction

by

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Abstract

What attracts us to the books we read, and why? Do our attractions, and the enjoyment that stems from such attractions, give clues as to who we are? This dissertation is an exploration of those questions. I conducted a case study analysis of discussions that occurred between two groups of readers, one group comprised of adults in graduate school and one group comprised of adolescents in high school, on the *Twilight* series of books. I employ critical discourse analysis, psychoanalytic, and reader response theories to uncover how both groups of readers use the texts in the formation of their identities. Through reading group discussions, journal writing, and textual analysis, I explore how the readers resist, accommodate, and question subjectivity and identity within the text and outside of the text.
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...Paul, Robin, Jeremy, and Geoff Guillard: my nuclear family and support base to which I am always welcome to return and regain any strength that might seem lost.

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...Gail Boldt, Jacqui Reid-Walsh, Stephanie Serriere, and Dana Mitra: I could not have come-up with a more challenging but supportive and engaging group of women as a committee. I look at each of you and am awed by the work you have achieved. I would be lucky to one day emulate but a sliver of the scholarship, kindness, and encouragement you have extended to me.

....Ryan Patton: finally, I want to thank my husband, best friend, and dancing partner. You are the constant reminder that trusting myself is worth it.
Figure 1. Cagle, Daryl. 2010. "The Twilight Saga and Girls". Source: PoliticalCartoons.com
I began reading Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series relatively late in the game for a children’s literature scholar. The first novel of the series had been sitting on my bookshelf for over a year and had yet to be cracked open despite its position on the *New York Times* bestselling books list for just as long. I had been hearing the buzz about this series in which a clumsy girl of divorced parents falls in love with a 90-year-old vampire. I finally grabbed the book on my shelf after a fit of longing for easy summer reading that followed a year of laboring through books devoted solely to educational and literary theory. I finished the 498-page book in less than 48 hours: a feat for slow-reading dyslexic.

What piqued my interest to the point of losing sleep to read this book? I could not figure it out. I did not identify with any of the characters or the fantastical plot, yet I could not put the book down. I immediately bought the next two books in the series and waited with anticipation until the final book, *Breaking Dawn*, was released in August of 2008. I wasn’t alone in my eagerness to read the five *Twilight* books. The magnitude of sales for this series is astounding: 40 million copies of the series have been sold\(^1\). Why is the series so popular and what keeps the readers going back for more? Why do younger readers seem to connect so strongly to these texts? The world Meyer created sparked a new creative drive for me: I have spent the past several years thinking, talking and

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\(^1\) *USA Today*. As of 8.3.2009
writing incessantly about possible ways to understand peoples’ love-hate relationship to the text, including my own.

The *Twilight* series raises many questions for me, questions that in fact have a long history in children’s literature criticism. For example, I wonder if messages embodied in the text, such as discourses of gender or sexuality, are being consumed and/or replicated by its readers. *Twilight*’s protagonist troubles me. On one hand, I view Bella as an example of an antiquated notion of femininity: she is physically weak, meek, and finds fulfillment through marriage and motherhood. If Bella is so antiquated, why do Meyer’s books have such a large, intergenerational audience comprised of both sexes? In effect, I wonder whether this is a “good” series or a “bad” series, for whom, and under what circumstances.

Questions regarding readers’ responses to young adult literature are taken up by people who study textual analysis and identity negotiation, such as Finders (1997), Christian-Smith (1993), and Bean and Rigoni (2003). Reader agency within choice of text and textual analysis have been actively studied by DeBlase (2003) and Lee (2008), who asserted that readers of fantasy genres both accommodate and resist discourses specific to those texts. Both Cherland (1994) and Durham (1999) defined reading as a social act whereby cultural values are formed and perpetuated through the text and collective analysis of it. To phrase it in a way that makes sense to those familiar with reader response theory, I had many questions about the variety of responses that readers might have to the *Twilight* series and what meanings I might attribute to these responses. This dissertation describes the results of my decision to conduct in-depth discussions with *Twilight* readers organized into two discussion groups. My goal was to learn how and
why readers approached and interpreted the text in a particular setting, that of a book group discussion.

*Reader response and critical discourse analysis*

My research is heavily influenced by reader response theory. Louise Rosenblatt argued that reader response theory emphasizes the reader and the reader’s relationship to the text in a specific moment: the moment of transaction (1994, 1995). Transaction can be defined as that moment of interaction between the text and the reader that shapes their interpretation (Rosenblatt, 1995). She advocated that literature should be approached without the imposition onto the reader of a certain interpretation or a certain method for interpreting a text. Within this reader response, interpretations of texts are fluid and unstable: by that I mean my reading of a particular text is never exactly the same once I moved beyond that moment of transaction (interpretation).

Our lived experiences—every moment of our lives as readers—affect our interpretations of texts and no one reader can possibly have identical interpretations of a text. Put simply: our experiences shape our readings. For example, my reading of *Wuthering Heights* (1847) at age fourteen differed greatly from my later readings at ages twenty and twenty-eight, simply because of the experiences which occurred and affected my world outlook during those times (e.g.-if my world outlook shifted, my interpretation of the book and its major theme of love also shifted). However, Rosenblatt (1995) argues that influence is a two-way street; not only do our experiences shape our readings of a text, but the text also shapes our readings of society and social institutions. Therefore,
through my multiple readings of *Wuthering Heights*, I also redefined love and the definition of a “healthy” relationship.

Reader response scholars (Chambers, 1996; Durham 1999, Finders 1997, Rosenblatt 1995,) acknowledge that literature is a social product—and therefore a product of social constraints and constructions—just as we, the readers, are social products. In other words, because we share many cultural norms about identity and the meanings of interactions, we bring many shared expectations and experiences to the reading of any text. At the same time, however, as much as we share many experiences in common, we also differ greatly. There are experiences or interests we do not share in common; we have had different combinations of experiences, some of which are contradictory, and many different relations or proximities to dominant and subordinate discourses. The differences in our lives cause some textual representations to seem more normal or desirable to some than to others.

Because interpretations of texts are fluid and unstable, I approached my study with the understanding that my reading of *Twilight* might change drastically (or not at all) once I heard other participants’ readings of the books. In other words, no standardized opinion shared amongst a group of readers should or can exist, but within a group discussion about a shared reading we may, as researchers and readers, become aware of and, under the best circumstances, learn to appreciate multiple and possibly very subtle insights to a text (May, 1995) or to appropriate diverse or shared notions of identity. Reader response theory assumes that readers are highly agentic: by agentic I mean that I, the reader, have the ability to define and shape my reading and to accept or reject other readings of a text. For the purposes of this study, I define agency as the exercise of
subjectivity, of which I will go into more depth in Chapter Three of my analysis. Both Butler (1995) and Jackson (2004) work in a post-structural framework to define the smallest moments of agency as subtle iterations in which identity is not a fixed and coherent concept, but one in which the agent is both formed by and can form new social constructions. In other words, while we are always within social discourse, the discourse is not totalizing. *Discourse* can be defined as a “system of representation” (Hall, 1997, p.72), comprised of cultural languages, symbols, and practices. Because discourse is itself full of contradictions and positions people differently within it – those who are privileged through or criticized due to a close or distant approximation of the norm – as Foucault writes (1995), the discourses themselves give rise to difference and resistance. Therefore, it is more accurate to say that we are within discourses, and within that constant flux and contradiction, change and choice is possible.

It is within the transaction, that moment of interaction between the text and the reader that shapes their interpretation, that choice happens, which I am calling here “reader response”. However, transaction also occurs in discussions about the text. Aidan Chambers, in his book *Tell Me* (1996), places importance on the act of sharing responses to a text within a reading group. He believes that these connections can lead to discovering patterns—i.e. narrative patterns, patterns of rhythm and rhyme, visual patterns in illustrations, etc.—which could, in turn, affect a reader’s response to a text. It can present the reader with new sources of flux and, possibly, of contradiction. Chambers implies that this cycle of response and pattern discovery is never ending as each response changes with each discovery. I firmly agree with Chambers’ philosophy. As I will describe in later chapters, my case study participants demonstrated fluidity in their
literary interpretations during the group’s discussions, and struggled with any perceived contradictions in their responses.

As a children’s literature scholar, I train pre-service teachers how to converse with their future students about literature and how to use readers’ responses to literature in order to learn more about our society. We often discuss whether and how literature affects identity formation through the discourses presented in the texts we read. This dissertation will attempt to identify how readers talk about and analyze the *Twilight* texts. Specifically, I want to look for and evaluate evidence of the anxious claims put forth by some reviewers of *Twilight*. In a pilot study of Amazon.com reviews of *Twilight* I undertook prior to beginning this dissertation (detailed below), many reviewers worried that girl readers might want to emulate Bella and recreate her characteristics. In this dissertation study, as in my pilot study, I locate and analyze the varieties and patterns with the various discourses readers use to make sense of texts and their lives in relation to the text. In the pilot study and for my dissertation, I use critical discourse analysis to analyze my data. Arguments over whether the *Twilight* books are “good” or “bad” for young readers dominated many of the Amazon postings. In this dissertation, I will go beyond evaluating the books and their discourses as “good” or “bad.” As Buckingham and Sefton-Green (2004) note, too much of media criticism frames popular media in these “totalizing terms” (p.24).

My research focuses on the areas in between, the entire spectrum of the participants’ interpretations, which is characterized by ambivalence and an ability to both enjoy and criticize a text, to embrace certain ideas and traits of given characters even as the reader distances and distances her/himself from other ideas or traits in the same text.
In other words, I hope that my analysis of the response of a small group of *Twilight* readers will present a picture of readers that helps to broaden our sense of self and acceptance of self. Additionally, I hope the data that will emerge from this study will contribute knowledgeably to the debate over the inclusion and usage of popular literature such as *Twilight* in school classroom. If identity can be influenced through literature and critical literary analysis of popular literature occurs, the curriculum should be broadened to include access to these texts.

*Setting the stage: the pilot study*

My research interest in the *Twilight* texts began, as described above, with surprise and ambivalence about my own attraction to the books. As a doctoral student in a linguistics class, I used the opportunity of a final course paper to explore the responses of other *Twilight* readers as a way to begin thinking about the powerful response of many readers worldwide to these books. For the course paper, I did a discourse analysis of readers’ responses to *Twilight* in the comments section of Amazon.com. I grounded my analysis in van Dijk’s (1993) definitions of discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis. van Dijk defines discourse analysis as a theoretical approach wherein the relation between language and power are studied; he defines critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a progression of discourse analysis, since it not only studies the links between language and power but also the methods in which language is used to dominate those weakest in society (p. 1-2, 1993). I conceptualized this class paper as a kind of pilot study for a possible dissertation, one that would allow me to begin to identify categories of response to *Twilight* in one particular context.
To begin this study, I initially combed through many websites to read people’s reviews of the series. The Internet has proven to be a vital catalyst for audience response to the *Twilight* series. Several websites are devoted to fanfiction (the fictionalization of new plots with characters taken from a popular series created by fans) and the myriad of discussion forums is astounding. The *Twilight* Lexicon ([http://www.Twilightlexicon.com](http://www.Twilightlexicon.com/)), is the oldest discussion forum and only fan website to be endorsed by Meyer, who acknowledged the website in the author’s comments section of *Eclipse* (2007) and *Breaking Dawn* (2008). The forum contains over 500,000 active discussion threads. The conversation surrounding these books is active and ripe for analysis.

To limit my pilot study, I conducted my analysis of reader reviews on Amazon.com. I used critical discourse analysis to analyze 50 pages of transcript. Those reviews formed distinct categories of response from which I tabulated and indexed particular patterns.

My analysis consisted of the following data:

- 20 written reviews of Stephenie Meyer’s *Breaking Dawn*, posted to the Amazon website during the first week of the book’s release in August of 2008. I chose reviews from two groups:
  - 10 1-star reviews (35 pages of single-spaced transcript)
  - 10 5-star reviews (15 pages of single-spaced transcript)

I chose to analyze readers’ reviews to the final book in the series, *Breaking Dawn*, due to the overall scope of the reviews. That is, all of the reviewers described their

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2 Accurate as of April 2011
thoughts and feelings not only about this particular book, but also the series in its entirety. Therefore, these reviews were most suited to an analysis of the entire series and the descriptions of themes, characterization, plot, etc. contained therein. Admittedly, the research questions that formulated my study were vague. The questions were: What patterns emerge in the “dialogue”? What are the main similarities and differences between the positive and negative reviews? I searched for overall patterns in the “dialogue” over the course of these 50 pages of transcripts.

Through my analysis, I found six key categories of reader response: genre, message, characterization, continuity, reader age/position, and themes (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1.1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Review Type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive (5-Star Reviews)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative (1-Star Reviews)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The definitions of the categories analyzed in-depth are as follows:

- **Genre**: this includes the usage of the words “fantasy”, “fairy tale”, “fiction”, and “non-fiction” within the responses. It was used to primarily categorize not only the book itself, but also how the reviewer actively chose to respond to *Breaking Dawn*. The usage of genre-related discourse positioned the reviewer to respond to the text in a manner according to the genre (in-depth analysis to follow).

- **Message (to readers)**: this category includes the overt usage of the word “message”; as in, “the author’s ‘message’ to readers is…”

- **Characterization**: a category wherein reviewers focused heavily on the series’ characters, their actions, and reader reactions to such actions. Descriptors such as
“passive girls”, “overbearing boys”, “independent”, and “needy” were applied to the review by some readers.

• Continuity: this category contains references to Meyer’s writing style and whether or not her text follows a logical sequence from plot inception to story conclusion. This was the only category wherein no reviewers who ranked the series with a “positive” rating addressed concerns about continuity.

• Reader Age/Position: this category refers to reviews that alluded to readers’ age and experience within readers’ responses. Some reviewers claimed that their positions as a wives and mothers gave them a better understanding of Bella and the *Twilight* series, especially with regards to the final book.

• Theme(s): this category is divided amongst two prominent usages of the words “love” and “sacrifice” as themes recurrent within the series.

The differences within the discourse of reviews can be roughly analyzed from this table. The quantitative data indicates a higher usage of words relating to genre within the Positive Reviews than within the Negative Reviews (11 vs. 7); data also indicates an overwhelming usage of continuity-based discourse within the Negative Reviews while these same indicators do not appear within the sampled Positive Reviews. Because of this data, I decreased my analysis of the pilot study from the six key categories listed above to three nearly equal (in terms of quantifiable, indexed qualities) categories: genre, message, and themes.
Analysis of Genre

I based my analysis of the discourse regarding genre on three excerpts, each sets of three from the positive reviews and negative reviews. The excerpts are as follows:

Table 1.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre-based discourse</th>
<th>#1</th>
<th>#2</th>
<th>#3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive Reviews</td>
<td>“This was a fantasy, no I’m wrong-this was a FAIRY TALE! Readers need to remember that this is not a work of nonfiction. It is not a work of realistic fiction. It is a fairy tale and everyone got their happily ever after.”</td>
<td>“It is a fairy tale. It is not meant to be realistic. It is not meant to convey some deep, meaningful message. It is a STORY…meant to entertain and thrill.”</td>
<td>“As a society we are programmed from middle school to consider anything with a tragic ending ‘literature’ and anything with a happy ending a trite fairy tale.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Reviews</td>
<td>“This ISN’T a fairy tale. Fairy tales are for young children. This is a series for adults-both young &amp; old- and I expect a mature level of writing that reflects that.”</td>
<td>“They [the series’ books] were fairly entertaining. They were simple, entertaining, simple and entertaining. That’s it. A good escape read.”</td>
<td>“I thought it was fanfiction I was reading, not a published work, let alone from the actual author.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The general overarching pattern within the positive reviews clearly state that this book series is a work of “fantasy”, not applicable to real life as the plot lines or thematic messages found within “realistic fiction” (Positive, #1) could be. Therefore, since no “meaningful message” (Positive, #2) can be gained from it, readers should not be worried about the books containing or conveying “some deep meaningful message”, they should only be concerned with entertainment and thrills (Positive, #2), characterized within their definition of the fairy tale genre. The negative reviewers countered this discourse with slightly more varied responses. Review #1 emphatically stated that *Breaking Dawn* “ISN’T a fairy tale” because “fairy tales are for young children”; while the third reviewer classified the genre as “fanfiction”, a genre even further removed of the “fairy tale” scope.
but somewhat on-par with the wish fulfillment plotlines that characterize the fairy tale genre.

Historically speaking, fairy tales were didactic in nature. They were meant to convey a deeply powerful message to a literate society; e.g.- take the well-worn path to Grandmother’s house, not the woods or else suffer the consequences (of disobeying your parents). Those messages were conveyed within stories set within worlds fantastical in nature or in a land far, far away (Nodelman & Reimer, 2003). *Twilight* is clearly not a fairy tale in the sense that it is meant to teach a lesson to its reading audience; however, there are certainly fantasy elements within the characterization: vampires and werewolves live, interact, and even fall in love with a human protagonist. I cannot express any claims about what Meyer intended her series to do, however, her intent does not seem equivalent to the purposes of early fair tales and children’s literature like them. The usage of the term “fairy tale” as a classification of genre could just be a mistake made by an audience unaware of the genre’s background. In other words, if the genre is “fairy tale”, then the concern with what the book is trying to “teach” is justified. However, what the reviewer seems to be arguing is that because the *Twilight* series involves fantastical elements – vampires and werewolves, it is clearly marked as “not real” and therefore cannot be mistaken by a reader as an exemplar of what real life should or could be.

The repetition of the copula in the reviews is also an attempt to define genre; e.g.- what “is” what “is not” characteristic of the fairy tale genre. This copula usage indicates that the reviewers have an expectation of a genre to contain certain characteristics and elicit certain responses within a reader (fairy tales are for children, they have writing and themes interpreted by a mature audience, they do not have “trite” endings, they are not
real). The concept of genre and expectations of a standardized reader response to genre cause much of the discord noted within these particular reviews. These reviewers, especially those who gave positive reviews in this instance, might be confusing how a reader will respond to a genre, rather than the definition of genre itself. Both the positive and the negative reviewers are expecting all readers to react in a uniform way – either to be seduced by the troubling illustrations of girls or sexuality in the books or to be unaffected by them -- to a particular genre (fairy tale). Ironically, differences among the reviews themselves show otherwise, both the positive and the negative reviewer do this, those who see it as dangerous and those who see it as not dangerous. The negative reviewers introduce the theory: there is a danger to others with these books; that people might be influenced by what they read.

Analysis of message

Just as the reviewers of Breaking Dawn expected to establish a blueprint of responses through the “fairy tale” genre, so, too do reviewers wish to establish what type of message is articulated within the text and to which all readers’ responses acknowledge.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Message-based discourse</th>
<th>Review #1</th>
<th>Review #2</th>
<th>Review #3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive Reviews</td>
<td>“She reinforced the sanctity of marriage before sex which I believe is a fabulous message to young readers.”</td>
<td>“As for those who believe that this imprintation promotes pedophilia, I believe that they are misunderstanding the delicate balance and”</td>
<td>“Feminism is about allowing choice and not judging the mother. If anything, Bella is more assertive in this book than in any of the others. Edward’s always been”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3 Imprintation is a term from the Twilight series that has caused much debate among the reviewers’ data for this pilot study. Imprintation refers to a character’s soul recognizing its mate once they lock eyes. This imprintation is defined earlier within the series and comes to fruition when a popular older male character “imprints” on a much younger (infant) female character within Breaking Dawn. The relationship is not consummated until both characters reach a mature age.
nature of the situation.”

possessive and protective. Remember him not allowing her to do things, like seeing her friends at La Push or even just being alone? He did it for love and because he was protecting her, but no one could say it was feminist.”

| Negative Reviews | “These books are all extremely sexist. Not a single strong female character exists.” | “Perpetual Victim Bella continued to be incredibly needy and dependent as well as in peril at all times. I hope that doesn’t make other young women WANT to be victims!” | “All I can say is that I hope the young women of today are mature and self-confident enough to take this series for what it is- an exciting fantasy tale- and not actually dream of an ‘Edward’ in their lives.” |

In this particular table, the positive reviewers contradict earlier statements on genre. As previously established, these reviewers implied that a “fairy tale” should only elicit a thrilling or entertaining response from the reader. Yet the first review (Positive, #1) clearly states that the reinforcement of a particular message (sex only after marriage) is one she/he not only agrees with but is also a message of which she/he advocates the social reinforcement. In opposition to the first positive review, the negative reviews imply that while a message is being produced within the novel, the reviewers do not want the message to be replicated by readers. The reviews center around the social construction of femininity or how the novels construct femininity and how readers might reenact those constructions: are women in *Breaking Dawn* weak or strong? Are these characters meant to be emulated? While one reviewer adamantly states that the pathways a woman can take in life can either be traditional or progressive—“feminism is about choice” (Positive, #3)—other reviewers counter that argument. The heroine and other female characters within the book are not “strong”, but “needy” (Negative, Reviews #1 &
2) and should not “make other young women WANT to be victims!” In an unexpected move, one reviewer (Negative, #3) returns to the positive reviewers’ previously established argument of genre. He/she writes that the books are “an exciting fantasy tale”, implying that any “modern” and “self-confident” young woman can overlook the messages and constructions of femininity because the genre does not dictate that any social reinforcement of those messages should occur.

The discord among the reviewers morphs into one not necessarily questioning the existence of a message (as they did within the establishment of a type of genre), but whether or not that message is being reproduced by readers or being reinforced by the author. The negative reviews imply that messages stemming from the characterization of women within the text will not only be understood by readers, but also will be reproduced by readers (Negative, #1 & #2) or will be ignored by mature readers (Negative, #3). If we are to apply a critical discourse analytic point-of-view, this reproduction could position a person unequally within a social environment; e.g.- the negative reviewers worry that “sexist” characterization produces passive girls and overbearing boys. Not all messages, however, are perceived as ones with negative social positioning. That is, while a message could be reinforced, a reviewer (Positive, #1) thinks that the reestablishment of a sexual relationship only after marriage is a “fabulous message” to send to “young readers”. I must repeat that the reviewers here are not arguing over the existence of messages within this novel, but they do argue over whether any of those messages—characterization or plot—promotes a particular social order or strain of thought.
Analysis of themes

Similar to the reviewers’ disagreement over the implications of messages found within the text, they also disagree over the presentation of key themes in *Breaking Dawn*.

Reviewers identified two primary themes of the novel, love and sacrifice.

**Table 1.4**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme-based discourse</th>
<th>Review #1</th>
<th>Review #2</th>
<th>Review #3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive reviews</td>
<td>Love: “I understand Bella’s love for Edward- I feel that way about him too.”</td>
<td>Sacrifice: ”The overwhelming theme was not that you do not have to make choices in life because everything will work out for the best, but rather, love does conquer all…It is a universal theme—with love anything can be and is possible—isn’t that a lesson we can all agree on?”</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative reviews: Love</td>
<td>“The problem isn’t necessarily that Bella’s married at 18 so much as this entire thing is idealized. At the point where this is passed off as the purest form of pure love and something that all people should aspire to. Meyer is saying that this is what all true love is like.”</td>
<td>“Her love of Edward focuses far too much on Edward’s beauty, and not much on what actually makes them click together….the fact that Edward stalked Bella while she was sleeping before she even knew him is creepy, not true love.”</td>
<td>“Neediness is not love! Being told what to do and what to drive and who to be friends with is not being loved! Being a victim is not sexy! Desire to forsake your friends, family, and humanity is NOT healthy!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Review: Sacrifice</td>
<td>“The main theme of the books is choice and sacrifice, delved even more deeply in Eclipse. BD completely disregards all of this. Bella doesn’t lose anything. In fact, she gets everything.”</td>
<td>[Bella] “Does not have to deal with any consequences.”</td>
<td>“God forbid, Stephenie, God forbid there’s actually some sacrifice or pain or struggle. It was lame and * yawn * . The cheesy happy ending was the saddest of all happy endings ever. Yes, absolutely EVERYONE got EVERYTHING without giving up ANYTHING. No one deserved it. No one. It was all so sparkly and happy, with rainbows and unicorns, all so sweet and candy that I think I got diabetes by just reading it.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Much as we had reviewers concerned over the replication of any “message” that readers might identify, the reviewers are similarly concerned over how both love and sacrifice are defined by the novel. The usage of intensifiers (underlined in the following) amongst all of the reviewers’ responses is in reaction to the author’s sweeping use of language: “this entire thing is idealized” (Negative review #1, love); “love does conquer all” (Positive review #1, love); “her love of Edward focuses far too much on Edward’s beauty” (Negative review, #2, love). The usage of copulas resurfaces, as well. In these responses on themes, however, the reviewers seek to not only just come to a standardized definition of genre, but a standardized definition of love and sacrifice that is recognizable and replicable by all. For example, Negative review #3 (love) states that love “is not” the following: neediness, being told what to do, what to drive, and who to be friends with, being a victim, and having a desire to forsake friends, family, and humanity. This particular reviewer not only identified a definition of love in *Breaking Dawn* that included all of these traits, but also categorized this definition as “NOT healthy”.

While I might agree with this particular reviewer’s assessment of the novel’s definition of love, the reviewer implies that there is a stable definition to be identified—both within the novel and within society. The negative reviewers in this section worry that readers might alter their definition of “love” to include the dictates of Stephenie Meyer’s definition of love and reenact this definition within a social environment.

*Extending the Research: Texts, identities, and reader agency*

The results of my study suggested that there are several categories under which readers’ responses to the *Twilight* series fall. For example, readers discussed cultural
discourses of ideology around specific categories such as genre (e.g.-the fantasy genre to explain why Meyer characterized Bella in a particular way), themes (e.g.-love), and message to readers. Completing this discourse analysis research opened up a whole new series of questions for me. After conducting my pilot study, I was intrigued by the variety of stances taken by readers. I wondered, for example, about whether these categories exist outside of the online community. Would a reading group comprised of live readers’ responses be similar to the online community? What differences in discourse (if any) might the contextual difference between online and live conversation produce? This question went to the issue of whether discussions of the text, such as those that might occur in a classroom, could produce effects that would argue for or against the inclusion of such texts in a classroom. Most importantly, could I find evidence 1) of how readers’ previously existing identities were influenced by reading the texts; and 2) that those who took a stance for or against the books were actively producing discourses that in some sense participated in something that might be called “self-oppression” or “self-liberation”?

To explore these questions, I recruited and collected data from two reading groups of different age sets. One group was comprised of adolescent readers, aged 12-17, while the second reading group was comprised of older readers, aged 18-32, as a comparison group. I had hoped to formulate groups with participants of both sexes: in discussions with teachers and parents about the books, I have been told that many males also read the stories even though the reading audience is predominantly female; that did not transpire. My methodology section in this dissertation will detail the group information, the data collection methods, and the research timeline I will follow for this study. For now, I will
simply say that I decided on two groups because I began to wonder about whether readers would understand differences in response to, in any way, mark age differences. Given that the text was written for adolescents but read by adults as well, I wondered whether an identifiable construction of adolescent identity and adult identity could be found within the group discussions. My data sets included transcripts of our book group discussions and participant journals. I asked the participants to write in journals, of which I was the sole reader outside of themselves. I asked for the journals because I anticipated that they might have reactions to the text that they could/would write down while concurrently reading the text. I also thought that they occasionally might want to present an opposing interpretation of the text that they, for whatever reason, felt unable to share within the reading group community.

The data I analyzed in the pilot study suggested that reviewers do not have a sense that their readings of the text might be at least in part due to their own experiences and positions. They do not, in other words, exhibit a conscious awareness of reader response theory, that the preferred meanings of the text nevertheless may not finally control the reader’s experience of or response to the text. Rather, reviewers express their concern that concepts of thematic structure, message, and genre within this series position the reader within possibly unequal social scenarios in language that is, for the most part, totalizing. For example, “all” love and “everyone” who wants love like characters of Bella and Edward must fit within particular categories (the girls are: “needy”, “fragile”, while the boys are: “fierce”, “determined”). For others, genre determines the “danger” of the texts, that because the genre is not “non-fiction” or realistic, the messages and characterization should not and cannot be replicated by readers. In effect, the reviews—at
times both the positive and negative reviews—state that the genre of popular fiction/fantasy cannot be taken seriously enough to shape the worldview of a reader. Would the data from my dissertation participants be similar?

The argument over whether and how textual representations impact the shaping of reader identities extends far beyond the Amazon reviews. Assumptions about this interaction are central to both critical discourse analysis and critical literacy but in fact go back much further in history as the belief that literature shapes children’s character can be traced to at least to *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* (Hughes, 1857). Donald Biskin and Kenneth Hoskisson (1974) advocate a framework of using children’s literature in basal reading programs to teach morality to young students. The authors claim that through identifying the moral dilemmas with which characters are faced and eventually overcome (supposing the characters actually do overcome moral temptation), teachers can easily identify, explain, and replicate positive moral development within their students (p.152). Such exercises are seen to benefit not only teachers, students and their schools, but also the positive benefits extend into society (p.156), since the purpose of children’s literature is to not only entertain, but also to train upstanding citizens of the state (Stone and Veth, 2008, p.22). But how would the language of these texts (being used to develop moral character) position readers? Can texts develop or degrade all readers’ moral fortitude in a predictable way? Many critical discourse analysts would claim that language and texts can position readers in predictable ways, worrying particularly about texts that, like *Twilight*, are seen to replicate and reinforce in readers a subjectivity that mirrors inequalities that are outside of the text and in society (Leland et al, 1999).
This stance is not without critics. The more dire concerns of these perspectives are countered by Rosenblatt and other reader response theorists (Chambers, 1996; Atkinson and Mitchell, 2010). There are no similar pathways that all follow to come to understandings of right and wrong, of desirable or undesirable actions or identifications, just as there are no similar pathways that readers follow to comprehend a text. As Tobin (2000) argues, we cannot know the meanings that others will make of texts outside of conversations with those we would for whom, or on whose behalf, we would presume to speak. Rather, the important aspects of textual interpretation and the character development of readers in relation to texts is an empirical question to be studied via research. This involves looking not just for instances in which readers seem to agree with the texts, but should include openness to the possibility that audience’s responses “collude, collide, exclude, and compete for meaning” (Atkinson and Mitchell, 2010, p. 4) often contextually and across multiple identities.

Literature Review

Readers negotiating identity through literature discussion

Several researchers have investigated readers’ negotiations of identity in relation to texts and groups. There is no agreement among these researchers about the balance between the text and the context, by which I mean the group and the reader’s existing identifications, in these negotiations. Bean and Rigoni (2001) argue that young adult readers often gravitate towards books that portray protagonists with similar ages and values to the reader. They argue that those books that are popular with younger readers typically also have plot structures that provide a “roadmap” to negotiate issues such as
“pregnancy, divorce, substance abuse, family conflicts, and political injustice” (Bean and Moni, p.638). In effect, sometimes younger readers choose literature that echoes their space of adolescence; it is a vehicle through which they can watch as a protagonist similar to themselves can make decisions about an issue without the reader suffering the consequences. Young readers can use literature to explore their states of selfhood or identity formation.

Bean and Moni (2003) advocate a critical literacy framework in which critical discussions of literature problematize values that are present within the text and “readers become aware of how they are being constructed as adolescents in the text and how those constructions compare with their own attempts to form their identity” (p. 639). These scholars’ work with adolescent reading groups and the identity formation that comes through critical analysis of literature applies to my study on Twilight for several reasons: primarily, their work prompted students to question how the author replicates specific cultural ideologies of gender, class, and adolescence. The authors also used very generalized structural prompts to get their participants to pinpoint whether, where and how the text produces, cites, or replicates particular stances. Whereas Bean and Moni’s work is guided by the need to intervene into readers’ interpretations of the texts, for my research, the assumption of intervention is a premature stance. While I might draw from the prompts Bean and Moni provide for our discussion (e.g.- who is the implied reader of this book? How does the adult author construct the characters in the novel? How do these characters construct their identity?), unlike critical literacy theorists, this is not intended as an intervention or advocacy study. I want to take a step back and see whether such an intervention is even necessary.
It is within the power of the reader to support, assimilate, reinterpret, or reject the words and dominant patterns of social discourse presented to them in the texts they read. Notions of a reader resisting or embodying ideologies within the texts they read has also been addressed by Margaret Finders. In her ethnography on two reading groups of teenage girls in *Just Girls* (1997), she concludes that literacy is primarily a social event that constructs social identities and positions girls within their peer groups. This construction of social categories (those identities and positions) aids or serves as a coping mechanism as these youth negotiate their advancement into adulthood and out of childhood. As Finders (1997) writes, the girls chose to ignore the texts or assignments presented to them within their language arts classroom, but they devoured the teen magazines that outlined what fashions they should wear and gave dating advice during sleepovers and get-togethers. This type of reading assigned status to them: they were the arbiters of fashion and the popular girls amongst the boys at school. Their literacy both defined them within their social roles among the outside world (as they perceived it and as it was presented to them in their readings) and connected them to their peers through this event. My work relates to Finders in the sense that I, too, am curious as to how groups produce discourses along the lines of “teen-ness”, “adultness” or other kinds of “otherness”.

However, Finders found that the girls neither simply resisted nor accommodated the female role models or identities presented within their texts. Rather, they simultaneously chose both pathways of resistance and accommodation not only by choosing multiple forms of literature, but also by interpreting gender roles differently as
an individual and as part of a group; that is, their interpretations might differ once an individual is separated from the peer group.

Like Finders, Lewis and Ketter (2004) discuss multiple identity formation that arises within reading group phenomenon. In *An Introduction to Critical Discourse Analysis in Education*, Lewis and Ketter link socially situated identity formation to interdiscursivity. As they define it, group discussion of literature can cause individuals to appropriate and reconstruct “discourses associated with other participants,” in addition to discourses present within the text (p. 117). They imply that active accommodation and resistance is part of the learning process associated with reading analysis (p. 117). In other words, participants’ identities are socially situated (p.117), and what aspects of their identities they foreground and as well as their understandings of the text and society shift based on the situation they are in. Likewise, in this study I look to see whether my readers enact separate group identities whereby they present an interpretation of *Twilight* to the group that fits with various group identities, that formed by the reading group and by outside group affiliations. This communal interpretation of literature on a microcosmic scale (the reading groups mentioned within these reviewed ethnographies and my proposed case study) echoes the macrocosmic worldwide popularity of Meyer’s fiction. Individual interpretations of the stories might differ, but by the large monetary sums generated by the books alone it can be argued that readers identify with each other or the text on some level, simply by the act of owning or reading the books; therefore, they are part of a socially established peer group and reading event. The question then morphs into: what can be convincingly said about whether (and how) stances taken in the
book (and/or in the group) interact with their own identities, their own actions, and senses of what is possible or desirable?

**Reader Agency**

As Bean and Moni (2003) note, discussions of literature through a critical literacy framework problematize values that are present within the text and “readers become aware of how they are being constructed as adolescents in the text and how those constructions compare with their own attempts to form their identity” (p. 639). While it is worrying to think of simplistic or overtly sexist, racist, or classist discourses being reproduced through popular adolescent literature like *Twilight*, it is important to note that these assumptions neglect to recognize that readers are not empty vessels into which the authors’ of texts pour a particular interpretative and actively acceptant or resistant stance. Readers are not necessarily subjects to the text or to the discourses within the text. Reader agency must be considered as a variable within the equation. Linda J. Lee (2008) argues that romance novels and fantasy novels have a very active accommodating and resisting reading community, whereby the readers pick and choose aspects of the text with which they agree and disagree. Gina DeBlase (2003) noted in her case study of girls’ readings of romance novels that while individuals use the social structures of language and literacy to construct (or reconstruct) identities of gender, race, and class, they also have a give-and-take relationship with their texts. In other words, Louise Rosenblatt’s (1994) reader response theory—specifically her notion of “transaction”—supports Deblase’s assertion that gender is constructed by not only what we read but also “by the social and cultural context within which we read it” (p. 625). Therefore, the reader is not
a passive variable in reader response theory; the reader is a “co-producer” of culture outside of the text and the replications of social institutions found within the text. Thus, by facilitating a group discussion around the *Twilight* books, we could gain a greater understanding of if and how readers interpret particular power discourses represented within the texts.

Because the interplay of text and identity is so uncertain and because the “literature shapes character” stance is still prominent in education, many educators take the “safe” route of excluding popular literature within school curriculum in favor of “high quality literature.” Credaro (2006) distinguishes popular literature from “quality” literature used within curriculum as a type characterized by frequently requested books by readers (within libraries or stores) but books which are not necessarily “celebrated or approved” from a scholarly standpoint. Specific reasons cited for not using popular books included claims that popular literature is characterized by repetitious storylines and poor character development (also points of contest within the data of this study). While “poor character development” is often used to describe characters who are not rhetorically well defined, it is not a stretch to argue that this often involves an implicit dislike of characters who do not develop in particular ways. The implication is not only that must something specific be learned from literature, but also there are only specific, “approved” messages or ideas to learn and that this learning occurs either in the affirmative or through tragic outcomes for those who stray. Anything outside of the approved knowledge taken from a text is not considered knowledge or is dangerous knowledge.

Popular media like *Breaking Dawn* therefore raises questions: Is there anything for the young reading audience to *learn* from these books, and if so, what? What
characteristics or virtues are desirable for adolescent female readers? Are the wrong messages being sent? Could the messages about love and gender that Stephenie Meyer sends to children be amoral, immoral, or too moral? While it is worrying to think of simplistic or overtly sexist, racist, or classist discourses being reproduced through popular adolescent literature, it is important to note two major factors that these assumptions neglect to take into account: primarily, that readers are not simply adrift without already existing anchors. There is no simple sense in which books can be said to steer the reader into a particular interpretation or accepting or resistant stance. Readers cannot necessarily choose their emotional responses to books – a fact that causes considerable consternation for some readers in my study – but they can choose whether or not they accept and are guided by the discourses being presented to them. Secondly, works considered “high quality literature” are not immune from the fact that readers’ backgrounds mean that they will experience the texts’ differently.

The overall conclusion that I gather from the pilot study data is that the existence of the online dialogue among Twilight reviewers shows that there is an active, agentic reading community that shows no signs of slowing down. However, I recognize that it might not be enough to say readers are actively speaking-up for themselves. What if they are actively constructing oppressive subjectivities? From an Althusserian perspective, the real power of an oppressive society is that our very subjectivities are formed as we are interpellated through dominant messages to desire our own subjection (1971). Were those who were not critical of the Twilight books simply blind to their own participation in ideological messages that were bad for them? While such a conclusion might be possible, it was premature. I needed to research in greater depth what people were saying...
and doing with these texts. It was from this need to question, listen, observe, and collect
real-time data on readers’ responses to these difficult texts that I formulated my
dissertation.

Group values and collective reading: review of literature

Several scholars research the divide between literature’s influence on the
individual reader’s identity formation and identity negotiation amongst a peer group of readers (Comber and Nixon, 2005; Keddie, 2006; DeBlase, 2003). Meenakshi Durham
(1999) identifies a level of comfort among peer groups who internalize the values of their reading (mostly magazines like Seventeen, Glamour, and YM aimed at teenage girl
readership), which in turn influences girls to actively associate themselves with the type of girl defined in these readings. Durham argues that this allows the girls to feel secure amongst their friends at a time when they lack security in other aspects of their lives. Durham indicated that the internalization (by adolescent viewers or readers) of what is perceived as “objectionable beliefs and behaviors”—i.e.-anything that falls outside a category of normativity in the group —contributes to low self-esteem and even possibly harmful or destructive behavior in young women. To avoid this problem, she argues that young readers often identify with previously established and group accepted categories, rather than being given the opportunity to create their own, possibly culturally undefined category.

notion of the fluid identities of participants’ in-group activities. They argue that the
identity negotiation that occurs amongst group members aids in the development of social
skills such as self-confidence and tolerance for other viewpoints (p.25). In other words, the participants in these latter studies were more likely as individuals or in small groups to break with the norms than the participants described in Durham’s study. For me, this raises the question of whether Durham read her participants too pessimistically or the others read their participants too optimistically, or if there were other differences in the groups, contexts or discussions that led to the differences in outcome.

Cherland, who supported her ethnography *Private Practices* by defining reading and conversation as “social acts”, succinctly summarized the researcher and participants’ roles within reading discussions. She writes that every observation and analyses of conversations provide insight into “people’s tacit cultural beliefs” (1994, p.12). Where does agency converge with the power of popular culture and peer pressure within these reading group discussions? That is, how will the influence of one reader’s interpretation over another effect the group? Michel Foucault’s explanation of power as sinuous rather than being wholly contained within a structure or institution demonstrates the fluidity of power as a construct (1980). This fluidity that Foucault addresses can also be stretched to accommodate a contextualized definition of identity—or the surfacing of multiple and sometimes contradictory identities. Bakhtin’s notion of *heteroglossia*, socialized language(s) that might seem contradictory or at odds with a personal belief system (Pollard, p.28, 2008), allows us to be open to such contextualized interpretations of a text. That is, we play certain roles (Pollard, p. 34) and how we perform those roles depends upon contextual circumstances: past, present, and future instances of a similar event (like a book group analysis of the *Twilight* series) may affect our role-play, as does the community we are in at that contextual moment.
Bakhtin’s polyvocality also relates to how we define ourselves within those contextualized communities, through the influence of fellow community members (or role-players, as it were): as understood by Linell (2007), “consciousness is a dialogical notion and involves the self’s ability to internalize others’ views on self’s own thoughts, utterances and actions” (p. 166). To approach the participants’ interpretations of the text through Bakhtin’s notions of context also permits us to abandon the notion that the participants were accepting of the text, and all aspects of the text, at all times. Interpretive stances become dynamic, rather than static. The dynamic aspects of my participants’ interpretations are exhibited not just through their real-time responses in our meetings, but also within their journals. Their reflective processes were enhanced, as Boud (2001) terms it, in the “midst of action” (p.13)—noticing how they responded to the text at that moment and unpacking why they might have responded that particular way at that particular time—and by “reflection after events” (p.13-14), dedicating a paragraph of their writing to what was said by other participants during our previous book group meeting.

Christian-Smith draws from Foucault’s argument that subjectivity, in the form of what we experience as individual desire, is formed as an effect of power/knowledge. Working from this, Christian-Smith argues that the gender discourses of these popular romance texts “speak to the unconscious and conscious desires of young women readers while using those desires to secure their consent to larger dominant patterns of power and control”(1993, p.3). However, this is a dated expectation of participant behavior: if readers are able, as I believe they are, to avoid those larger dominant patterns, it only serves to show that they are multiple ways of showing power and control as a
reader/woman/man/younger reader. As Lewis and Ketter (2004, p.118) claim “communities of practice create and reinforce tacit and explicit expectations and worldviews held in common by the community.” I want to use the analysis of my reader response groups to explore not only if or how those discourses arose in readers interpretations of the Twilight texts, but also to get a glimpse of how readers within a group of readers resisted or accommodated those “larger dominant patterns” of societal control.

In order to fully understand how some, not all, readers played with resistance or accommodation of social discourses, I found it helpful to turn to psychoanalytic theories of fantasy and role-play. These approaches allowed me to move past either categorizing the readers as subjects of social discourse or resistors of social discourse; it moved my analysis into a discussion of locating when and why readers might choose to be both accommodating and resistant. From reading as a form of pleasurable escape (Nell, 1988), to therapeutic benefits in role-playing (Weille, 2002), and sexual domination as rationalized violence (Benjamin, 1980), I could locate not only instances of where some readers enjoyed (but also cringed at their enjoyment) aspects of the text but why they might do so. In this same vein, I called this role-play “intrafantasy”, of which I go into more detail in Chapter Four. This term differs, however, from past conceptions of metastanstasy, in which literary critics have defined fairy-tales-within-fairy-tales, or an awareness of the characters own fictionalized identity (Foust, 1980; Aichele, 1988). Instead of the characters within a text being aware of their place in the story, I use intrafantasy to describe the awareness of the reader’s role and active engagement in
relation to the fantasy text; none of which needs to be consistent to a reader’s prescribed social status, from a heteroglossic standpoint.

The questions that helped to frame the questions I asked participants as well as my data analysis were these:

My general research question:

- What does this research say to the contention that a given book can be properly categorized as “good” or “bad” for readers? This dissertation responds to what I see as a type of policing of literature; that is, a tradition has emerged from critical literacy that some books, typically popular books, can be readily classified as either good or bad literature, with “good” or “bad” discourses that could be emulated by a non-critical reader (DeBlase, 2003; Marsh 2003). What is the interaction between critical consciousness and ideologically troubling text messages?

Sub-questions related to identity

- Does the Twilight series contribute, and under what circumstances, to participants’ understanding of and articulation of identity, their own and that of others? Part of what I want to understand is whether it is possible to say that these texts appeal to people based on some predictable markers of identity or whether they use the text to mark their own identity and that of others in particular ways.

- What, if any, larger contextual practices and markers are used by participants to make meaning from these texts in one way or another?

Sub-questions related to subjectivity
• Do I find evidence that these texts have substantially changed or reinforced aspects of readers’ identities or beliefs? For example, do the participants report the text interacting with or changing their own conceptions love, relationships, gender roles, etc?

• How did readers react with the text: did the text overwrite their beliefs? Was the text “bad” for the readers? Is there evidence that reading the text overwrote subjects’ capacity for distance for criticality; in other words did they become subjects to the text?

Sub-questions related to discussion and context

• Do the discussions change or reinforce aspects of their own identities or beliefs?

• What, if any, differences arise in individual versus group contexts?
Chapter Two
Methodology

In this chapter, I outline not only the classification of my methodology but I also address my role as researcher. I present details about the location of the study and the particulars of the participants; and also show how my theoretical framework fits with my choice of methodology.

Participants and participation

To recruit participants for my study, I spoke about my research to classrooms at both the university and the high school level. I supplemented this in-person recruitment with fliers seeking research participants which I posted at a public library. My goal was to recruit enough participants for one reading group composed of adolescents and one reading group comprised of adults (over the age of 18). All recruited participants were individuals who were able to make the necessary time commitment to complete the research. I meet with each group for one hour once per week for four weeks. This allowed us adequate time for addressing the readers’ interpretations of the texts, with one meeting dedicated to each book in the series.

I had more difficulties recruiting participants than I had anticipated. I was able to put together two reading groups, which I will hereafter refer to as “the Adult Group” and “the Adolescent Group.” The Adult Group was comprised of 3 women, between the age ranges of 23-32. The Adolescent Group was comprised of 3 young women between the ages of 15 and 18. Although, I did not discriminate by gender, age, religious affiliation,
or sexual orientation in the recruitment of group members, the two groups I ended up with shared several commonalities. All of my volunteer participants were female. While I made every effort to include both men and women, boys and girls, (and anyone who identified otherwise) in the study, only these six females accepted an invitation to participate in the study. While I received interest from several local high school males, in the end they chose not to participate in the study due to scheduling conflicts or lack of parental/guardian approval of participation in the study. Participants had other commonalities beyond gender. At one point within a discussion about the author’s Mormon background and how that might have affected her stories, all participants in the adult group identified themselves as Christian. While no participants directly named a sexual identification, at one point they all described their attraction to males -- not that this necessarily equates to exclusive heterosexuality.

The breakdown of the participants is as follows:

Adult Group:

Karen: Early 30s, PhD student in media studies and communications

Brianna: Early 20s, PhD student in literature

Sascha: Mid-20s, PhD student in communications and women’s studies

Adolescent Group:

Maryn: 16, local high school student

Regan: 15, local high school student

Lena: 17/18, recent high school graduate, in her first year of college
Participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. In order to participate in the study, members of the Adolescent Group needed permission granted by parent or guardian (Creswell, 2009; AERA, 2004). Pseudonyms have been assigned to each participant so that this final dissertation and any published work resulting from it will not reveal the identity of individual participants. In the interest of full disclosure and transparency for my research, I acknowledge that two participants in the Adolescent Group are my cousins. After I had exhausted several other routes to secure adolescent participants, I approached my cousins, Maryn and Lena, simply because I knew that both are voracious readers and might have been interested in participating. At no time, however, did I give either of them special treatment: we did not discuss the study or book group conversations outside of the actual book group meetings nor did we bring in previous conversations we might have had about the series (or life in general) to our book groups.

Although they are cousins, because of our age differences, I had never discussed my feelings about the books or had I previously discussed with them the types of topics of conversation we explored in our discussion, so it is unlikely that they could have anticipated my perspectives in order to respond in ways meant to please or frustrate me. Even though my family is a rather tightly knit group, I took pains to assure my cousins of their privacy and that I would not share anything said during our book groups with other family members. I do not think that they were any more cautious in their responses to me than is usual with any research subject. As both Buckingham (1993) and Tobin (2000) point out, even child informants are capable of and interested in ferreting out the interests and desires of researchers, and will at times answer in ways that veil, oversimplify or
protect their own positions. Nevertheless, the dialogue and journal excerpts presented in this dissertation show Maryn and Lena, along with most of the participants, to be thoughtful and forthright in their responses to the texts.

Several participants in each of the groups had read the series previously: Karen and Sascha (of the Adult Group), and Maryn and Regan (of the Adolescent Group) had read all of the books before we met and spoke of their willingness to reread the series again for the study. Both Lena and Brianna (one member in each group) had never read the series before their participation in the study.

It is important to note that all members within the Adult Group were, at the time of the study, Ph.D. students in a Research One institution. This made for a different population, in a sense, that many other adult readers since these women shared knowledge of certain theoretical approaches, such as feminist theory and general literary theory, and applied those theories to their readings. They were also very comfortable with addressing their opinions on the text; at times it seemed like our book group conversations were a very lively graduate seminar on *Twilight*. While it might seem that this type of population would give a skewed perspective on the books or only understand the series in conjunction with the knowledge from their academic backgrounds, they were an interesting population of readers. As I will show in Chapter Four, their awareness of the expectations attached to their identities—feminist, scholar, etc.—made some of the conflicts over the relationship between texts and identities particularly visible.
Procedures

Each group read the four books within Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series (*Twilight, New Moon, Eclipse, and Breaking Dawn*) and we discussed assigned books (or particular aspects of the text, such as themes or the plot of each book) on a weekly basis. I received permission from a public library to hold our book group discussions in one of their meeting rooms on a weekly basis. I met with each group once every week for four weeks in the Library’s meeting room, each of us resting comfortably in executive-style chairs around a conference table as my computer aurally and visually recorded our discussions. Each meeting was roughly 60 minutes wherein we discussed their opinions on the texts, with some prompting from me in order to get the conversation flowing. These were not questions where I intended specific outcomes; rather, I asked very open-ended questions such as, “What did you like in this book? What did you dislike in this book?”). These questions, while open-ended and meant to stimulate dialogue amongst the participants, were aimed to answer my specific research questions. I combined questioning methods from both Chambers (1996) and Bean and Moni’s (2003) reader response and critical literacy frameworks.

In my work as an instructor in undergraduate Children’s Literature courses, I had found that support for Chambers claims that not only do these types of questions facilitate conversation amongst readers, but they also can help to bring readers’ underlying assumptions about a text to the surface (p. 8-12), which in turn prompts more conversation. Bean and Moni’s critical literacy and discussion framework is similar to Chambers’, but contain more specific questions that relate to reader identity with relation to the text, authorial intent, and classroom initiatives to stimulate dialogue. For example,
the authors would suggest that a teacher should ask students during a literature lesson questions such as: How does the author position you as a reader and do you accept how the author positions you as a reader? How does the author define adolescence in this book? Who has a voice in the novel and who does not (Bean and Moni, 2003, p. 645)? These types of questions allowed me to address readers exercises of subjectivity and identity in a manner that I perceive to be nonthreatening; that is, I never directly challenged the participants to consider their identity in relation to the Twilight series with the question, “Can you define yourself for the purposes of this study?”, but by asking questions such as “Who do you think is the primary audience of this text?” or “What confused you in this book?”, the readers offered their own perspectives that often included answers which addressed their identity, sexuality, gender, subjectivity, etc. Follow-up questions that arose out of any dialogue were organic in the sense that there was no preparation on my part to push the conversation in any particular direction.

In addition, all participants kept an individual journal responses or reading log. I asked each participant to write their responses to each book while they were reading (or when they had completed each book) in preparation for our book group talks. I also suggested that they could revisit any topics we discussed during those meetings if they felt like a topic had not been adequately addressed or if they felt more comfortable writing an opinion on a discussion topic in their journal. I collected the journals at the end of study—right after our last book group meeting. I did not review them in between sessions and kept the journals once the discussion group portion of the study had ended. The content of these journals remained confidential; no other member of the group read these responses, nor did I speak of individual responses to other group members.
The role of the researcher

Doubtless the participants correctly viewed my roles as researcher as an observer of the discussions and as someone analyzing their responses to literature. None of the six participants in the study ever told me their feelings on my position as researcher but it is important, I think, to acknowledge, as Tobin remarked in his focus group-based approach to research responses to video texts, participants “can either resist or facilitate our attempts to know them” (Tobin, 2000, p. 10). I do think, however, that through being an attentive listener to their conversations and at times prompting discussion without an effort to tout my interpretive agenda, I was successful at gaining some access to my participants’ opinions on the texts, more so than had I just “eavesdropped” on their book discussion without asking any questions. While there were times of real insight into my readers’ responses, I am confident that there were times where I was absolutely ignorant of what the participants were trying to communicate. I remained flexible in the sense that I did not control the outcome of this study: I hoped to uncover how these readers responded in a particular manner to these Twilight texts and to draw implications from these responses, but I could not have predicted the exact ways in which they responded. I was floored with how forthright some of the participants were, and I was certainly disappointed that I seemed unable to “reach” one of my participants and get her to open-up a bit more in our group discussions.

As researcher, I was intent on gathering the most broad and honest interpretations of the literature by my participants. I cannot state more clearly that I was open to multiple interpretations of the novels. That being said, I also cannot ignore that the discussion surrounding some of the discourses (sexuality, love, gender) present in the novels could
have made some participants uncomfortable. I was not aware, however, of any serious arguments or power struggles arising in our group discussions and no major concerns about group dynamics arose in the journals.

**Timeline of the study**

I met with each of the participants for eight weeks. We began our weekly meetings in late January and concluded in March of 2010. I spent several weeks transcribing the recorded audio data of our book group meetings and immediately afterwards began searching for common threads (and uncommon threads) of reader talk within those transcripts in the same manner in which I coded transcripts of “dialogue” for my pilot study. I located two key categories in the readers’ responses, identity and reader agency as an employment of subjectivity, and devoted the subsequent chapters of analysis in this dissertation to those themes.

**Categorization of the study**

Based upon the structure of my research questions and my position as researcher, I categorize my reading group as a case study. As a strategy of inquiry, case studies are time-limited studies whereby the researcher typically employs open-ended questions and textual data analysis, like journals and transcripts, as methods (Creswell, 2009, p.17). As Yin defines case study, the researcher investigates and describes a “contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context” (p.18) such as a reading group. Since my questions are designed to answer how or why participants respond to literature within a particular, contemporary context, Yin’s work also points to the classification of
my dissertation as a case study since my research is based in the gathering of responses within a particular context. There were no set behavioral controls placed upon the participants; and the study seeks to answer research questions with “how” or “why” interrogative positions (p.8). Additionally, case studies are often conducted within smaller time sets than traditionally longer ethnographies, as mine certainly was.

My primary research questions, which I discussed within the previous chapter, follow the general characteristics of a typical case study design: my research questions were designed to answer how or why participants respond to literature within a particular context; and, as the researcher, I must recognize my own lack of control or authority over the participants. That is, my role as a researcher is one where the participants viewed me as a participant within the discussions, but also as someone recording their responses to literature (Yin, 1994, 2008). I was flexible in the sense that I could not control the outcome of this study: I hoped to uncover why or how these readers respond in a particular manner to these Twilight texts, but I could not predict the exact ways in which they will did.

It is helpful to consider many other scholars’ previous case study research so that I might best position my work with the Twilight reading groups within this methodological viewpoint. Robert E. Stake is a prominent voice within the academic community and a major proponent of case study methodology. In his most recent revision of his now-classic chapter on case study research (“Qualitative Case Studies” in Denzin and Lincoln’s Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research, 2005), Stake details three types of case studies: the intrinsic, the instrumental, and the collective (defined as a study that provides “insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization” p.437). The collective case
study, wherein the researcher extends one instrumental case study “to several cases in order to investigate a phenomenon, population, or general condition” is how I defined my study.

Since several readers’ insights into their opinions on the Twilight series were explored, the study became an analysis of not one situation, context, or reader, but an analysis of the “collective”, multiple voices of the readers within two distinct reading groups. Had I decided to explore my own literary analysis, one reader’s analysis, or one classroom teacher’s method of teaching the Twilight books, I would have had one case to analyze. By deciding to compare, occasionally contrast, and explore the multitude of responses to the texts, I moved the definition of my methodology from “case study” to the more explicit definition of “collective”, or “embedded” in Yin’s terminology (2008, p.10), case study. There are multiple cases within a case in this type of study: one reader’s reaction to one text is posited against another reader’s reaction in her reading group, which can then be pitted against or with another individual’s reaction to the texts in the other reading group. Multiple means of data collection also helped to ensure that I defined my methodology correctly. By Yin’s descriptions, my data falls under an embedded case study since I had a multiple sources of evidence (both transcripts of conversations each group had about the Twilight texts and their reading logs) within distinct subunits (members of the Adult Group and the Adolescent Group).

Historically, case study research has not been immune to controversy. Many arguments against qualitative case study research claim that the findings in these studies are too contextual to be applied outside of their limited scope of research. Flyvbjerg, in his article “Five Misunderstandings of Case Study Research,” gave me some perspective
and assuaged the worries that I had about employing this methodology. He wrote that while a case study might very well be contextual, case study research it is important for the development of a nuanced view of reality (2006, p. 223). Certainly, the idea of nuanced identities as both a reader and an individual apply to this study.

I employed a typical method of embedded case design, wherein structured or focused interviews are used (Yin, 2008, p. 14). I liken the literature discussion groups to being loosely structured group interviews, since I asked questions of the participants that could relate to the categories of my research questions. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, I continuously used questions based within the frameworks of Chambers (1996) and Bean and Moni (2003) to prompt my group members into responding. This loose structure is more of a pattern in my questioning—as opposed to a structured interview—but could be viewed as another aspect of case study research.

Data collection methods

Observation, audio and visual recording

In each weekly, individual group’s meeting I observed and recorded discussion of the reading. I anticipated instances where I might have to prompt discussion by asking the group members questions about the assigned text, if no participant was willing to begin conversation. I worked from a general outline of discussion prompts to initiate talk amongst the group. Discussions and writing prompts were categorized in a similar manner to Morgan (1998) and Bean & Moni’s (2003) critical literacy models. For example, those scholars generated discussion across broad categories such as structural prompts (whereby the reader considers ideologies present in the text), subject and reader
positioning (whereby the reader addresses how the author positions not only their literary characters but also the reading audience), and finally, the “gaps and silences” (what do the participants think is missing?) found within the text. Drawing from this model, examples of questions I asked of the participants at various points of the study include:

- What aspects of *Twilight* attract you?
- What aspects of *Twilight* prove unattractive to you?
- What aspects of *Twilight* might prove attractive or unattractive others? In other words, how do you account for the intense popularity of *Twilight* among some readers while other readers have a strong negative reaction to the text?
- Which character do you like best (or least) and why?
- How does the text define love?
- How does the text define women’s roles and males’ roles in relationships?
- How do participants characterize the effects of *Twilight* on themselves and on real or imagined others?

These examples do not indicate the full scope of our discussions, but merely serve as examples of how I initiated our textual discussions. I transcribed the nearly eight hours of talk per group and the research journals of the participants, I collected the journals at the end of the study and analyzed them in conjunction with transcripts of our book group discussions. I must acknowledge that one journal is missing: despite repeated attempts and queries to this particular participant (in the Adolescent Group), she declined to turn-in her journal at the completion of our study. It is difficult to speculate on the impetus behind her actions: I lean towards thinking that this was not a matter of feeling insecure

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about her responses to the text, but rather the more likely answer was a simple one: that she never completed journal-writing aspect of the study. She often forgot the journal during our four meeting times, but she was very candid with her responses—possibly in an effort to make-up for the lack of her written response.

I used critical discourse analysis (defined below) to analyze the content, looking for key words and themes and recurrent categories of discussion. This allowed me to not only get a better sense of how the participants responded to the books, but also to see how group discussion might influence their readings of the books. I applied these questions to my analysis of participants’ journals:

- How did readers verbally respond to these questions (detailed above) in a group setting and how do readers respond in written form? That is, do the participants of this group respond differently or are they more forthcoming in their written responses to elements of the text that grab their attention or are their aspects of the text that they don’t like and only note in written form?

- How did the two groups differ in their responses? What patterns were formed in their responses?

In the course of this study, I documented only one instance of a participant preferring to address her thoughts on contextualized identities (as she put it “hypocrisy”) through her journal, rather than within the group. This was not done out of a matter of her own comfort, but, rather she wanted to continue to speculate on human behavior in different settings after the group had concluded their weekly meeting. During all other discussions,
both the Adult and Adolescent Groups seemed to feel free to frequently agree and
disagree with each other. This could have occurred for the two groups because of their
similar backgrounds: the young women shared a local high school and the adult women
were all graduate students used to conversing in small groups about sensitive subjects and
literature.

Analysis of data

Critical Discourse Analysis

In my original reading of Twilight, I read the text through the lens of critical literacy.

Critical literacy involves the analysis and critique of the relationships among texts,
language, power, social groups and social practices. It shows us ways of looking at
written, visual, spoken, multimedia and performance texts to question and challenge the
attitudes, values and beliefs that lie beneath the surface” and who is privileged within
society and who is not (Department of Education, 2007). Critical literacy involves
thinking carefully about how literacy and literature position readers, occasionally
unequally (Leland et al, 1999). In this study, as in my pilot study, I am taking a step back
from the assumptions of critical literacy in order to understand the varieties and patterns
with the various discourses readers use to make sense of texts and their lives in relation to
the text. In the pilot study and for my dissertation, I use critical discourse analysis (CDA
from herein) to analyze my data.

CDA views language as a form of social practice—the replication of those
worldviews taken from readers’ responses—and focuses on the ways social and political
domination is reproduced in discourse (Fairclough and Holes, 1995). Van Dijk (2003)
claims that CDA “bridges the gap” between multiple levels of discourse—the macroscopic and fluid power stances are replicated, challenged, enacted, or ignored through the microscopic levels of communication (pg. 354). Through participation in this study, the readers had their own microlevel of discourse that identified them as members of this study group. I anticipated that by finding patterns of particular talk of the text in participants’ talk, similar to my pilot study, I would be able to relate that microlevel of discourse to macrolevel notions of discourse (such as gender, genre, age) constructed by sociopolitical means. I looked for and catalogued patterns in this data (transcripts of group book discussions and the journal entries), similar to my analysis of the online reviews of Twilight. My search for patterns in the participants’ analysis of what they read yielded similar results to my pilot study. That is, there were similar discussions of genre (is Twilight a fantasy or romance series?), authorial message (does Stephenie Meyer write a certain way because she is Mormon?), characterization (what type of heroine is Bella?), reader age/position (do younger/older participants have a “better” understanding of the series based on their experiences?), and themes (how do the participants see love/gender/the reader being defined in this series?) in our real-time reading groups and within each member’s journal entries.

In a strictly CDA sense, I could have easily coded repeated instances of key words like “love” or “gender” to see how often the words arose and, therefore, equate some sense of importance with how often the words were repeated in group discussion or within the participants journals. I wanted, however, to go beyond this calculation or quantification of the data and instead look for instances of negotiation with how the readers worked with or against those themes (and occasionally both at the same time). So
while I began by reading through and looking for key themes related to love, reader identity, and gender in each of the transcripts (eight in total, four for each group) of our reading groups and in the participants’ journals (five in total), the research questions that took shape began to change slightly from those I initially anticipated. While I valued, and continue to value, the discussions I had with my younger group of participants, what captured my attention from the outset of my analysis of the data were the adults’ discussions on feminist identity and how that related to popular and/or fantasy literature. After I located many of these discussions on identity and literature within the transcripts of adult book group conversation, I returned to the Adolescent Group members and their talk on identity to continue my analysis. While they did not address or define themselves as feminists, they still had conversations on gender and role-play, which I then related to my discussions with the Adult Group.

What arose from the participants’ discussions and their writing seemed to stem from a real wrestling with their identity as readers and how they chose a specific pathway to come to contextualized interpretations of the text and themselves, which I term as “agency”. Probing further, there was much more to this notion of a reader identity: participants saw reader identity as contextual but at the same time, they often struggled with how they accepted or rejected fantasy—fantasy as a genre, fantasy as a type of romance or sexuality, a fantasy of adulthood and childhood. In other words, the participants saw their identifications as readers as something they could limit through contextualization. They argued that those identities do not determine their actions in the outside world.
The subsequent chapters in this dissertation address the struggles readers have with identity, subjectification (not to a text, but as an exercise of self-formation), and contextualization. Both chapters three and four contain sections of data from both group discussions and journal entries. Dialogue is attributed to each participant’s pseudonym and then followed by my analysis. All journal entries are centered and italicized text, also attributed to the correct participant’s pseudonym and followed by analysis. Chapter Five consists of implications and ruminations on the findings in this study.
Chapter Three  
Exercises in Subjectivity

“Just deciding which “team” you’re on says something about who you are as a person. Like, this cultural signifier. Like, Oh, I’m an Edward kinda girl because I like the moody, brooding types and you...like Jacob because he’s independent and has a life, right?” – Karen, Adult Group

My overarching research question, as stated in the introduction, is whether certain books can be determined to be “bad” for readers. How can critics’ determine the positive or negative effects of a book? Can books change us or teach us new modes or behavior or thinking? Can book talk change us; if so, are the only “good” uses of literature didactic in nature? Do differences arise between individual and group points-of-view?

As I will describe below, since the beginning the novel, critics have worried that adolescent readers will either misread novels or will be overtaken by novels, and will then simply go out and imitate exactly what they read. Readers, and especially female readers, have been understood to be lacking in critical faculty to bring to bear in the reading of texts. Historically, gothic novels in particular, which centered their plots around female sexuality, gave rise to moral panics over the dangers of these texts to young women readers (Moss, 1989, Radway, 1984, Weinstock, 2008, Pratt, 1981). This fear is very much present, both in my pilot study and among the Adult Readers in this study, who worried about what reading Twilight, a contemporary gothic text would do, not to themselves, but to young readers.

This concern demonstrates a particular assumption of subjectivity, that is, that readers are made subject to texts. In this chapter, in contrast, I will use the concept of subjectivity, which assumes that while humans can only operate through the discourses that are made available to us, to assert that we are not subjected in the sense of being
enslaved, much as the moral panic has suggested for many centuries. Rather, humans are able to take themselves as their own subjects, as in self-formation. As Butler (1990), Foucault (1980) and others argue (Pollard, 2008), because we exist among so many often-conflicting discourses of who we should be, multiple contradictions and gaps open up. As subjects amongst these multiple contexts and subject positions or identities, we make choices. Clearly, these are choices that are bounded by context and discourse, but subjects have the ability to work among multiple contexts and discourses to resist, accommodate or change the discourses they encounter. I use the term “agency” as the action of subjectivity. In this chapter, I explore whether in fact my readers, and especially the adolescent readers, are overwritten by what so many critics take to be a “bad” book (Seifert, 2008, Galessey 2009). I will show that by bringing criticality to the text, subjectivities can be, and are, actively overwritten.

A particular issue that has been important both historically and for my Adult Readers has to do with the desired purposes and outcomes of adolescent reading. The fear that is so often expressed is that “popular” literature corrupts whereas “high quality” literature enlightens and forms correct subjects (Suhor, 1988), those subjects being women and men of high moral character. In other words, worthwhile reading performs a didactic and moral function. The value or the danger lies in the texts, and not in the readers’ interactions with the text. To the extent that readers are seen as interacting with texts, the concern is that their responses demonstrate intellectual or moral growth. To explore this, in this chapter I will not enter into a discussion of the literary merits of the Twilight books. By just accepting them as popular rather than “high quality” literature I
am able to consider whether my participants responses to the support these concerns or
demonstrate something else.

How do we actively define ourselves and others in situations like a reading
group? Can we represent the subjective experiences of others if we can never fully
experience the lives and, therefore, perspectives of others? Can we, in fact, know the
nuances of our own subjectification and subjective experiences? Dan Zahavi (2008)
insists that in order to understand the self, we have to understand the social experience(s)
and situations surrounding moments of self-awareness (p.1-3), since those moments
contribute to the subject’s definition of self by others and themselves. This section will
address moments during which participants attempted to define themselves and others
through moments of book discussion.

For the purposes of this study, I explore my participant’s exercise of subjectivity
within three specific frames: as the act of choosing a text; choosing a specific pathway to
come to an understanding of that interpretation of a text; and actively basing one’s textual
interpretation through contextualized identification as a group member discussing a text.
That is, how did the participants demonstrate a sense of their own subjective authority in
relation to self, one another and the text? Did readers see these texts as having
substantially changed or reinforced aspects of their own identities or beliefs? For
example, do the participants perceive the text interacting with their own conceptions of
love, relationships, gender roles, and so on, and are those concepts affected by the group
majority? Do the participants construct their own subjectivity or oppression in reading
and enjoying these texts?
Subjectivity in textual selection

How did the participants first hear of the Twilight series? Why did they read the books? I discuss commonalities and disparities among the participants when trying to define the Twilight reader identity in Chapter Four. In order to fully appreciate the type of popularity that this series holds on the contemporary reading world, consider that everyone I recruited for this study had not only heard of the books and knew the storyline, but also only two people (one in each group) had not read the books before taking part in this dissertation study. All of the participants had seen the first two movies, regardless of whether they had read the books. I asked one Adolescent Group participant, Lena, who had read the books for the first time under the directives for this study, why she thought there was such a large reading community surrounding these books. She replied,

LENA: Well, NOW people are embarrassed to say they like it. Um, because at first, when they were some of the first people reading it and liking it, it was like, ‘oh, okay’. This book, it’s a new thing and I’m allowed to do that, but now people are really used to the writing and the story and it’s a movie...so, now people are embarrassed to say they like it. Um, I don’t know why it became so popular. I can’t tell, really. I mean, as far as you can read it and like it—fine, but it just got so big so fast—

MARYN: Yeah, romance is really in right now.

JULIANNE: Romance?

MARYN: Yeah, the genre.

LENA:--and also, the characters. Bella’s just kind of ridiculous sometimes which is fun to read about but she’s also relatable in a kind of scary way.

JULIANNE: How so?

LENA: Um, she...she is an insecure, plain character.
LENA: Her age, also, um, she’s supposed to be 17.

Lena and Maryn both identify a few key aspects that might clue us in as to the type of community that reads the *Twilight* stories: those who like the romance genre; those who identify with being young and/or insecure; those that have seen the movies. While she cannot pinpoint the beginning of their popularity, Maryn chimes in to say that those who enjoy the romance genre might be the basis of the fan community. Maryn went on to agree with Lena and say that all of her friends, who are “into fantasy literature”, had recommended the books to her and that she was the outsider for never enjoying the books in the first place. Similarly, Adult Group members Karen and Sascha were both avid romance genre readers in their youth. They, however, mentioned that it was on the suggestions of friends that they first picked up the books: Karen, at a bridal shower, was intrigued when she was the only attendant who had not already read the books (a wide-ranging group of women readers from different ages and backgrounds, including the grandparent of the bride, had urged her to read *Twilight*), and Sascha, who respected her “Goth” and “sophisticated reader” friends when they recommend that she pick-up the series.

This activity (seeking a reader community through choosing a particular text) parallels the *Twilight* reader identity, which I write about in Chapter Four, in the sense that the readers gather around a specific context, that of reading a text and negotiating aspects of their identity with the text; in that process of contextualized identity formation, they form a specific reading community. All of the women in this group were pushed by other female friends—with the exception of Brianna (in the Adult Group) and Lena (in
the Adolescent Group) who read the series for this study and were asked by me, a
woman—to read the books. The women do, of course, make the final decision as to
whether or not they will pick up the book and read it. Is there a coincidence, however, in
the relationship between the texts’ genre (romance) and readership (women)?

Jane Missner Barstow (2003) asserts that the majority of reading groups which
take place outside of academic environments are not only comprised by women, but that
the main goal of such reading groups is not to intellectualize the text but to relate to and
bond with other female readers outside the context of family or work (p. 10). She goes on
to insist that reading groups are profitable both economically and emotionally: they
provide a metaphorical diving board for female readers not only to jump into a pursuit of
a text they might not have approached if not for the advice of their cohort, but that they
allow “many readers to do important emotional work” (p.8). Barstow adamantly asserts
that she carries no prejudice towards popular, “accessible” literature often read within
reading groups such as Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood, the choice of the book
group she observed. Nevertheless, she creates a polarizing binary between those texts
and the “literary”, “cerebral” novels (such as Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon) which
she teaches in her classes and compares to Divine Secrets. She insinuates that through her
teaching and her diverse student makeup within her classroom, her students are more
willing to analyze texts in relationship to cultural and social norms and are also more
willing to provide “polyvalent” readings (p.7-10). She claims that much of this diversity
found in her classroom is not present within the mostly white, middle-class, working-
mother reading groups across the country.
Looking at my groups as “out of school” reading, I witnessed a very different scene than Barstow. While some women clearly related their emotional ties to the book (and there was a similar homogeneity in the members of the groups) and there was much laughter while discussing the texts, both groups discussed things like plot development, character formation, genre, style, and symbolism. There was much evidence of polyvalent readings of the text, where the readers both loved and hated the same character within different contexts or loved and hated their own reactions to the text at different moments in their life when they read the series. In other words, there were many moments when the discussions of my participants were not unlike what one could hear at any moment within a college literature classroom.

Of course, both groups of participants were within the educational system (high school and college) and their awareness of this being a dissertation study may well have prompted participants to take more care and attend to academic rationality rather than emotional discourses, which could lend some credence to Barstow’s theory that specific types of engagement with a text are formed within an educational environment.

In her analysis, Barstow seems oblivious to the exclusivity of her own argument. While asserting that she does not look down upon popular literature and she praises the emotional bonding experience women share in book groups, she also sets-up the dynamic that one environment provides emotional catharsis (book groups) while the other (the college literary classroom) provides access to intellectual stimulation. She seems unaware of the feminist criticism of the male/female binary that theorizes intellect and logic as superior to emotion (Walkerdine, 1992), and she does not address the idea that any college classroom is itself a class-divided realm, characterized by certain discourse
practices that do not necessarily make them more enlightened or liberating. As Fiske (2004) argues, popular culture—or “low” literature shared in book groups in contrast to “high” literature studied in college classrooms—does not restrict or close its boundaries to its readers’ intellect. Arguments similar to Barstow’s ignore that high literature, and its place within a high social stratum (for example, college-educated readers), carries as much potential for catharsis as “low” literature, and vice-versa. Fiske read much of these arguments as class-based, widespread ideologies that became social norms; that is, we, as a society, accept that there is a higher value in the literature disseminated and analyzed in higher education (for those that pay for the training to recognize its “higher” value). This norm—this assumption—gets repeated by not only those to whom it might benefit (the people who agree that high literature has intellectual value and popular literature has only cathartic value) but also to those who disagree. Our social lives become structured according to those norms (p.1270).

This differentiation between high/low literature, and popular/scholarly literature is a trap that caught Brianna, a participant of the Adult Group and an English literature scholar, quite frequently. Brianna was often reluctant to voice her opinion in the book group discussions; while I cannot speculate as to why she was more quiet than the other two participants in the Adult Group (who often tried to include her in the conversations by asking her direct questions), she most definitely kept a respectful distance from the discussions and was consistent in such an approach. She acknowledged in her journal that she intends to center much of her own academic research around “well-written” contemporary literature (not necessarily popular literature), but often could not enjoy the Twilight series because of the flaws she located in the author’s writing style and character
development. Her background in English literature study also seemed to disrupt much of her reading; that is, her training in “high” literature caused her to stop much of her reading in-progress to note, what she viewed, as some of the problems with Meyer’s writing:

“I think because just recently I was in a class where we were discussing problems with writing dialect in a novel or non-fiction...so I was really attuned to that, capturing the voice and this—this doesn’t seem natural to me. And that’s been the hang-up [with her enjoyment of the series].” –Brianna, in our final discussion on the series

That is not to say Brianna neglected trying to understand the books or other readers attractions to popular literature in general but she did seem to indicate that there was a place and time for popular, fun reading and intellectually-stimulating, “high” reading.

During our final group conversation on the series, she speculated as to why she thought the series was so popular:

“Well, I think that it taps into assort of a ready-made reading audience...like the fantasy audience without having any kind of geek aura...I don’t know, I’ve actually tried to get some of my students to write papers about this and—they actually have to write cause and consequence papers or research papers and things like that—so I’ve actually offered that as a topic, like why is Twilight so popular? And no one really answers it.”

I think her assignment was twofold: the writers had to answer the posed prompt, i.e.- tell me why Twilight is so popular, but also, prove to the instructor that it is worthy of study and critical analysis in a college-level classroom. Brianna seems to be willing to use pop literature as a gateway drug to correct reading. By taking such an approach, it is possible that she misses the fundamental pleasure in the text because her only use of it is in the didactic sense—to teach something to her students. She seems to be stuck within the fairy-tale-as-teaching-tool approach just as many reviewers in my pilot study were
muddled within. This approach, however, assumes that readers are subjects to the text and that the only good uses of literature didactic in nature: to improve the intellect of those subjects, to teach subjects right vs. wrong. But how is “good” literature being defined, for whom, and in what context?

There is a fallacy involved in observing readers’ responses in one setting, such as a classroom, and interpreting the responses in those settings as the truth of the reader. Readers often have multiple experiences of texts and of themselves in relations to texts. Which interpretation of many they may hold they bring to the fore is in large part a function of the context in which they are speaking. D.J. Sumara (as quoted in Twomey, 2007) might describes the flexibility of reading communities when he emphasized that the reader experiences an on-going process of identification and reinvention, both of self and knowledge, when engaged with literature. By sharing common texts, communities “create opportunities to interpret personal and collective experience” (p. 402). However, the personal and collective experience produced in any one setting is not the reader’s only possible experiences of self, others and text. Studying a group that primarily gathers for companionship and fun could not produce adequate information to rule out members’ capacity for criticality in another context. Unless we are willing to argue that critical consciousness is more important to emotional connection, that critical discourse is the stance that should rule our interactions in all contexts, and that emotional connection or community is not a form of political work, we also cannot assert the superiority of critical responses over emotional responses. The participants in my study were in a setting that cued them to both kinds of responses, and as I will show, the contradictions, insights,
consternations and pleasures they demonstrated in their responses demonstrate that there can be no simplistic relationship between readers and texts.

My participants felt the tensions of identifying with multiple discourse communities with different expectations for responses to texts like *Twilight*. In the transcript above, Lena describes the potential for embarrassment from being seen as a *Twilight* fan. The decision to see the *Twilight* movies provoked this dilemma as well. The entire series has been made into high-grossing movies, with the fourth in the series in production and scheduled for release in the summer of 2011. All of my participants had seen the movies, including Brianna and Lena who had not read the texts before joining the study. Sascha, of the Adult Group, gave her perspective on the *New Moon* movie community in her journal:

*I went to a late night showing of New Moon on opening day. I went by myself. I wanted to enjoy the film w/o feeling censored or judged by my friends. The movie theater was a true community—we were all adults, it being past curfew for the few minors in my college town. We laughed (at the and the so-lousy-corny-it’s-funny moments), gasped (when Jacob first took off his shirt), and balked (at the ridiculous[sic] scenes—when Edward crushes his cell phone in his weird apartment in South America) all in unison. It was great.*

Sascha details the enjoyment she felt when identifying with this *Twilight* movie community; a community that differs, however, from her other set of friends who might cast judgment on her choice of movie. Her enthusiasm is noted in her assertion that it was a “true community” in the theatre, one that doesn’t demand critical or ironic distance from the text and could simply bond over shared similar reactions to specific scenes. What is most interesting to me is this repeated association of embarrassment between the reader and text. In Lena’s excerpt at the opening of this section, she connected the
popularity explosion of the series with readers too embarrassed to admit that they once enjoyed the books; Sascha notes that she might suffer some embarrassment from friends who might “judge” or “censor” her enjoyment of the movies. What seems to be a commonality amongst the Twilight reader community is the choice to actively form a sub-community, wherein any sense of alienation felt from those who just do not understand or appreciate the series, might find a sense of belonging free of judgment. There is an awareness of how the group is perceived by outside members—noticed by Lena and felt or anticipated by Sascha. Lena and Sascha are asserting the importance of a need to make connections with others, using a text (literature, movie, or otherwise) as one of the pathways that allows this to happen.

Textual subjectification

Can subjectivities be overwritten? Do readers bring criticality to the text? Lewis and Ketter (2004) claim “communities of practice”—e.g.- book groups, movie theatres full of viewers, or even Fan Fiction sites—“create and reinforce tacit and explicit expectations and worldviews held in common by the community” (p.118). To view, read, and respond together within a community of practice is to explore not only whether or how those discourses arise in readers interpretations of the Twilight texts, but also to get a glimpse of whether or how readers resist or accommodate larger dominant patterns of societal subjectivity through those “tacit and explicit” worldviews. In the following excerpt, the Adult Group considers the discourse of sexuality as a worldview and as a textual component in the Twilight series:

JULIANNE: Alright. So. Sexual tension. I mean, good? Bad? Keeps the pages turning?
BRIANNA: Good. But not when male sexuality is this horrible—or any sexuality, really—is this...is dangerous. I mean.

JULIANNE: Okay.

BRIANNA: I just... I used to have this professor who used to say, “You know, today sex can kill you”, right?

SASCHA: [laughs]

BRIANNA: And so, like, yes, we know this, but...thinking about teenagers reading this, I don’t really like that. I mean, even apart from the whole you know, abstinence until marriage thing...like, this [sexuality] isn’t...deadly.

KAREN: Mm-hmm

BRIANNA: Right? You shouldn’t be...that shouldn’t be what’s pushed so overwhelmingly. I think.

KAREN: I didn’t even think about it like that. That’s very interesting.

SASCHA: [laughs] The sexual tension definitely kept the pages turning.

KAREN: Yeah.

SASCHA: Right? BUT, my like, my whoa moment is how, like she’s aware of her own sexuality, she wants to make out with him,

KAREN: Mm-hmm.

SASCHA: She wants to have sex with him, she’s okay with sex before marriage,

KAREN: Mm-hmm

SASCHA: So she’s taking agency for her sexuality

KAREN: Sure

SASCHA: So, I’m pretty fine with how she’s portrayed as a character. I’m not okay with.. the only way she gets to experience and to enjoy her sexuality is to be completely immobile. To be still. He’s always like telling her like, “don’t move!”

KAREN: Yeah!

SASCHA: I’m gonna kiss you. So she just like stands there.
KAREN: Yeah!

SASCHA: And he kisses her? Like.

KAREN: Yeah, yeah

SASCHA: That’s not sexy.

BRIANNA: I guess, well...

JULIANNE: I mean, he could kill her.

KAREN & SASCHA: Yes!

JULIANNE: If he gets overwhelmed by his senses

KAREN: It’s true, it’s true...

KAREN: It’s just...I was probably just allowing myself too much to get taken into...liking that, to be thinking critically. [laughs]

BRIANNA: I don’t even think that it’s played out that well. It’s ambiguous still. Like, I get that there’s a parallel here between him being a vampire and teenage sexuality, but I don’t really see that developed really fully.

In this dialogue sequence, taken from our first Adult Group meeting on *Twilight*, the women talked about how the text defines sexuality and how they see the texts working with or against their notions of sexuality. This sequence is a perfect example of some of the participants’ contextualized definitions on a particular topic (sexuality). Karen wavers between agreeing with Sascha—who abhors the idea of Bella having to remain still during her make-out sessions with Edward in order to not over-excite him and inadvertently causing her own death —and admitting that during her own reading of the scenes, she enjoyed Bella’s immobile acquiescence. This emphasizes the fluidity of their contextualized interpretations, both as individual readers, and in-group readers who might change their opinions based upon group discussion. Brianna, however, sees it
much more problematically. Through reading the texts, she was reminded of a former professor who equated sex with death—or maybe sexually transmitted diseases with ill-health or death. To paraphrase Brianna, she worries that this same message—sex has the potential to be dangerous or even deadly—is being perpetuated through these texts to an impressionable, teenage audience. So we have two discussions occurring here among the three participants. One is a question of what message is being transmitted to readers, who are specifically imagined by the adult readers as younger readers rather than themselves, about sexuality through popular texts. The second is a question of what definition of sexuality is desirable and/or pleasurable, as when Karen describes the pleasure of the representations of desire taking her away from critical thinking.

Reader subjectivity must be considered as a variable as I try to locate participants' answers to these questions. As mentioned above, one of the ways in which I define subjectivity includes how we define others within a social context. There is a tendency for participants, and all of us, really, to define other readers in conjunction with or against the text’s discourses, as if one reaction to one text’s discourse on sexuality would indicate how the reader would respond to that same discourse in other contexts. But is subjectivity as fixed an application as that? Does our definition of self, and other, ever change? Both Butler (1990) and Jackson (2004) work in a post-structural frame to define the variations in subjective stances as subtle reiterations of more dominant discursive themes in identity; not a coherent concept fixed by the dominant discourses, but one in which the agent is both formed by and can create forms of identity and identification (Butler 1995 as cited in Jackson 2004).
If we apply my definition of subjectivity to the Adult Group participants’ views of sexuality taken from this excerpt, the questions that arise and necessitate further probing are: what discourse(s) on sexuality is being presented in, reaffirmed, and reacted against in the books and the discussions of the books? How do we define female sexuality and why would Karen be embarrassed to call her enjoyment “uncritical” with regards to this aspect of the text? Karen was embarrassed that she, a self-defined critical thinker, feminist, PhD student in media, enjoyed aspects of the Twilight series texts that include the restrained sexuality of Bella. Since I spend considerable amount of time in the following chapter addressing notions of contextualized identity, I will now instead consider notions of contextualized criticality and subjectivity in relation to participants’ views of each other and the texts.

Brianna worries that what she views as being a negative discourse of sexuality—sex is dangerous—permeates not only the texts, but the readers and, subsequently the readers’ lives. From the viewpoint of the Adult Group readers, however, that fear seems to be easily allayed when applied to themselves but not to younger readers. Both Sascha and Karen acknowledged, in group discussion and in their journals, that they chose romantic partners in real-life dating scenarios whose personalities are vastly different to those they find attractive (Edward) in the Twilight books. If we extrapolate from this that there is no necessary tie between what one finds to stimulate desire in reading a fiction text and the choices one makes in a different context, that is, material life, then we cannot extrapolate from Brianna’s dislike of the series and the types of gendered sexuality represented what her own sexual choices might be. The main worry from Brianna’s perspective seems to be that Meyer’s discourse on sexuality will not only be recognized,
consciously or unconsciously, but that it will also be consumed as desirable and then
enacted by its readers, whom she imagines as young, impressionable readers who might
accept something without question.

While this fear is certainly one that has been explored within many studies on the
effects of popular literature and media on youth (Buckingham and Sefton-Green, 2004;
Durham, 1999; DeBlase, 2003), what I witnessed amongst my group of younger readers
might have helped ease Brianna’s fears. As Buckingham stated in his work with children
and horror movies, there is a tendency to swiftly condemn or praise younger audiences
for the ways in which they might react to a text (1996, p. 136). Instead of looking at each
individual reaction and the social context in which a child might respond to a text, many
adults react with black-or-white, good-or-bad generalizations and assumptions that paint
children’s responses as uniform, decontextualized and less mature than those of adults.

In my teaching experience, I frequently met direct challenges from students who
thought that works we read in our “Teaching Children’s Literature” class were too risqué,
too sad, and/or above the comprehensions of a young audience—as if all readers could be
lumped into one audience or comprehension level. By understanding reader subjectivity
as a kind of empty vessel that is then filled and defined by the text, my students – like
many literary critics – understand young readers as being without the capability to accept
or reject the discourses presented in-text within differing contexts. Karen Coats, in her
2004 work Looking Glasses and Neverlands: Lacan, desire, and subjectivity in
children's literature, touches upon these types of concerns. She links identity and
language through Lacan’s theory of subjectivity: we know ourselves through what we are
called and through what language we use to define ourselves, “so the word ‘subject’ has
resonances of both agency and subservience” (p. 2-3). Adult participants in this study did in fact worry that the language, and therefore, the discourses of sexuality, gender, etc. in *Twilight* might create subservient subjects of the younger readers.

However, the responses of Adolescent Group participants continually demonstrated these kinds of generalizations as unfounded. In the following discussion of *Eclipse* by the Adolescent Group members, they criticize the characters of Jacob, Edward, and the perspectives they attribute to Stephenie Meyer for propagating instances of sexuality with which they did not agree:

LENA: Yeah, Jacob did some uncool things.

JULIANNE: Like what?

LENA: Like kissing her forcibly.

MARYN: Mm-hmm.

LENA: He’s stronger than her, that’s not cool.

JULIANNE: Yeah.

LENA: It’s not a good message to send especially because I think at least he’s supposed to be a character that you really like.

JULIANNE: Right.

LENA: And then he just kinda does these weird things. But there’s also a lot about him growing up and finding himself, so, maybe he can be forgiven for some things, but...

JULIANNE: Okay.

LENA: So, I still like him.

REGAN: I actually got kinda mad at that part when he kissed her and she punches him—

MARYN: --and then he laughed

REGAN: --yeah, and like—
MARYN: Yeah-

REGAN: And then like when she was telling the story then to her dad and Harry they were just kind of laughing it off like kinda, ‘boys will be boys’--

LENA & MARYN: Yeah!

MARYN: It’s not cool.

REGAN: That coulda been something that was really serious—

LENA & MARYN: Yeah!--

REGAN: --and to not take her seriously…I think it’s almost kind of offensive.

While all three girls truly struggle with Jacob’s forcible kiss on Bella, both Lena and Maryn still choose him as their favorite male “option” in the series (as Lena mentions here in this excerpt, and Maryn states at various moments in other reading groups and within her journal responses). Both the adult readers and the adolescent readers showed multiple instances of negotiating which character attracted them at different moments in time and for different reasons, even if there were things about that character that they did not like.

For example, the Adult Group also addresses this particular moment in the text, where Jacob confronts and kisses Bella:

KAREN: What enrages me about this book...[is] when Jacob forces Bella to kiss him

SASCHA: Yeah!

KAREN: Okay so like as if that’s not bad enough, I feel like its written to be like, oh boys will be boys--

SASCHA: Yeah

KAREN: --but when you factor in that that kissing is the most sexually aggressive form of sex or the closest they come to sex in the books up to that point, its like, to me a total
violation. And the part where she was like I had to just slump and let him—it take over and just get through it, it made me want to vomit. So basically, I mean because I’ve heard rape victims say that, like use that precise language—

JULIANNE: Yeah
KAREN: like and so the whole, that whole section even when she goes home and Charlie’s laughing about it—what the hell kind of father is this? My dad would be furious and my dad’s a retired cop, too, so—

JULIANNE: Yeah

KAREN: You know, just anyway, it’s a little personal—it just infuriates me. I was just so enraged by that section of the book.

JULIANNE: Did that bother you too, Sascha?

SASCHA: Yeah. Um, Jacob forcing Bella to kiss him definitely makes me mad and it makes me frustrated with the books. And, in part, frustrated with myself because, like, I can pinpoint that and the specifics of that scene and just really dislike it and really dislike that Jacob does that, and I’m—but I still have the image of Jacob from last week being real and dependable and comforting and safe.

JULIANNE: Yeah.

SASCHA: And the fact that he violates that in such a dramatic way in the narrative and yet leaves that perception of him unshaken is really disconcerting to me. ‘Cuz I feel like my perception of Edward shakes a little bit more in this book ‘cuz he’s, he’s set up in the very first chapters as being very paternal—

KAREN: Yes! That’s so true.

SASCHA: And all the, like all the way through he’s over-protective, he’s overprotective and you’re supposed to forgive him—

KAREN: Mm-hmm.

Both Karen and Sascha are angered with Jacob’s behavior; Sascha, much like the girls in the Adolescent Group excerpted before her, notes her disappointment in Jacob’s jarring character transformation, while Karen cannot contain her vitriol for this scene.

What struck me most about this dialogue exchange, though, is that their anger extends not just to the character’s development in this scene, but also—and maybe more so—to
themselves. Sascha says, “in part, I’m frustrated with myself” for figuratively taking back Jacob and Edward despite their transgressions. Karen agrees, and that despite Edward’s paternalistic behavior and Jacob’s physical forcefulness, they still accept them as love interests for Bella. This inconsistency in their own responses to the text—their love and hate dynamic with the male characters—is what I interpreted to be the crux of their disappointment. They seem to neglect that this inconsistency, this fluidity within their attractions/revulsions of the text, is a key example of their inability to be subjectified to the text. The criticality with which they bring to the text prevents them from fully being subsumed within the discourses presented here. What might be lacking within the Adult Group is theoretical knowledge and employment of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories of polyvocality and heteroglossia (Pollard, 2008).

As Bakhtin theorized, in reading and in speaking, participants engage in constant reinterpretations that allow them to adjust and function successfully in particular moments and contexts, known as polyvocality (1981). None of these adjustments represent a totalizing change—that just because I like a character who forcefully kisses another, I would accept a forceful kiss as acceptable—but rather allow us to enter into exchanges in which we participate in shared meanings, even while maintaining differences. Throughout the discussions, the Adolescent Group demonstrated that they were no more likely to be over-written by or no less likely to be critical of the seductive features of the text than the Adult Group. For the adolescent readers, this instance of coercive sexuality between Bella and Jacob did not change their beliefs about relationships or sexuality, but rather worked in the opposite direction. It reinforced their sense of what they perceived as not being right—“not cool” as Maryn said—behavior
within either a friendship or romance. While Lena might prescribe Jacob’s behavior to the inexperience of youth, she still disagrees with his actions.

In fact, all adolescent readers expressed disappointment about Jacob’s character during this reading group discussion, a disappointment that the Adult Group did not vocalize in the same manner within their discussion of Eclipse. While the Adult Group participants registered their disappointment and anger with the characters, they—Sascha in particular—felt more disappointed with themselves and how they still characterize the male characters in the books. The Adolescent Group hated not only the fact that Jacob took advantage of Bella (as they saw it), but also that his behavior was excused by Bella’s father and her friend. It was a sense of betrayal, not only between the characters that Meyer created, but a betrayal by Meyer to her readers through a character—Jacob—that they trusted and came to understand as being Bella’s best friend. As Maryn added later in our discussion, Meyer set-up Jacob to be the best friend and Regan’s definition of “best friends” does not include these kind of actions. The adolescent readers were able to apply their conceptions of friendship and love and to describe how the texts worked with or against those concepts at different points in their readings. How they perceived a best friend—one with whom they can participate in activities, like Jacob and Bella do—and the relationship that occurs between a couple within a “best” friendship, failed within this particular set-up in Eclipse. The trust that is a crucial part of the relationship between a reader and her author also failed within this example, due to the inconsistency of characterization—Jacob’s—within the text at this particular moment. Nowhere in this example of the Adolescent Group discussing Jacob’s actions towards Bella do the girls easily accept the text’s discourses of sexuality and friendship.
To compare Jacob’s character and the expectations that the readers had of him to the expectations that they had of Edward’s character, the adolescent girls said:

JULIANNE: Okay, so yeah his character seemed a little out of character because, as you said, he’s built up to be this best friend. Um, anything out of character for Edward, or is Edward staying the same?

MARYN: He’s growing in controllingness in this one—

LENA: I don’t know. I didn’t even think so—

MARYN: I felt he did a lot

LENA:--because for a bit, I mean, it was really scary how he would go away and um, have people watch Bella and stuff and I was kinda like, well...but as soon as she brought up that it was the vampire/werewolf issue and that he was just jealous, he backed off a lot. So I thought that was really good of him. I liked his character for that part. I thought that, um, when he...I don’t know, I feel that, like, he tries harder than Jacob does with that relationship.

JULIANNE: To be with her?

LENA: Well...to make Jacob work in his life more than Jacob works to make Edward fit in his life.

JULIANNE: Okay

LENA: I mean, a little.

JULIANNE: What still annoyed you [Maryn]? Give me some specifics that changed—

MARYN: It’s pretty much like he’s trying to, like, be better about accepting part of her life, I guess, but he’s still just kind of...just kind of the fact that he could be that controlling in the first place is just kind of really upsetting. And that he would have certain people watching and saying ‘you can’t see this person, but oh it’s for your own good”? It’s just kind of wrong. Like, totally wrong. I think.

JULIANNE: Yeah. Well, not to, not to pry into anybody’s personal life here...but when...do you...when does it overstep the boundaries? If your boyfriend or your best friend was kind of, like, too overprotective? I don’t want to say controlling, but I’m trying to gauge what you see or what you consider as um, maybe, confining a bit? And then you would read that in a book, not necessarily this book, but any book in particular that would have a relationship as its core theme.
LENA: It’s hard to think about it in these terms because there is a safety issue and hopefully we wouldn’t have vampire werewolf drama in real life—

JULIANNE: [laughs] True.

LENA: But um, I would say overstepping a boundary would be saying you can’t see someone. I mean, I would say his reasoning is safety, but then it turns out it was just jealousy pretty much.

JULIANNE: Right.

LENA: So if it’s something like that, that’s overstepping it a bit. Otherwise, I guess I don’t think about it very much. Yeah, but I think in this case there is a safety issue and Bella’s not that smart, but still she should be allowed to...and then it comes down to Edward was actually jealous.

JULIANNE: Right.

REGAN: Well, um, I agree. Saying you can’t see this person for any...pretty much any reason doesn’t really seem right...because, just because Bella is friends with Jacob doesn’t mean that she has to love him or that he’s gonna change her ideas and beliefs. So she can be friends with one person and be with one person. I think that maybe that kinda shows that her character is more complex that what we were thinking.

LENA: Although it does turn out that she loves him. Just not as much.

REGAN: Right [laughs]

LENA: Which is the interesting part of it.

ALL: [laughs]

MARYN: I think it’s um...Jacob is a friend of hers even before she knew Edward at all. He was like a family friend. I think that saying that she can’t see him is trying to change way too much from before he even knew her. And that would really annoy me. And also, um, what Jacob did though, with the emotional blackmail—I’m gonna go fight and get myself killed—that was not fair at all. That was, um, that’s not okay.

JULIANNE: Okay. Is that another area that kind of disappointed you with his characterization?

MARYN: Yeah, definitely. It was a big disappointment.
It seems as if through the participants’ discussions on control and how the boys exercise their control over Bella, neither boy (Jacob or Edward) seems attractive since none of the girls would accept that behavior within their friendships or relationships outside of the text. The levels of their disappointment differed between the two boys. It was somewhat expected for Edward to be controlling—as they mention, he’s both showing his jealousy and his protectiveness, since as a vampire he cannot trust a werewolf. Jacob, on the other hand, was not following character type (the best friend) in his “emotional blackmail”, as Maryn put it, when he threatens Bella that her rejection of his love interest will lead him to get into a fight that will end in his death. This excerpt also challenges the assumption of the Adult Group that their age or lack of experience made them more vulnerable to emotional manipulation or being subjugated to or seduced by any textual representation of love or sexuality.

Subjectivity and the “problem” of textual attractions

Both the Adult Group and the Adolescent Group identified and rejected a subtext of control in the texts’ discourses on sexuality. Just as Sascha in Adult Group proclaimed in the excerpt at the opening of this chapter that she was “not okay with the only way she [Bella] gets to experience and to enjoy her sexuality is to be completely immobile”, the young adults have recognized and rejected the immobility that Jacob’s kiss, which involves holding her so that she can’t move and kissing her against her will, and Edward’s jealousies impose. Both group’s members also accept or reject this type control, Jacob/Edward over Bella, at different points within the text. While they might rage against the discourse when they discuss it amongst their peers in their groups, when
pressed, they all still choose moments and characters in the text they find attractive. For example, Karen, in the Adult Group, thinks that she liked the control expressed by Edward too much to be critical of it at the time of her reading; Lena criticizes then excuses Jacob’s forcefulness. What does this mean? Is it a cause for concern?

The participants in the study who addressed their actual sexual alliances did not discuss whether or not they enacted scenarios in which domination or passivity might have played a role, so I cannot speculate on the role these might have played in their sexuality. They did indicate that in their own romantic relationships, they were involved with men who were not controlling, but of course one can be variously “controlling” and “not controlling” in different facets of one’s life. Nevertheless, some of the participants did indicate that they found the discourse of control in sexuality to lend excitement, which I might interpret as an erotic charge or appeal. Is this a cause for concern, or evidence that texts can be dangerous in over-writing a more “empowering” or “empowered” relationship to eroticism or other aspects of the readers’ subjectivity?

The Adult Group had a discussion that stemmed directly out of these deliberations on control, sexuality, and the reader’s part in accepting how those discourses were presented in-text. In contrast to their perceptions of the text’s potential danger to younger readers, they did not see the danger to themselves so much in terms of enactment as in terms of what it might reveal about flaws in their personalities. This turned out to be the key difference between the adults and the adolescents’ stance toward the books. It was not so much either a difference in attraction to the books or in criticality toward the books, but rather, it had to do with much greater concern on the part of the adults about what their attraction to the books said about them and their commitments. The young
women voiced no concern about whether their attractions within the text might define their attractions, or selves, outside of the text. The adult readers worried that the texts might define the attractions of the younger readers and worrisome secret aspects of their adult selves.

While Lena’s concern about liking *Twilight* after it was no longer trendy to like it had mostly to do with group acceptance, members of the adult group expressed both the concern about group acceptance and about the potential for what we might call flaws in their political characters. This concern extended from questions over the texts one enjoyed (as discussed in the opening of this chapter), to the groups one affiliates with through the book -- an audience filling a movie theatre or a book group -- or, as detailed below, a “Team” of readers that associates themselves with in the *Twilight* series. For the uninitiated, *Twilight* fans often characterize themselves as belonging to “Team Edward” – those who hope that Bella would choose Edward or would themselves choose Edward for romantic partnership versus those who would choose Jacob.

KAREN: Just deciding which “team” you’re on says something about who you are as a person. Like this cultural signifier. Like, Oh, I’m an Edward kinda girl because I like the moody, brooding types and you’re like, I like Jacob because he’s independent and has a life, right?

ALL: [laugh]

KAREN: I mean, I’m just assuming. It’s funny because like, I mean it’s hilarious, because I have always dated the moody, brooding Edward type but I married the Jacob, independent happy all the time...guy

SASCHA: Right! He’s a happy person?

KAREN: Never in a bad mood. Like, it’s annoying never in a bad mood. It’s just kinda funny...how...you know.

SASCHA: Yeah
JULIANNE: Okay--

SASCHA: I mean, I agree. If we’re actually gonna talk about realities, Jacob is a much better guy than Edward is and he would make a much better boyfriend. And I think that Jacob is the only choice you have as a feminist between the two...but I’m Team Edward all the way.

KAREN: Yeah, isn’t that so crazy? And I like her character a lot better with him [Jacob] because she’s like fun, it’s like she has light to her and that’s why I could not wrap my head around why I liked him [Edward] better. When all the time she’s with him all they’re talking about is how much they love each other--

SASCHA: Yes

KAREN: How...how...

SASCHA: How perfect he is--

KAREN: How perfect he is!

BRIANNA: How she’s going to get herself killed when he’s not there

KAREN: [laughs] Yes! She’s such--

SASCHA: [laughs]

KAREN: --How she cannot understand why he likes her. While she’s with Jacob, it’s like, oh I understand this relationship. It’s healthy. And that’s totally not healthy, it’s devastatingly, you know, um....

JULIANNE: So whose team are you on?

KAREN: Oh, Edward!

I focus on this particular excerpt in order to look at it through the lens of subjectification. I revisit this same excerpt in the following chapter to analyze it through the lens of identity. As Karen indicated, picking a character—a team—implies that the reader actively chose that character; you, the reader, support that character and not the character’s antagonist. As a cultural reference, it implies that you and your fellow “team” of either Edward supporters or Jacob supporters represent a certain type of fan
personality. It is an either-or sense of rationality: the reader either supports the vampires’ world, and Edward’s lifestyle and his relationship with Bella or the reader supports the werewolf world and Jacob’s characteristics and point-of-view.

The adult participants expressed that this issue goes deeper than just allying yourself with a character fan-base. In their opinion, by choosing a particular team you declare your attractions—“I’m an Edward kinda girl because I like the moody, brooding types and you’re like, I like Jacob because he’s independent and has a life” (an interesting aside is that “team Bella” does not seem to exist in the Twilight lexicon.)

Sascha states that as a feminist reader, there is only have one choice for the type of partner to whom you should be attracted. As gay vampires and humans do not seem to exist within the Twilight universe, it goes without saying that there is no homosexual tendency, attraction, or possibility for the characters. The logical choice for a feminist reader, from Sascha’s perspective, is to be attracted to Jacob’s character and to have someone like Jacob as your partner outside of the text. I will go into detail about feminism, identity, and the Twilight series within the next chapter, since it was a major sticking point for the participants Adult Group. But here, I unpack Sascha’s statement to mean that when she talks about Jacob being the only feminist choice as a romantic leading man, she could mean that he is the feminist choice for others (since she chooses Edward or that when feminism is taken as having a unitary perspective, there is only one possible choice. Nevertheless, Sascha both chooses Team Edward and routinely described herself as a feminist in our discussion groups). This statement puts subjectivity in motion.
To characterize feminism as being defined through a proper response to the two types of masculinity presented in the series, Jacob and Edward, implies that a feminist reader would choose Jacob because he treats Bella with a *little* more equality than Edward. It is important to point out, however, that both men control Bella: Jacob controls her physically and Edward controls her both physically and emotionally. The women define Bella and Jacob’s relationship further within the discussion. They term it “healthy” and based upon mutual activities and discussions they have. The tropes of masculinity in the book both have aspects of romance and control, but also differ in the ways through which the men exercise the control over Bella. Karen describes the opposite relationship within this fictional love triangle—the Bella and Edward relationship—as “not healthy” and devastating in its turmoil. It only adds to the confusion when, pushed to answer which relationship or “team” she is on, Karen responded to me as if I was asking a question with an obvious answer: *Edward!*, she yelled enthusiastically, looking at me as if it was crazy to even ask the question.

What might be going on here? Is it a case of schizophrenic or lazy engagement with the text or with their own philosophical feminist beliefs or a failure of feminist commitment? I think the women, Karen and Sascha in particular, really struggle with a desire to implement their theory. They view themselves as, and certainly are, competent, feminist women. They struggle to see themselves and their theoretical perspectives outside of a unified or narrow definition that does not make space for multiple communities and affiliations, and contextualized desires or enactments. Both participants go back and forth in their readings of the texts and, therefore, the picture of Karen and Sascha that forms is inconsistent. This leads me to conclude, from the many articles of
evidence in their book talk and journal writing I have excerpted, that Karen and Sascha have, use, and comfort themselves with their multiple interpretive stances—they just do not have an adequate theoretical term for such fluidity or polyvocality, so instead they worry or flit between love and hate for the text and the text’s discourses. They struggle because they might not have knowledge of polyvocality and how often we all employ different, and occasionally contrasting, selves in different contexts.

In whose lives, under what circumstances, might one version of masculinity be a better choice than another for a particular woman? Might a “real” feminist refuse to choose either boy or “team”? The “healthy” relationship that the women define in this context might not meet the criteria of a healthy relationship for another woman in another circumstance.

Karen is correct when she names teams as large cultural signifiers of types of fandom. The ubiquity of the choice – either Jacob or Edward -- may make differences among individuals less culturally visible and viable – as in someone who might want to a “team lesbian” option. Still, such affiliations allow groups to come together without necessarily defining or over-writing the experiences or desires of the individuals who align with the group. The adult readers seem oblivious to this fluidity or flexibility in their own desires, capacity for criticality and subjectivity. They do not have a way to talk about and, thus, intellectually reconcile to their ability to gain pleasure and excitement out of things that are partial and not all determining, even though they even mentioned that their attraction to Edward does not mean that they date or marry men who are “like Edward” – the anti-feminist choice -- nor are they attracted to many of the things that Edward does in the book. They both allow themselves the pleasures of fantasy in their
attraction and demonstrate that such fantasies do not override their criticality. They are chagrined and puzzled that their philosophical or political commitments do not overwrite the (occasionally nonsensical) fantasy of attraction. Despite their well-educated background, something within the text and the discourse of sexuality presented within the text attracts them and tells them to assign particular discourses to particular types of subjects (readers).

This excerpt shows how contextually agentic they are in their attraction to the discourses: as solitary readers and as a group readers discussing the text, they move in and out of their love and hate for the text and the text’s discourses. They struggle with releasing an anxiety built up over their failure of choosing a “correct” “feminist” pathway within the Twilight fantasy. It goes further, too, in that I think that the women believe not only do they have to choose “correctly”, but that they believe they have to choose and understand why they are attracted to something or someone they might not like in “real” life (as Karen said, above, she could not “wrap her head around” why she liked Edward and Bella’s relationship). Therefore, the argument that as feminists there is only one choice, Jacob, falls flat since these two feminists—Karen and Sascha—choose Edward. Karen did not marry a man similar to the Edward character; she married someone more like the Jacob character. In actuality, and in contrast to their earlier worries about younger readers accommodating the books’ discourses on sexuality and gender, what they revealed were their worries that they were the ones who chose “incorrectly”.

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Subjectivity and community

My participants enacted a desire to be members of an interpretive community. For the Adult Group, communities included not only a group or “team” that is the equivalent to a cultural signifier, but also an academic community. The Adult Group participants are within a very small community: they are PhD students who have a strong motivation to take up the practices and perspectives that identify desired subjectivity in their academic communities, which includes a strong subjectivity of and enactment of feminist criticality. Their theory should inform their daily practice, or so they believe. It is reasonable to imagine that the Adolescent Group participants are also within a small community—that of high school—where there are expectations that they choose among various identities (athlete, musician, scholar, etc.) or where teens (like adults) subject one another to/through those categories. However, that is not a salient feature in this analysis because the adolescent girls simply did not articulate concerns about how their pleasures in or criticisms of the text created points of conflict with their other identifications.

While some might imagine that this points to exactly the lack of criticality that the Adult Group imagined and criticized in the Adolescent Group, I have attempted to argue that it can just as plausibly be argued to demonstrate that the subject position of an adult Ph.D. student means a performance of distance and criticality about one’s own pleasures that is not required of the Adolescent Group. This does not, however, indicate a lack of criticality among the adolescents.

I once again must return to Bakhtin and his notion of polyvocality in an effort to really satisfy the questions I posed about subjectivity and agency—or a lack of others agency, as it were, if they are subjectified—at the beginning of this chapter. My
participants successfully worked toward achieving a specific goal; they engaged in dialogues with others and themselves to co-construct partly shared and partly individual interpretations of text within a book discussion group in a way that allowed them to gain satisfaction through identify with or against the group dynamic. As Pollard (2008) describes Bakhtin’s heteroglossia, as speakers we are often playing with multiple and occasionally oppositional social languages and social roles in order to relate to our present contextualized community (p.28). Such a perspective on dialogue allows us to recognize the influence of members within those interpretive communities: members engage in a constant fluctuation between accommodations and rejections (Linell, 2007).

The definition of subjectivity, therefore, grows larger than the smaller instances of how group members influence and define each other or choose to a pathway towards comprehending a text (i.e.-the exercising of their subjectivity). It became much more complicated. Defining agency as an employment of subjectivity became a process of locating small moments of influence, accommodation, and rejection on behalf of a group member rather than documenting grand moments of agentic change. In analyzing the transcripts of my participants’ interactions, a few of my questions were answered. I found no evidence that the texts’ discourses changed the participants—for better or for worse because they actively brought criticality to the texts. When asked, the participants rejected the idea that the text changed their beliefs or commitments.

To the contrary, moments of conflict between the text and the participants’ beliefs, along with discussion of these moments, tended to solidify differences between the participants and the text. No disparate journal writings that clashed with the participants’ viewpoints in-group; anything that was mentioned in journals represented
participants’ talk in-group. This is not to say that texts never influence readers. That would be an absurd claim. However, what is evident is that for at least these readers, even given the great popularity and appeal of the texts, I can find no evidence that suggests that the powerfully seductive moments of the text didactically overwrote the beliefs and enacted desires of the participants.
Chapter Four

Articulations of Identity

“I would qualify my reading with: I’m allowing these books to, like, take me over. I had to justify my pleasure...’Cause otherwise, I should know better, right?” – Karen [Adult Group]

Conversations of identity frequently arose within both our group discussions and within the participants’ journals. In this chapter, I will focus on reactions by the Adult Group to the texts with regards to how they define their own identity as readers and as women. While the Adolescent Group certainly did not ignore questions of identity, in no way did the topic of what it means to be female or male arise with as much frequency as it did within the Adult Group. Those adolescent participants did, however, have plenty to say about identity and love. In this chapter, I organized the first sections of talk about identity (as a reader, as a female, as a romantic partner, etc.) from the Adult Group participants’ transcripts; the second section addresses how the Adolescent Group analyzes romance both inside and outside of the text and where gender tropes might fit into that analysis. Finally, I analyzed the participants’ views under an overarching theme that I categorized as articulations of identity.

As I will document in what follows, adult participants issues of gender and love were key factors not so much in their responses to the books as in their own subsequent analysis of their responses to the books within our book group meetings and journal writing. Identity and responses to the texts were problematic for the women, whereas the
girls did not seem to have (or did not voice) similar struggles with identifying with any group (like feminist, academic, etc.).

For the purposes of this study, I define identity as both an individually-acknowledged representation of self and as a socially-situated representation of self. That is, we both state how we define ourselves and clue-in others (and ourselves) to a definition of our identity by our statements and actions within different social situations, including situations like reading groups. We use the provided discourses within those social situations to help frame ourselves (Davies and Harre, 1990). Identity is and has the potential to be fluid in all contexts. I applied specific research questions to participant dialogue in my search for answers: how does *Twilight*, if at all, contribute to participants’ understanding of and articulation of identity? Are there any contextual markers of identity in these texts; that is, is there a type of *Twilight*-specific reader?

*Who is the Twilight reader?*

Who is the *Twilight* reader? This kind of question often gets bandied about in discussions of children’s or young adult literature, as if there is single or perhaps dominant type of reader who enjoys these texts. Readers of *Twilight* are typically portrayed as obsessed teens who have outgrown the *Harry Potter* series and are now enjoying their extreme infatuation with these texts and the characters portrayed within them (Spires, 2006). Or, as implied by comic artist Cagle (2010) in the epigraph to this dissertation, they are slobbering, frantic girls that inspire malaise from their boyfriends.

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4 The space that I devote in this chapter to the Adult Group does not indicate that I devalued the Adolescents’ responses. On the contrary, I think the Adolescent Group’s brief reflections on aspects of love, gender, and group identification reflects the confidence they have within their answers.
However, in my discussion groups it was not the Adolescent Group, but the Adult Group of participants who professed to experience more moments of intense enjoyment or abandonment with the texts. At least in my small study, age was not a factor in defining who was likely to be a *Twilight* fan.

Nevertheless, age – or perhaps the other identities the adult women had taken on that reflect their ages – was a factor in how the readers felt about their own responses to the book. As Karen so succinctly said in the opening quote at the beginning of this chapter -- “I had to justify my pleasure...’Cause otherwise, I should know better, right?”—the adults frequently seemed to feel the need to justify their reactions, their enjoyment, the pleasure they received in reading the *Twilight* series. Many women within the adult reading group spoke or wrote of themselves within the third person, as in, they would struggle with “taking off” or “putting on” a type of reader identity in order to enjoy the book. They differentiated types of reading and types of readers: the “sophisticated reader”, and its converse, the type of reader who devours popular literature like *Twilight*. The women in the Adult Group constantly qualified positive reactions they had to the texts with a statement like Karen’s. As adult women, who each self-identified as feminists at various points throughout the study, they incurred or anticipated teasing or criticism from friends or colleagues for taking such enjoyment from the series.

*Elite Reading vs. Fun Reading*

As graduate students and high school students, my participants have been taught to approach texts from both a strictly defined analytical perspective and from a pleasure-seeking perspective, or as Rosenblatt (1978) termed it respectively, the efferent and
aesthetic modes. As Sascha put it within our first meeting, when I asked her to share her initial reactions to the first book in the series, *Twilight*:

I had some very strong previous notions about the whole series. Even though I have a lot of friends who’ve read it who are, I would say, pretty sophisticated readers that just loved this series. They got so absorbed in it and...I thought, ‘well, I respect these people so I should give the book a try.’ [Transcript of *Twilight* discussion, Adult Group]

Sascha immediately establishes the demarcation between “sophisticated readers” and the books they read compared to the unsophisticated reader and the type of book(s) they might read. Her preconceptions about *Twilight* are apparently at odds with what she perceives as the types of books her “sophisticated” friends might read. The sophisticated reader, in Sascha’s mind, would not read trash. She goes on to explain that these friends of hers of whom she admires are heavily into a “Goth-type subculture”, and that they convinced her that the series was on its way to becoming a pop culture phenomenon:

The whole book...I thought it was hysterical and really, really fun. Like, just fun. And I understood why it was a pop culture phenomenon and why my gothic friends had liked it...I was just flying though them—they’re really fun and somewhere deep in the back of my mind there’s this little voice that was going, ‘these books are really fun but also really sketchy’ and not for sexuality alone reasons, but like, like, the little feminist inside me was like: ‘no! no!’ (puts hands up to signal stop). But as far as fiction and fun, it definitely had that appeal to me.

Sascha was not alone in describing that at least one part of her conscious identity was in conflict with her sense of enjoyment of the books. Compartmentalizing aspects of identity (e.g., ignoring the “little feminist”) was a common strategy the women described in discussing how they were able to experience the “fun” aspects of *Twilight*. Karen often stated that the books were fun and that her enjoyment probably grew out of her childhood obsession with Harlequin romance, but she also admittedly struggled with her status as a graduate student of media studies. When I pressed her to tell me about her first reactions
to the book, she laughingly told me of how a group of her women she met during a weekend-long bridal shower event got her hooked:

They kept talking about *Twilight* the whole time and I was like, what is this *Twilight* thing, you know?...I can’t even explain to you, I just met this girl and all she’s talking about is Edward. Edward, Edward, Edward. I guess growing up studying media for so long, if it’s popular [I assume that] I will probably hate it, right? You become such an elitist [in academia]. -Karen

She continues, explaining that after the emotionally and physically draining period of her life in which she passed her comprehensive exams, she sought a release that included reading for pleasure. Again, we have another participant that differentiates a type of reading and its correlative type of reader: there is the academic, the critic, who reads intellectually challenging material and who gets grilled on her knowledge of this material. Its opposition is the type of reading material that envelops you within its quick plot and “fun”, fantastical elements and is imbibed by an unsophisticated reader. By reading *Twilight*, Karen read and enjoyed a type of literature that reminded her of her favorite youth series (the Harlequin romances). The identity that she associates with a Harlequin romance/*Twilight* reader is that of a younger self that is not part of the “elite” academic world who might be trained to react to texts, especially popular ones as she mentions, in a certain way.

From Karen’s perspective, as media scholar, she is aware that she can critique the books to fit a certain scholarly rubric. That is, she can critique *Twilight* if she were to approach it using the tools she has been given in academia. Yet, she chooses not to approach these books with the tools that will define her career in media studies, suggesting that her academic training was teaching her to be an elitist and separating her from sharing the pleasures of other (presumably non-academic) peers. She rejects the
assumption that *being able* to critique a book means she *has to* critique that book from a scholarly perspective at all times. Rather, *fun*, enjoyment and pleasure describe a category of relating to the book that is outside an academic realm (whether feminist, literary, or critical theory based). At times she is able to set aside her theory and at other times she worries about doing that very act of consciously ignoring her inclination to approach her interpretations and enjoyment through theory.

*Feminist Concerns*

Criticality implies a specific approach to our understanding the world; when we think “critically”, we try to process assumptions, power dynamics, and values that are perpetrated within a specific worldview and why and how those very things gain credence (Tyson, 2006). The defining characteristic of all various sub-theories within critical theory (Marxist, race theory, feminist theory, etc.) is to not only uncover those power dynamics and assumptions, but to change or actively work towards a stage of equality between the groups affected by any inequality. Feminist criticism, especially feminist literary theory, “examines the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women” (p.83, Tyson). Cherland (1994), as did Durham (1999), defined reading as a social act whereby cultural values are formed and perpetuated through the text and collective analysis of it. Based upon some of our discussions and journal excerpts, I think my participants approached some of their book-group analysis of the texts with these types of questions in mind: what cultural values being perpetuated in the *Twilight* series? If I enjoy the books—and the values contained within—does that make me a “bad” feminist or not a feminist at all?
An example of Sascha negotiating her contextualized interpretations of gender, relationships, sexuality, and her reader identity can be found in her journal response to *Eclipse*:

*I love this book. When I put on my Feminist Hat, there’s so much wrong with this book—Edward is so controlling/paternalistic, Alice’s complicity in kidnapping Bella (where’s the sisterly solidarity), the unfinished feeling to Rosalie’s rape story, Jacob’s moodiness (he’s really a pretty bad friend in this book), Jacob forcing himself on Bella (the kiss...), Bella’s failed attempt to sacrifice herself (the 3rd wife...)—anyway, there’s so much wrong with this book that I forget that I love it. But I do. I love the story: waiting to see what will happen next. I love how much Edward loves Bella. I love how annoyingly persistent Jacob is. I love the sexual tension as it ramps up in this book. I love this book. Sometimes I wonder if it could be re-imagined. If it could have been written without all the stuff that alarms my feminist self, but I can’t imagine what that would look like—and I doubt I would like reading it. I often sacrifice romance/pleasure in order to live feministically. I don’t want to read about that, too. I still enjoy the fantasy—even though it’s bad in real life.*

In Sascha’s view, being a feminist and living “feministly” means sacrificing love and pleasure. Sascha could very easily critique the series from her “feminist” perspective; she has already told us that her “inner feminist” has trouble with many aspects of the series. And again, like Karen, Sascha lays aside her critical, feminist, academic voice in order to “love” the books. Reader response theory enables us to describe the fluidity of a participant’s point-of-view. The give and take, ever-transforming elements of transaction (Rosenblatt, 1994) that the participants share with the texts allows them to constantly change their interpretation of the story, since transaction dictates that the book both forms and is formed by the reader moment to moment, context to context. If they read for pleasure and wish to remove their “Feminist Hat” like Sascha, then they categorize parts of the book that do not work with a feminist viewpoint as “wrong”. If they are within a classroom setting and asked to critique the books’ discourses on gender and sexuality, then they will assume the identity of a graduate student reading critically to expose,
define, and critique those discourses within that context. In each instance, the participants were able to use the texts for different purposes, pleasure or academic standing.

Joey Sprague argues bluntly in her book, *Feminist Methodologies for Critical Researchers* (2005), that while feminists belong to a heterogeneous, group there are two uniting factors upon which all feminists must have consensus: not only is gender a “key organizer in social life” but feminists must also have a “central commitment” to progressive, equitable, changes in our social order (p.3). One could argue, then, that by enjoying a text that has, as some argue (Nikki Galessey’s “Feminism Doesn’t Sparkle” and Seifert’s “Bite Me (Or Don’t)”) a retro outlook on gender equality, you cannot make a central commitment to progressive social change. Therefore, you cannot be a feminist. Literature, after all, is a product of and replicator of social mores. By enjoying the books, and the cultural values within them, Sascha—and all readers who enjoy the *Twilight* series—are not working toward making the social world more equitable.

Feminism and *Twilight* are polarizing topics for the adult women in this study. I return to an excerpt I analyzed in the previous chapter, looking for clues that might point to reader subjectivity in the participants’ responses. I thought it necessary to look through the lens of identity in this dialogue, especially after the theme of feminism kept rising to the surface in some of the reader’s responses. In the following excerpt of dialogue, the Adult Group participants continue to voice their struggles with applying feminism to the *Twilight* series:

SASCHA: I mean, I agree. If we’re actually gonna talk about realities, Jacob is a much better guy than Edward is and he would make a much better boyfriend. And I think that Jacob is the only choice you have as a feminist between the two...but I’m Team Edward all the way.
KAREN: Yeah, isn’t that so crazy? And I like her character a lot better with him [Jacob] because she’s like fun, it’s like she has light to her and that’s why I could not wrap my head around why I liked him [Edward] better. When all the time she’s with him all they’re talking about is how much they love each other--

SASCHA: Yes!

KAREN: How...how...

SASCHA: How perfect he is

KAREN: How perfect he is

BRIANNA: How she’s going to get herself killed when he’s not there

KAREN: [laughs] Yes! She’s such--

SASCHA: [laughs]

KAREN: --how she cannot understand why he likes her. While she’s with Jacob, it’s like, oh I understand this relationship. It’s healthy. And that’s totally not healthy, it’s devastatingly, you know, um....

JULIANNE: So whose team are you on?

KAREN: Oh, Edward!

As I wrote earlier, the participants clearly state that a feminist reader has one choice in the type of partner to whom you should be attracted. For Sascha, the logical, feminist choice is to be attracted to Jacob’s character and to have someone like Jacob as your partner outside of the text. The women define Bella and Jacob’s relationship further within the discussion; they term it “healthy,” and ad based upon mutual activities and discussions. Karen also describes the opposite relationship within this fictional love triangle—the Bella and Edward relationship—as “not healthy” and devastating in its turmoil.

In spite of earlier saying that she can separate fun from criticality, Karen, along with Sascha, struggles with a desire to implement a theoretical background of academic
feminism which they view as having a claim to being all-defining. That is, they think they know what a feminist should be attracted to, or what a feminist would think, but their argument falls apart when in spite of their identifications as feminists, they reject the “feminist” choice (Jacob). Rather than concluding that their perceptions of feminism are, in this particular instance, too narrow or reflecting on the oblivious fact of their own fluid criticality, they simply leave the contradiction uncomfortably in place.

In some instances, as both Sasha and Karen described earlier, they put up a wall between “fun” and “life”, but both expressed considerable discomfort with this maneuver. While wanting to practice their philosophy, they also experienced that their intellectual commitments did not override their emotional responses and attractions, nor replace the satisfactions they found in fantasy. Despite their well-educated background, something within the text and the discourse of sexuality presented within text attracted them. In actuality, their education is what seems to be holding them back from accepting or acknowledging any fluid construct of what a feminist choice might be. Their ability to be well-versed in feminist theory, their knowledge of what it means to be feminist, and their educational background limits, caused them to hesitate, or to feel the discomfort of being conscious of contradictions in their thoughts and desires.

Both as solitary readers and as a group members discussing the text, Karen and Sascha moved in and out of love with the text and the text’s discourses. They struggled with the anxiety that built up over their failure of choosing a “correct”, “feminist” pathway within the Twilight fantasy. It goes further, too, in that the women seemed to believe not only do they have to choose correctly, but that they also had to understand why they were attracted to something or someone they might not like in “real” life. As
Karen said above, she could not “wrap her head around” why she liked Edward and Bella’s relationship.

Against the (Con)Text

Not all of the adult participants in Adult Group wrestled with their proclamations of a reader (feminist, academic, or otherwise) identity among different contexts. As Brianna noted in her journal:

*I feel like I am having a fairly predictable “feminist” response to Twilight, in the sense that I’m almost all criticism and have a hard time taking my “scholarly” lenses off (I can’t help it—they’re glued to my face while I’m in this grad school bubble). As many people say, “just enjoy it, it’s just fantasy, escapist, etc...” I find that I really can’t separate myself from “feminist” perspective. Escapist, sure, but escaping to a really ugly, dangerous sort of world (or version of our world).*

Brianna cannot contextualize her response, at least in this example from her reading journal, to *Twilight*. She could not separate what she perceives to be a “predictable” response coming from a self-described feminist in describing the text: she does not enjoy or escape within these books to a setting in an “ugly, dangerous sort of world”. I do not think that she was describing the fantastical, Gothic elements of the text (werewolves, vampires, etc.) as being “ugly”, but Meyer’s creation of a female character and a romantic relationship to which Brianna cannot relate. Within this small group of three participants, Brianna was the only one who acknowledged that she fought against anyone who insisted that she just enjoy the texts. In response to a friend who had read the books and who told her to “take off her critical lenses” (Personal communication, Brianna, Journal, p.3), she replied that act was impossible for her.
Nothing in either the texts or participation in the community of fans was sufficiently motivating to convince her to lay aside an identification that she experienced as so central to her identity in “this grad school bubble.” While she did not elaborate more within her journal about what it means, in her opinion, to be “feminist” or “critical”, I can only assume that it is the opposite of the trope presented within the books since she has such an aversion to the characters (both male and female) and plot structure. Importantly, it also seems to have to do with an unwavering critical lens. To clarify, I am not insisting that she is incapable of pleasures she simultaneously experiences as non-feminist or non-critical pleasures, but that this particular contextual example (Twilight) does not represent it.

Criticality is a tricky thing: what is a critical perspective to one participant might be very different to another. Again, should we not be considering context when Brianna mentions her critical lenses? Brianna implies that to be critical – a trait she values or at least finds important in graduate school – means remaining consistently critical. Yet this definition of “critical” is quite narrow. One might ask, however if we ever fully remove our critical lenses? To be critical might also be understood as having the consciousness to be able to discriminate what responses among many to foreground in particular circumstances. Karen and Sascha employ a type of criticality when discriminating among elements of the texts that they do and do not like; their type of criticality also suggests that there are contexts within which the criticism would take precedence over the pleasure. Sascha states that she is well aware that the fantasy to which she is attracted is bad in “real life”...but, rather poignantly, she also states that she often has to sacrifice “romance/pleasure” in order to live as a feminist. Sascha seems to be suggesting that her
sense of what is romantic and pleasurable is different than what she believes feminist cricality will allow for.

It is worth pausing at this point to discuss the notion of escaping into a text and the question of criticality’s existence during such an escape. Janice Radway, in her famous ethnography of women reading romance novels (*Reading the Romance*, 1984), reported that most of the women she spoke to described using literature as a means to escape the routine of every day life, while some “escaped” into the books to give value to their own lives. She writes:

“In attending to the women’s comments about the worth of romance reading, I was particularly struck by the fact that they tended to use the word escape in two distinct ways. On the one hand, they used the term literally to describe the act of denying the present, which they believe they accomplish each time they begin to read a book and are drawn into its story. On the other hand, they used the word in a more figurative fashion, to give substance to the somewhat vague but nonetheless intense sense of relief they experience by identifying with a heroine whose life does not resemble their own in certain crucial aspects” (p. 90).

We are presented, then, with two clear meanings of the word: some of the participants use books to escape into a world in which they find comfort, excitement, or verification, while others use the “escape” of the texts to prove to themselves what they do not want; i.e.- the heroine makes different life choices than the reader would, and therefore, a sense of comfort and reassurance arises from such comparison of the reader to the heroine. In order to fulfill both tracts of escape, however, the women were thinking critically to achieve some goal. Whether they were looking for an escape and found something within the text that helped them reaffirm what they do not want within reality (like Brianna wrote, *Twilight* was “escapist, sure, but escaping to a really ugly, dangerous sort of
world”); or whether the text provided a sense of pleasurable comfort in identifying with a heroine whose life does not represent their own, it would be absurd to insist that the readers were not thinking critically to come to those conclusions.

Reconceptualizing Readers’ Responses

In my study, the adult women participants—each one a Ph.D. candidate in programs across three different departments at a Research One institution—consciously assumed one type of identity while ignoring another part of themselves that they classified as “feminist” because it did not fit the mold of the type of reader who reads a popular text. So, here, at least these two participants have a distinct idea of the reader to whom the *Twilight* series appeals, the unsophisticated reader who is looking for an easy, fun story. The challenge arose when they found themselves enjoying the books and identifying with their preconceived notions of that type of reader. This statement epitomizes what my study became: a dissertation wherein identifications do not necessarily overwrite one another and cannot be viewed as hierarchical although we try to use them that way.

Our identities are social practices distributed on a social plane that is nothing but context, wherein we draw from the particulars of each situation to help define ourselves (Davies and Harre, 1990). These educated women could not discipline or control what kinds of texts or content gave them pleasure via the application of their theoretical knowledge. Though they seemed to suggest that they would be more comfortable with a unified identity, to varying degrees each of the participants described -- without acknowledging that they were describing -- different identities with different proximities
to pleasure and intellect at different points of the study. This fact became crucial as I attempted to conceptualize and reconceptualize my understanding of their responses. In this process, my research questions shifted from identifying cultural markers of an identifiable type of *Twilight* reader, into a questioning stance on *when* my Adult Group participants employed their multiple, contextual identities, *why* they employed those identities, and *to what extent*. The question began dauntingly: am I considering that these participants compartmentalize parts of themselves when they read different types of literature, such as *Twilight* vs. academic literature? If so, does one or should one stop compartmentalizing oneself as a reader? When is that hat or that lens removed too frequently for you to be able to claim that one enacts a certain identity with integrity? Is there a “real” or more enlightened self that is deprived a more efficacious or activist voice? Which reaction to the literature is the truth – the one that happens at home, alone or in class? What do contradictions, and particularly contradictions that are “guilty pleasures,” say about us?

When the many nuances of self and of readers’ multiple identities that form a whole became the most salient feature during the study, I realized that neither the humanist nor the critical approaches, wherein a discernable “real” or “authentic” self could be found, were helpful. We always read critically on some level—we constantly judge what we read, hear, see, taste, smell, etc. based within whatever context we find ourselves at that moment. How else do we make sense of the world, if not by critiquing it? Moreover, because the context is constantly shifting and because which of our identities within that context are brought to the fore also shifts, it becomes impossible to
impose a hierarchy from false to true or more “real” (or in my participants’ cases, a “feminist”) selves.

The other problem at this stage of analysis was that I approached the data too linearly, as if I found a direct correlation between Stephenie Meyer’s writing style and the identities my participants would articulate as a result. As Tobin (2000) writes “the media effects paradigm is stymied in the logic of single-cause, single-effect relations” (p.4). That is, too many assumptions are made about one type of text being the single cause of a reader’s behavior or personality attributes. The participants’ qualifying statements are actually part of their comprehension process: they might foreground parts of themselves in order to read and enjoy parts of the text, but they are aware of the voices of other selves and can call on these voices in order to critique and discuss the text in other contexts.

Within their embrace or critique of the series I find evidence of non-hierarchical but contextual strategies. Tobin theorizes that reader response studies have misplaced their focus by concentrating on only one type of response to a text rather than a multitude of responses that could be generated from one text. In effect, these studies lack contextualization of not only the text and the reader, but also how and when the participants are asked to respond to the text (p.5). Researchers should take into account the type of response and how that effects the responses the readers might give (say, within group dynamics). Researchers also must consider the gender, sex, age, and the collective life experiences of the reader at the point of their response to a text and what the mode of response itself signals as a type of discourse. What I missed initially in my search for the participants many articulations of identity was context.
To understand Karen and Sascha’s contextual compartmentalization of their identities when digesting and responding to the *Twilight* series, I returned to Bakhtin’s theories of polyvocality, dialogism, and heteroglossia, all of which allow for multi-voiced (and occasionally conflicting or contradictory) notions of self. Plainly stated, dialogism is the presence of more than one voice in a text and it relates to heteroglossia (“the interaction of different ‘social languages’ often in ideological conflict with each other” Pollard, p.28, 2008) within its application to context. That is, we play certain roles (Pollard, p. 34) and how we perform those roles depends upon contextual circumstances: past, present, and future instances of a similar event (like a book group analysis of the *Twilight* series) may affect our role-play, as does the community we are in at that contextual moment.

Bakhtin’s polyvocality also relates to how we define ourselves within those contextualized communities, through the influence of fellow community members (or role-players, as it were): as understood by Linell (2007), “consciousness is a dialogical notion and involves the self’s ability to internalize others’ views on self’s own thoughts, utterances and actions” (p. 166). To approach the participants’ interpretations of the text through Bakhtin’s notions of context also permits us to abandon the notion that the participants were accepting of the text, and all aspects of the text, at all times. Interpretive stances become dynamic, rather than static.

*(Con)Textual love and reader identity*

Within our reading group discussions, Sascha often talked about the type of literary romances that she enjoyed: quick reads full of angst that are populated with
moody characters. Not only are these literary romances melodramatic, but also they are not written within an intellectual framework. That is, she implied the books’ intended reading audiences are not feminists who critique lengthy manuscripts on academic topics, but readers enjoying a cathartic escape, like her.

Part of the attraction, for Sascha at least, was the ability to quiet the feminist part of herself that might object to certain aspects within the story in order to escape—“ignore”—what was happening or not happening within the relationship in her own life. The text was not going to change how she interpreted romance in the “real” world; we assume that she wears her Feminist Hat in the “real” world. However, Sascha made it clear that she often feels like she sacrifices a sense of romance and pleasure in order to remain true to her beliefs. Sascha was not alone in naming these contradictions in her identity or within her desires and enactments of romance, but she appeared to be somewhat more comfortable in her acceptance of these contradictions.

The theme of romance and sex came up both explicitly and implicitly frequently. What struck me most about much of the language in the Adult Group of participants was how it could be construed as a type of sexualized language and more specifically, the sexual language of domination and fantasy. In fact, concerns about Twilight as a dangerous or at least objectionable model for sex and sexuality were commonly voiced and caused tension, consternation and laughter, as when, for example, Karen spoke about “allowing” the books to overtake her” and, jokingly but knowingly, objecting that her rational brain “should know better”.

After a group discussion on inconsistencies within our reactions to the texts (what is accepted within the textual relationship between Bella and Edward and what we would
not accept within a relationship outside of the text; that is, models of sexuality with which we wouldn’t be comfortable enacting in our lives but enjoy reading about them), Karen wrote:

After our conversation tonight/focus group meeting on Eclipse, I wanted to acknowledge something you mentioned about inconsistency—we are all hypocrites in some respect and I was just at the gym thinking about this—how I have such an aversion for Jacob’s sexual aggression towards Bella that in many ways I’ve been anticipating since my distaste for him really begins @ Emily’s house post-fight with Paul when they start acting like juvenile Frat boys (part of being a young werewolf, yes I know, but still...). But in the same respect I totally admitted that I thought Edward stalking Bella by watching her sleep at night in her room was totally hot—and the power dynamics are totally messed up, right? Like with Edw. & Bella—E’s voyeurism is totally about his own power as the voyeur while B is being watched completely unknowingly! Yet Jacob we “know” and “trust” (I DON’T!! but I feel we are supposed to) yet his “playful” yet unwanted kiss totally enrages me—even though admittedly, Bella had perhaps more power to control this situation more than the one w/ Edward—like @ the very least she’s gone to La Push, she knows how Jacob feels, the conversation is going in a weird direction, Billy is nearby (I think?), etc. He’s not forcing himself on her or invading her privacy in her bedroom unknowingly (like Edward, minus the forcing himself on her part...) Anyhow, I wanted to acknowledge this b/c my own hypocrisy bugs me. I don’t know really why I seem to prefer E to J but I think it has something do w/ my fear of sexually aggressive men? Maybe? Or unwanted sexual aggression.

Karen’s frustration with her “hypocrisy” certainly resonates within this passage from her reading journal and she, like Sascha, relates an aspect of the fantasy to her definition of romance within the “real” world (she hates unwanted sexual aggression both inside and outside of fiction). The key to analyzing the participants’ reactions is tracing their choice or method in which they ignore, accept, challenge, or resist their readings. How they define romance, pleasure, and how they chose to interpret the texts shifts constantly depending on context: when they read the book, whether they were single or within a relationship while reading the book(s), whether they chose to adopt their “Feminist Hat” or the lens of a graduate student, before and after book group discussions. Oftentimes, the
struggle that these adult participants stemmed from their awareness of and assumption
that criticality (or a particular theoretical extension of it, like feminist, post-structuralist,
etc.) is the proper social stance from which to read.

I sympathize with Karen. I, too, get frustrated when I consider the very real
enjoyment I felt while reading the *Twilight* series for the first time. The summer had
finally arrived after a very long school year and I craved reading literature outside of the
critical (academic) spectrum. Meyer’s first three books (*Breaking Dawn* was to be
published later that summer) had been sitting on my bookshelf all year. I purchased them
earlier during the fall semester after reading about the incredible sales figures. I blew
through those novels so quickly that the wait from May until August for the conclusion of
the series seemed torturous. I enjoyed reading them, and, yes, just like Karen and Sascha,
took pleasure in reading about the growing sexual tension between the two main
characters and wanted to know how the plot would resolve itself.

On my second and third readings, however, I became more and more
uncomfortable with the gender tropes and how those tropes related to the presentation of
a love within the books. I often found myself questioning how I could ever have enjoyed
reading a certain paragraph, or getting so excited over the plot development—which after
many re-readings, I realized was poorly constructed in the first place. Where did this
desire come from and why (or how) did I compartmentalize not only my feminist self, but
also the trained literary critic that I am when I read these books? If I enjoyed these
“uncomfortable” moments within the text the first time I read the books, underneath it all,
am I not a feminist or critical reader? Will I become an uncritical reader?
In Bronwyn Davies’ *Shards of Glass: children reading & writing beyond gendered identities*, (2003) she addresses some of these concerns by pointing out that within modernist or humanist theories, “tight boundaries around the self and its possibilities” (p.11) are drawn. There is no fluidity or context within identity theories that stem from a humanist structure. Our frustrations, then, were stemming from an idea that there is one real, stable identity of ours underneath other layers that we might identify as part of our selves. From a humanist perspective, the participants would have to deny either the feminist self or the self that felt pleasure in the book; only one could represent the true self. This neglects Davies’ assertion that many tensions arise because, “the discourses and practices through which we are constituted are also often in tension, one with another, providing the human subject with multiple layers of contradictory meanings which are inscribed in their bodies and in their conscious and unconscious minds” (p.11).

The problem is, why does it hurt or bother us so much when we acknowledge our identities’ instability? Why does it bother me to say that I enjoyed a part of a book that some might not define as “feminist”? Does it mean that really underneath it all, I am not a feminist because I enjoyed this part of this particular text, at a particular point in my life?

To think in this manner trips us into the dichotomy trap: feminist/non-feminist; high literature/low literature. These dichotomies seem to arise frequently when discussing tropes within popular literature. Gemma Moss discussed some of these very concerns in *Un/Popular Fictions* (1989). She wrote that popular media oftentimes is associated with poor behavior replicated by readers, a point that Tobin picked up on in his loathing of a media studies paradigm wherein there is a single cause or source of actions readers (p.37). Popular literature falls into the trap of being a “second rate” model from which
children learn and since, as Moss points out, pop culture is assumed to be “primarily the
culture of consumption rather than production,” we have not properly addressed the
nuances in identity negotiation that comes from reading a text popular or otherwise
(p.37). Moss summarized the perspective that dominates critical literacy, arising from the
work of F.R. Leavis and Frank Whitehead:

“Popular culture stands in this argument in opposition to good literature; the
nature of the pleasure to be gained from popular culture dulls its readers’
senses and threatens to undermine their ability to discriminate, to seek out
good literature. The two are absolutely distinct, and it is the moral duty of the
good teacher to guide the pupil to the latter, the source of greater wisdom and
true knowledge. For in this view literature is not only aesthetically of
infinitely higher quality than popular fiction, worthy of critical attention
because of the greater skill it displays, but also gets to the heart of human
experiences and, by its power to illuminate the truth, can teach readers how to
live...popular fiction, popular culture (the assumption is) do not have the same
effect...popular fiction contaminates because it deflects pupils from the quest
for self-knowledge and limits them to a narrow, repetitive and damaging view
of the world.” (p.38)

Not only are theorists differentiating between types of readers (sophisticated,
unsophisticated) and types of literature (high, low), but also we are to believe that there
are types of pleasure to be categorized in a similar good/bad vein. This only serves to
perpetuate the dichotomized idea that readers, primarily women, can only have one vs.
the other. But I argue that it is not necessarily that we are not thinking critically or are
hiding a portion of our identity when we engage with popular literature. Rather, we are
wrestling with the limitations of what counts as criticality and with the dictum that
popular literature cannot itself give rise to criticality in a reader’s response. Karen
certainly was frustrated over the “hypocrisy” of her positive reaction to Edward’s
controlling behavior and negative reaction to Jacob’s “sexually aggressive” behavior. I
would be remiss if I didn’t point out that it was through reading and discussing *Twilight* that she had occasion to consider continue her critical response outside on her own time.

*Sublime and everyday love and feminism*

In one early group discussion, Karen also was forthcoming with her own “real” life expectations with romance in contrast to the textual presentation of romance:

KAREN: This [*Twilight*] is my vampire love fantasy.

All: [Laugh]

KAREN: It’s how I describe it. I don’t know. I don’t know about you...girls...but I have this awful—HAD this awful—because I’m married now, FINALLY [shows ring], so you know

All: [Laugh]

KAREN: I was just always kinda boy crazy growing up because of my obsession with young, teenage romances.

SASCHA: [Laughs]

KAREN: --and I was like 7 and 8 years old

BRIANNA: Nice.

KAREN: And, um, real love [makes air quotes gesture] never lived up to the books or the movies, probably, hence the reason for my career choice, but, um...and, so, yeah I could definitely—I don’t know, um, I could always—I definitely always had like, weird, probably weird relationships with men that are not normal [laughs]

SASCHA: [Laughs]

KAREN: --and, I know, this is totally embarrassing,

BRIANNA: That’s okay!

SASCHA: It’s okay--
KAREN: Um, and so in a way, I could see totally being into that [Edward sneaking into Bella’s room and watching her sleep], when I was totally super into the guy in the beginning which would totally contradict any political sense of self I have, you know what I mean?

BRIANNA: Right

KAREN: But we’re, you know, I think people do that all the time. I mean, hopefully, across the board--

SASCHA: Yeah

KAREN: I mean we all contradict ourselves

SASCHA: Yeah

KAREN: Um, and then of course when I probably had the guy I’d be like, oh please get out of my room! You know! Like—

SASCHA: [Laughs]

KAREN: You are totally—

SASCHA: You’re gonna watch me while I sleep?

KAREN: Yeah! It’s so not cute. It’s annoying. Can’t I even sleep? By myself? But anyhow, that’s how I was thinking of it, reading that. I guess I was waiting for her...okay, when’s she gonna get annoyed with him? Like and bored of his constant...you know

BRIANNA: Yeah.

KAREN: ...Obsession, you know that’s not...going to last.

Again, Karen references the type of contradictions that come along with contextual notions of self as discussed by Davies. So, in fact, the women are conscious of their contradictory interpretations, it is just that they do not have a theoretical language to express such types of contradictions. When Karen notes that, “we contradict ourselves” frequently, she absolutely is locating her awareness of her fluid interpretations, but does not necessarily have access to a theory that allows her to be okay with such inconsistency.
She draws attention to her “political sense of self” that might be lost or at odds with some points in the early stages of romance. While this statement comes after her referencing her own adolescent joy of reading trashy romance novels, her thought process seems to indicate that she links her teenage joy in obsessive, unhealthy (“not normal”) type of love – which she claims led her to being “boy crazy” -- as being in opposition to her “political” self, which she positions as having arisen as a response to her disappointment that boys and men were not what the romance novels had led her to desire. In other words, rather than leading to a non-critical self, being a reader of Romance led her to a critically political consciousness. Is this an unconscious confession that her political self is a poor substitute for something she would rather have? Is she perhaps attributing to Romance novels a positive developmental role, advocating reading Romance as part of the nurturing of proto-feminists? Or is she perhaps acknowledging that no one identification is complete enough to satisfy every need, every context, or every desire?

Karen elaborated on this discussion in a journal entry:

*I think the book [Twilight] is also appealing to older readers because it’s kind of a “timeless” love story in the sense that anyone (of any age) who’s been in love, or has dreams of falling in love, can identify with the irrational passion that usually comes along with the process of falling in love. I say process because I don’t think that true love in this world, a material secular world, can sustain the sublime (or “love” as sublime) that comes as part of falling in love. At some point most people become secure enough that love (unfortunately) becomes transfused into part of your everyday being—not separate or distinct from it, like the pit in your stomach reminds you of the early stages (the falling stages).

*I think the “material”/secular world and all its distractions (work, etc.) forces you at some point to start taking “love” for granted...and, anyway, Bella never does this and I think that inability to take Edward for granted or to get over the sublime & incorporate it along with everything else into the everyday is a sort
of state a lot of women (or men) might wish they didn’t have to do. Falling in love can be agonizing but at the same time I think it’s the very feeling/state of being that we pine after once it finally fades into part of your everyday. – Karen, journal 7-8

When Karen refers to her “political sense of self” being at odds with certain aspects of romance, she may be referring to the type of love that she describes in her journal, love that is no longer sublime but is rather an “everyday” love. Karen indicates that this with this latter kind of love, something is lost, and speculates that the pleasure in the Twilight books is the fantasy that sublime love could be the permanent state of thing.

Karen’s interpretation suggests that rather than finding complete satisfaction in the idea that they have moved on to a more “everyday love”, older readers are no different than adolescents in their excitement over the sublime possibilities of new love.

At the same time, both Karen and Sascha recognize (as did the adolescent readers, as described in the previous chapter), the limits of this kind of “obsession”, how it can itself, come to feel wearisome or stifling:

SASCHA: You’re gonna watch me while I sleep?

KAREN: Yeah! It’s so not cute. It’s annoying. Can’t I even sleep? By myself? But anyhow, that’s how I was thinking of it, reading that. I guess I was waiting for her...okay, when’s she gonna get annoyed with him? Like and bored of his constant...you know...

The issue for Karen and Sascha seems to be, then, which version of love – “sublime love” or “everyday love”—is appropriate to the identification “feminist.” For Sascha, feminism and everyday love bear a striking resemblance to one another. That is, both seem to require that she sacrifice of romance and pleasure for the responsibilities, commitments and demands of everyday life.
Boldt (2009) has written that what we define as love is, at its core, identification with an idea of the beloved: whether that imagined beloved is one other person or an entire group of people. This asserts that the social practice of feminist criticality—or all forms of criticality—and falling in love are closely related practices or fulfill similar or over-lapping needs. This would suggest that the Karen and Sascha experience desires about what feminism could offer them that might now be drab and everyday in comparison with their original sublime hopes. This is unlike Brianna, who still seems quite “faithful” to the romantic promises of an exclusive relationship with a particular version of critical feminism. Sascha and Karen struggle with choosing which form of love and/or identification is the more appropriate or desired expression. Are they “bad feminists” if they set aside what they see as the everyday demands of feminism and allow themselves to acknowledge their attraction to the sublime but apparently immature fantasies of love they see in the Twilight series?

While we might have sympathy for Karen and Sascha’s desire for access to experiences of love as feminists that have not lost their access to the sublime, Brianna’s stance, which suggest that such a position is a kind of rationalization of weakness or a lack of commitment, seems to be substantiated by Karen and Sascha’s inability to make sense of the love for irrational and all-consuming desire. Are there ways to make sense of these desires that do not abandon Karen and Sascha to the category of “failed feminists”?

On one hand, both Karen and Sascha are actively invested and engaged with their identifications as successful graduate students. On the other hand, they are also engaged by their relationship to the Twilight series that falls outside of a graduate student
identification. There are rewards with each identification—a sense of community, a shared dialogue, pleasure within those communities. All three of the Adult participants might be able to struggle less with the conflicts among their various identifications if they permitted themselves less anxious or distanced or critical notions of self, a stance that seemed easier for the Adolescent Group to take.

(Not so) Young love

Since love and sexuality are such large aspects of our group and self-identity, I want to bring the Adolescent Group into comparison. I cannot compare the two participant groups based on reader identities, simply because the girls did not talk about themselves as “feminists” like the women in the Adult Group, nor did they identify themselves as theatre geeks, jocks, nerds, or other similar tropes of a high school population. In other words, group identity simply did not come into play in their discussions. I can analyze their discussions on the representation of romance they found in the series. For instance:

JULIANNE: We talked about Bella. Now let’s talk about Edward.

LENA: He concerned me a lot.

JULIANNE: Okay.

LENA: He...’cause...

MARYN: The realism of their relationship scares me a lot and how it’s a happy ending scares me a lot, because he seems so manipulative

LENA: Yeah, he concerned me because I had seen the movie first and anything I knew about Edward had to do with people saying, oh he’s so hot, you know, Robert Pattinson is great as Edward. But, yeah, he was just really controlling in the book and just because he’s physically stronger, he does whatever he wants and he really does! Bella...I mean...she...does actually want it to happen, but that isn’t always the case.
MARYN: They really shouldn’t do things...I think it’s in this book...yeah, it’s in this book where she’s worried about her dad’s safety and James is, like, stalking her or whatever he’s like, nope! We’re not going to your house. I will do whatever it takes to protect you. Uhh...

LENA: Yeah, he’ll physically restrain her or he won’t let her drive after she passed out--

MARYN: He’s very controlling--

LENA: The physical stuff.

JULIANNE: How about the whole creeping-into-her-bedroom and watching her sleep?

MARYN: It’s just creepy

LENA: Listening to her sleep talk!

ALL: [Laughs]

MARYN: It’s not an ideal quality.

LENA: No, and once I read the book and had the realization that that’s what younger girls, I guess, think what’s attractive...yeah, well, if that’s the character, I didn’t know what the movie character was based on until I read them and people like Edward, so...

MARYN: And if you see a guy standing over you and watching you sleep is that going to be an attraction or are you going to say, ‘what are you doing in my room? I’m asleep kind of thing. It’s just creepy.

What caught my attention at this point in the transcript of our discussion was the similarity of the interpretive approach between this group and the Adult Group. That is, the younger readers and the adult readers are really no different in what elements of the text they disliked, liked, questioned, etc. This is a prime example of criticality as a contextual, socialized practice.

Interestingly, Lena assumed that “younger” readers of the series find Edward’s controlling behavior attractive, which is in complete contrast to Karen’s assertion that the series is attractive to older readers because of the same reasons. Both groups are trying to
ascribe some sort of definition to the idea of love within the texts and who would be attracted to that love. Why does this matter?

One of my primary research themes was based on the concept of identity: the identity we might present to others and ourselves, and as people both receptive to and critical of what is inside a text. In this study, I wanted to look at how we take what we have read and employ or not employ it outside of a text. I wanted to look for contextual markers of some sort of recognizable, nameable reader identity, not only specific to the *Twilight* series, but a type of identity maybe inclusive of genre (young adult literature, fantasy literature, romance, etc.). What I found, however, was not that cut and dry. The only thing that I certainly could “quantify” was the struggle some participants encountered while framing their identity in context with the books. That is, most of the participants (four out of six women) might have hated a certain aspect of the books, e.g.-Edward’s controlling behavior, but they also admitted that they might find that very behavior sexy or think that others find that type of behavior attractive. The type of love that some of my participants recognized within these books paralleled types of relationships in their real, out-of-text lives (when Brianna realized her frustration in her current relationship arose from the fact that she now was dating a “Jacob” after having dated many “Edwards”).

Again, we are returning to the same scenario that many scholars—Tobin, Moss, Gauntlett, Radway—have wrestled with: if the readers like the examples of love presented in-text, do they like that same definition outside of the text, enact that definition of romance, and/or recognize it? Do our attractions (in-text or out-of-text) give others clues as to who we are?
In the excerpt (above) of our book discussion, Lena and Maryn fall into one category of reader (much like Brianna who cannot escape into what she sees as a “dangerous” world and Radway’s *Reading the Romance* participants) who use the “escape” into the text as a reassurance of what they would not find attractive outside of the text. They employ a contextual marker as to what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior in a relationship at a certain time. Maryn continued the discussion:

MARYN: I think that the, sorry, I’m going back to Edward...he seems played up too much as mysterious. It’s like, at some point, mystery can be like, sexy, or whatever, but after a certain point and you’re madly in love with this guy and you’re like “oh, I want to be a vampire with you” you should probably not be so mysterious anymore. That’s just not really healthy in a relationship.

I think Maryn echoes Karen’s assertion that *Twilight* never shows a relationship developing past the early “sublime” stages of infatuation. To paraphrase Karen, she wrote that once you have established your love and moved past the original stages of falling in love, the correct social practice of love is to move into the “secular” stage where romance survives amongst the minutia of every day. Maryn unknowingly agrees, by saying that there are no more big mysteries to be revealed about each member within the relationship because you are equals. Any other mystery or inequality is “unhealthy” otherwise.

Regan, the third participant in the Adolescent Group, declared herself to be “Team Edward” from the outset of our book group discussions and, therefore, set herself apart from the rest of her group. She gave me a breakdown, in the form of two tables, in her journal of the two types of male figures in *Twilight*.

~Edward (the Boyfriend type)~

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mature</th>
<th>Protective</th>
<th>Has good manners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Hansome (sic)</td>
<td>Respectful (to authority)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patient</td>
<td>Humble</td>
<td>Capital, social</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
-Jacob Black (the best friend)-
he is...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Romantic</th>
<th>Passionate</th>
<th>Edicate (sic)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Likeable</td>
<td>Energetic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funny</td>
<td>Playful</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitive</td>
<td>Good listener</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Regan not only identified the trope of the “boyfriend”, but she also identified the trope of the “best friend” and the qualities associated with both masculine types. In her mind, and her subsequent discussions with me and the other participants in her group, the boys within the books were clearly defined within their tropes and the implied reader should be able to not only distinguish between the two, but also understand to whom the reader is supposed to be attracted. Contextually speaking, at this point within her life Regan identifies specific traits associated with boys to whom she should be attracted and traits that signify friendship. The best friend is not “protective” but “handy”. The boyfriend is “romantic” and handsome, while the best friend is a “good listener” and “sensitive”. Note the references to attraction and physicality for the boyfriend type and the lack of such references for the best friend type.

It is tempting to ascribe Regan’s dichotomous lists to the inexperience of youth—most of us, over time, have realized that many of those qualities in both categories cross-pollinate into both friendships and relationships. However, as I have noted at the beginning of this section, the women in the Adult Group also characterized the men with whom they have dated/are dating within these two camps (the friend vs. the boyfriend). All of the participants, in the similar ways, are looking for recognizable markers of love: love interests, types of relationships, and the recognizable gender tropes that make up such relationships.
Regan ascribes the same sort of characteristics to Edward as did the adult women (at one point in her journal entry, she describes one of Edward’s downfalls is his tendency to be “melodramatic” as opposed to “moody”; “protective” as opposed to “controlling”) and she, too, picked up on the marked difference in Jacob’s character after he becomes a werewolf. She writes: “Before Jacob becomes a werewolf, he is always around and very cheerful. He does everything he can to make Bella happy. He is playful and fun...Some of his downfalls include that he is overprotective and manipulative.” (Regan, Journal, p.3) She goes on to explain, again—without comparisons to personal experience, why Edward would be her choice in real life:

Why Edward’s the Guy for Me
If I were to choose to be with either of these gentlemen, I would want it to be Edward. In my mind he is so georgous [sic] and I find many of his masculen [sic] qualities endearing. Edward seems innovative when thinking of activities to do together and he is able to make decisions which always end up being what Bella really wanted anyway. He pays close attention to what she likes and remembers things she says. Also he seems like the kind of person you could be comfortable in silence with. Edward is also someone with a lot of social capital. He wears nice clothes, he has great manners, he is educated, and he is an accomplished pianist. He is not a boy you would have to worry about being embarrassed around at social events. Not only that, but he does not flaunt his assets. He would seem like the kind of guy you could say anything to (like a secret, or fear, excitement, insecurity) and he would treat it with respect and not pass judgment. I really think that Edward would be the guy for me in this story. Plus, Vampires Rule! Regan, Journal, p. 2

What separates the group of women and girls with whom I spoke was how their personal experiences with love, or at least, their willingness to talk about their experiences with love that shaped their readings of the texts. While Regan identifies specific traits of the boys (Meyer’s types of masculinity being Jacob and Edward), she
does not compare it to her own personal experience in order to understand why one type is more attractive to her than the other.

As adults, it may be tempting to view changes in what we find sexually or romantically attractive through a trope of “maturity.” We might imagine that what might have been attractive to us as adolescent boys and girls (e.g.- Edward watching Bella sleep) is attractive to the adolescent side of Karen’s identity but not the “political”, critical media studies adult she is today. Karen’s own journal entry disputes such a view and in fact suggests an awareness that the age of the reader may have little to do with the reader’s responses to the text. While her own romance has moved into an “everyday mode,” Karen was suggesting that she had not outgrown this desire, and could relive the excitement of the sublime stage of early/young love through reading about Bella’s relationship with Edward.

In comparison, Regan has already voiced that certain aspects of the character’s behavior are not attractive (he can be “overprotective” and, at times, “manipulative”) but that does not rule out for her that the character can have other aspects or be in other contexts that she finds attractive. I write this not to say that all of the younger participants were more open to fluidity or polyvocality in their desires and the adults were always closed to it, but there were moments of analysis where the burden of monovocality did not seem to weigh upon the young women as much as it did the adult women.

Reconceptualizing Sexual Desires

Both Karen and Sascha sought to reconcile their polymorphous nature of their pleasures in the text by naming their engagements as “fantasy,” Karen called it her
“vampire love fantasy”, while Sascha said the series was her “Harlequin romance without the sex”. Following their lead, I began to search for theories of fantasy and sex, particularly related to the issues my participants raised – control and domination, desire, and rationality/irrationality. My search for theories about fantasies of domination in sex showed two types of literature. The first, which would only confirm my participants’ fears about the meanings of their “perverse pleasures”, was literature largely produced in the 1980s that described such fantasies as evidence of women’s self-hatred and oppression (scholars who look at this phenomenon include Vance, 1992, Hull, 2006, Sedgwick, 1997, Russell, 1993). The second body of literature came from psychoanalytic theory, and this material took me beyond more literal and linear analyses arising from reader response or critical discourse analysis and provided a better basis for considering fantasy, desire and pleasure from the perspective of participants negotiating their multiple identities.

I acquainted myself with several psychoanalytic texts that dealt specifically with domination, desire, sexual play and fantasy. In “The bonds of love: Rational violence and erotic domination”, Jessica Benjamin (1980), while primarily concerned with the gendered negotiations of self found within the masochistic relationship, theorizes that psychological differentiation -- the need for both autonomy and to be recognized as autonomous by others outside of ourselves -- surfaces in “other relationships of domination, especially erotic domination” (p. 145). In other words, Benjamin is arguing that we can choose or use submission and domination as sources of pleasure and meaning. Readers are capable of choosing to be dominated and need to be recognized by others that they are capable of making such a choice. This differentiation, and its
corresponding domination, surfaces in all sexual imagery in our culture (p. 144). She
takes pains to establish the types of different roles in which men and women differentiate
from their first relationship—that with their mother and primary provider, physiologically
and psychically speaking. Benjamin gives the example of Nancy Chodorow’s thesis
(1979, “Difference, Relation, and Gender in Psychoanalytic Perspective”) that “a male
child’s independence is bought at the price of saying: I am nothing like she who serves
and cares for me! I am the recognized and nurtured one, not the recognizer and nurturer”
(p. 147). A male identity, theoretically, is formed based on being the recipient within this
dynamic with the female, and associating his independence by “unlearning the
identification with the mother” (p. 147). Benjamin takes the argument further, by
bringing in Evelyn Keller’s (1978, “Gender and Science”) notion of boys’ differentiation
and development and a concomitant rationalized, scientific worldview to correspond to a
worldview wherein male rationality “emphasizes difference over sameness, boundaries
over fluidity. It conceives of polarity and opposition, rather than mutuality and
interdependence, as the vehicles of growth. That is, it does not tolerate the simultaneous
experience of contradictory impulses” (p. 148).

I think, quite possibly, that the women in the Adult Group — Karen, in particular —
struggled with accepting this fluidity. As a doctoral student ensconced in academia,
even her perspectives of feminism were structured through discourses of rationality,
distance, and discipline. She felt she should “know better” than to enjoy the pleasure she
gained from the texts, she was afraid that in succumbing to the books, she was
demonstrating a form of feminine passivity. But is that the only way to understand her
response? It is possible that Karen never left the privileging of the male rationale within
this specific statement, or perhaps that she did not have academic language that would allow her to imagine having chosen to be overtaken by this kind of enjoyment. Benjamin writes that an adherence to strict rationality can cause us to erect strict “boundaries between self and other, which are unbearably isolating” (p.150). Benjamin argues we can never fully exist without some sense of dependency on others; we want to connect to the other. From this perspective, we might imagine that Karen chooses to connect to the books and to the community of readers in part through giving herself over being overcome with the pleasures of the text, but can only manage the demands of rationality with the caveat of “I should know better”. Perhaps what she is really saying is, my awareness of “should know better” – in essence, signaling that I do know better --gives me a control of my engagement with the text. Her training, as a well-educated member of society, permits her to assume the dominant stance within the text-reader relationship.

In some sense then, Karen has never left the rational or dominant position. That is, Karen has learned a theory or style of academic feminist critique that is characterized by a kind of rationality that demands distance from, or refusing to give oneself over to being dependent upon or even pleasurably dominated by (perhaps just temporarily), or perhaps co-dominating with, something or someone else. This is disappointing considering the expectation of intellectual and social freedom that we, as scholars, attempt to achieve through theoretical practice. Whether the theory be Marxist, feminist, critical, or media studies theory, there is a depressing and rigid literalness in our belief that there can be no true pleasures in any forms of dependence, domination or subordination. It seems as if not much has changed since Walkerdine asked us to
consider how, as academic women, we are asked to put our own sense of pleasure in a position secondary to theory (1989).

What we’re really looking at here is a notion of control. Karen in fact both exhibits the pleasure of being “overtaken” yet demonstrates that she is in control of even that process. She “allows” the books to overtake her, rather than subjected to submission in the relationship. She performs a controlled release, permitting not just the books’ stories, but also the discourses of whatever upsets her (gender, sexuality, religion, etc.) take her over for a specific period of time—that of her reading—and not past that point in time. The issue here is one of breaking a taboo: Karen chooses to both accept and reject these discourses. She might gain a sense of pleasure from both enjoying what she reads, but at the same time she also gains pleasure from “knowing better” and rejecting those discourses at a later point (after her analysis).

Victor Nell psychoanalytic exploration of the pleasures of reading, describes the qualities and implications of ludic reading, or reading as a playful activity, pursued in its own right (1988, p. 1). Much of what Nell describes seems readily applicable to the women in this study. Oftentimes, the subjects in his study described reading as an active pursuit of escape—which he, in turn, found to be “synonymous with the blocking of self-awareness” (p. 43). These escaped-to fantastic worlds served as not an “extension of one’s own but a world that is nontoxicating because it is quite different”. The control readers exercised within their choices of reading material (horror, fantasy, mystery, and romance genres) oftentimes related to emotions or experiences within which they had little to no control over within the real world (outside of the text). They gained pleasure or mastered or avoided circumstances within the books that mimicked these real world
experiences. As Nell wrote, the readers often mastered an emotion by somewhat controlling the re-experience of those events/emotions through the pages of a book (p.43). His readers, were much like Karen in the excerpt above, as they tried to exercise elements of control within their transactions with the *Twilight* texts.

What Nell’s research points to is that both his readers and mine actively pursued a sense of control, whether in the form of active escape or re-enactment with the goal of mastery. While some might argue that to escape is to elude or elide one’s political responsibilities, it is equally plausible to assert that being able to imagine oneself otherwise opens up new possibilities for powerful engagements with the world. An implicit question, then, is whether the recognition of what counts as worthwhile politics or criticality is limited to acts that fall within a given range, e.g., “public”, “resistive”, “reality based”, or in some other way consistent with virtues identified as properly feminist (in this case).

Katharine-Lee H. Weille (2002) clinical practice and writing about therapeutic elements of control during sexual play, challenge this assumption. She writes about patients that use sadomasochistic sexual behavior within their relationships to *play* through often violent, saddening, and psychologically damaging parts of their past. Play—sexually speaking, in this particular case—in a sexually “contained” environment with specific rules and regulations established by the participants that allow for a “safe, contained” reworking of “toxic affects, frozen dichotomies” previously experienced. In other words, patients gain flexibility and freedom through playing with the same elements that were previously imposed upon them in threatening and destructive ways. This might be fruitfully compared to gay activists, black hip-hop musicians or feminist
artists who take great pleasure in employing terms and images that were previously used to dominate, in ways that allow them to reclaim a sense of control or power.

These contextual instances of play with clearly defined rules and relationships could relate to the relationship that readers have with their books and the transactions they experience. The question, then, becomes not “Why do these women want to enact a non-feminist discourse?” or “Why do these women gain pleasure from something that is not feminist?” but “Why shouldn’t they use these playful tactics within their reading to either reaffirm, expand, or challenge rigid formations within their own identity, including how they have developed as feminists or what it means for themselves to be feminists?”

Carole S. Vance (1992) detailed the concurrent states of emotion that women describe as defining their sexuality. She found that women commonly merge feelings of pleasure and danger, domination and agency, shame and exhibition based on active, contextualized criticality. That is, “a woman might choose one perspective or the other at different points in her life in response to external and internal events” (p. 1). Vance goes further, explaining that the historically feminist dialogue has been too one-sided in the debate over whether women’s sexuality, defined both personally and politically, is either taboo (pleasurable—acts or feelings that reach beyond what social boundaries might decide is acceptable for a woman) or the norm (dangerous—acts or feelings that might confine women to passivity and victim status, but might be viewed as more culturally acceptable) (p. 7-8).” As Vance wrote, “when pleasure occupies a smaller and smaller public space and a more guilty private space, individuals do not become empowered; they are merely cut off from the source of their own strength and energy. If women increasingly view themselves entirely as victims through the lens of the oppressor and
allow themselves to be viewed that way by others, they become enfeebled and miserable” (p.7).

In considering Vance’s argument for my participants, two issues become salient, which further demonstrates the theme of multiple enactments of subjectivity and identity in multiple contexts. One the one hand, my participants did express considerable concern and discomfort connected to pleasure that they identified, as Vance suggests, as sources of guilt, that is, their sometime pleasure in scenes that depicted Bella’s passivity and being moments of being dominated. Given that the participants gained considerable pleasure and status from their identities as feminists in graduate programs, this very “victimized” status functioned in part to empower them as feminists who knew better than to allow themselves to be submissive in their sexualized beings. They were not, however, able to reconcile themselves to the erotic charge in their response to these features of the text. What Vance’s research points out is that the ability to take enjoyment from multiple sexual stances is an expression of one part or one aspect of her informant’s diverse selves, which is itself a form of contextualized criticality. They were able to express one facet of themselves at a particular moment of circumstances. The shame of my participants also shows, however, that they think that their feminist identifications should produce a unitary stance toward sexual pleasures, or in other words, that they should develop a rationalized and one-dimensional perspective on and experience of their sexuality.

As Boldt (2009) writes in Literacy, Learning, and a Boy in Love: A Socio-Psychoanalytic Theorization of Passionate Attachment in Reading, one form of pleasure is the very act of submission to the “language, sociality, and the rules of our
communities” (p. 22). The women in the Adult Group actively engage with and submit to the pleasures of reading the *Twilight* texts because they are members of a particular reading community in which this is not only acceptable but also normative. Had they been asked to read the series within one of their graduate level classes and critique it from their perspective of an academic identification, they might have experienced a set of pleasures that would go along with raising very different points and hiding their enjoyment of the texts. That is, Karen shows us how she is both acknowledging and performing the normative identity within this study’s reading community (Boldt, p. 22) by stating that she “allows the books to take her over” but otherwise, she “knows better” than to enjoy or state such enjoyment within other communities.

The Adolescent Group, Lena in particular, tackled these thoughts and theories head-on in our discussion on *Eclipse*:

MARYN: Bella’s always like, ‘I’m not good enough for you’, and Edward [says], ‘it doesn’t make sense that you’d love me and I don’t have a soul and doomed to hell’—

LENA: [Laughs]

MARYN: “You’re too good for me”...it’s just...[shakes head]

JULIANNE: Well, why do you think everybody likes it then?

LENA & REGAN: It’s fun to read!

MARYN: It’s very entertaining.

REGAN: It’s kind of a way to get some of the drama that you wish was in your life, but you don’t really...

JULIANNE: ...You don’t really want in your life?

MARYN: Kind of when you think you want zombies to attack, but you really don’t.

LENA: I never thought of that before.
REGAN: What would I do in the zombie apocalypse?

MARYN: What would I do if I had a vampire boyfriend?

LENA: You don’t have to really support their relationship to like to read about it and find other things to like about the story. I don’t think it’s a waste of my time or anything.

Lena summarizes, in one succinct sentence, the answer to much of the adults’ fretting on identity and subjectification: not only are we not subjects to the text, but any moments of enjoyment in the text do not encapsulate the entirety of who we are or who we have the potential to be. I remember this point in our discussion with clarity: Lena shrugged very nonchalantly as she spoke—as if she were asking, is this not common knowledge to everyone—that we enjoy does not necessarily give others clues as to who we are? This statement encourages us to look at how our identity moves between and changes within every context and not to look at one part of ourselves—our intellect, our judgment, our heart, etc.—as overriding any other part of our identity. Rather, these elements can work together and they can clash; but the potential for claiming one part (our intellect, our heart, etc.) as the defining aspect only limits the potentiality of understanding the many parts of our selves.

This insight might seem very practical—that we act differently in different circumstances, that we receive the pleasures of different kinds of belonging, domination and submission in different settings. There is, however, still much current theory, particularly as the adult participants experienced expectations for membership in a feminist community, that insists all women must perform similarly within the context of feminist heterosexuality, e.g.- by rejecting anything that might be deemed as putting women within a powerless position. I am certainly not implying that there are not real
social, economic, political, and racial consequences to blindingly accepting a dominant heteronormative sexuality or masculinity or femininity; but I also refuse to presume to understand the attractions of our myriad identities that comprise our selves. To assume that one particular identity or enacted identity represents the entirety of identities capable of a person is wrong. Contradiction should be embraced, if only to study what our informants experience as the norms of their own identifications, including identifications that seem to be about the defiance of norms.

In bringing together these various psychoanalytic theorizations of fantasy, I have come to a new theory of “intrafantasy,” which I’m defining as a sexualized structure of fantasy domination and attraction within the fantasy genre of literature; one type of fantasy within another, separate definition of fantasy. This is in contrast to the literary term of “metafantasy” that denotes a fantasy story set inside another fantastical story, i.e.-an example being if we were to read an expanded story of the mice concurrently and within Cinderella’s fairy tale (Foust, 1980; Aichele, 1988).

Describing a fantasy within a fantasy perhaps has the virtue of being a structural theory from which the participants could work: this theory is one that is non-exclusive, unlike the feminist theory which seemed to trap the participants and prevented their contextualized enjoyment of the text. Admittedly, the limitations of such a theory would be related to the fact that we are, again, trying to use theory to explain or understand a part of the self (pleasure) that might be outside any such intellectual comprehension. However, if in fact there are participants who find comfort in using theory in an attempt to understand just that—the pleasure seeking self—then the concept of intrafantasy is not only appropriate, but also very useful and unlimited in its scope. The adult women
struggle to implement their theories feminism, since that is how they understand themselves and the world surrounding them, so one possible avenue to move forward is for them to employ a theory like intrafantasy that would, in a sense, allow them fluidity without any sense that they are contradicting their beliefs.

The participants in the Adult Group are active purveyors of intrafantasy: their interpretations can be fluid and, when aligned with a polyvocalistic sense of self, do not correspond to a static definition of criticality—feminist, academic, or otherwise—and make space for the participants to explore the limitations of their own identifications. This would, in essence, mean that the women are not dominated by very the discourses they took up as liberating, but are able to use these discourses flexibly and selectively as sets of tools chosen for their usefulness in creating flexible, pleasurable and personally powerful engagements in particular contexts.

Why discuss identity and why search for predictable markers of identity, both in-text and out of text? From a reader response perspective, the emphasis on context that arose within my analysis is affirmative. Reader response theorists, as I discussed in my theoretical framework and literature review, emphasize the influence that the text has on the reader and how the readers’ subjectivity shapes their experience of the text. Our fluid embodiments of identity also shape our contextual definitions of love and romance. So my original research question has shifted from looking for distinct markers of identity, to finding temporal instances of contextual identities at various points of reader analysis. The question shifts from looking for markers of clearly articulated or non-contradictory identity, to one in which we ask how the adult participants came to believe that they had to qualify their enjoyment of these texts? What has been taken away from them to the
point where they need to justify their pleasure? Perhaps they have to reject the idea that
criticality that imagines it can stand free of context enacts a form of domination.

The most important position that I took away from the analysis of many
transcripts of dialogue about identity is that our critical selves—or parts of ourselves—do
not override the other parts of ourselves any more than less-than-ideal texts override
criticality. Like a Lego block that needs to connect to other differently-shaped and multi-
colored pieces to form a coherent, single object—but can still exist as a single Lego block
on its own—so, too do these different articulations of the participants’ identities come
into play and form their subjective stances when they read the books and analyze their
own reactions to the books. Rather than look at the Adult Group of women and insist that
they allow only one aspect (one Lego block) of their identity to dominate as they read and
analyze the book, they—and we—might be happier by acknowledging that our selves are
formed by many pieces.

Each piece connects to, and helps decide, the shape of the whole self. And like
Lego pieces, each different articulation could be removed and re-order in ways that allow
the whole object (or self) to be re-imagined and reformed. Each piece, like each
articulation of our identity, is capable of serving a different purpose. As the women
wrestled with their academic selves reading taboo, pleasurable literature, they never
seemed to really account for the fact that their critical selves were not being replaced by a
dumbed-down version of themselves. Those critical selves were active but they were only
called different names.
Chapter Five

Conclusions and Implications

At the beginning of this dissertation, I asked questions like: can books be bad for people? Do the books we enjoy reading somehow define us? Do we define others by our and their choices in literature (or movies, art, or other activities)? How do the ways in which we talk about literature reinforce or change our beliefs? Do we change our beliefs when we are in different contexts? In the two chapters of analysis on subjectivity and identity, I chose specific excerpts from participants’ journals and book group discussions that showed moments of subtle iterations of subjectivity and identity by each group member. Some participants were certainly more forthcoming than others and that leads to some questions being answered, some questions being left unanswered, and a few new questions being raised from the eight weeks of book talk and journal writing.

My pilot study focused on written responses to the Twilight series. These responses were categorized according to categories of response that I located within many of the reviews (genre, characterization, type of reader, etc.). I scoured reviews from both those who loved the books and from those readers who hated the series and coded every instance of “dialogue” that fit into a particular category of analysis. By doing this, I thought I could locate specific examples about the readers of the series (for example, they all liked fantasy novels, and, therefore, they liked Twilight since they defined it as fantasy literature), or how other people viewed the readers of Twilight but also the series itself. But I also think that sometimes people hide behind the comfort of anonymity that can be offered by the internet. That is, many of the reviewers in my pilot study were so
forthright and, occasionally, angry or slightly abusive towards the series and its readers, because they could afford to be. Reviewers could choose to remain anonymous; each review I studied was written by a reviewer who used a pseudonym. No one would know who Amazon user “Chicklet” was, other than from what basic information she provided. She was, therefore, afforded a sense of comfort in writing a scathing review of *Breaking Dawn* without having to worry about retribution from readers who might disagree with her or about hurting the feelings of people toward whom she might have felt some desire for community. What would happen if I removed that protective shield, the internet, and had a discussion of the series with readers in real-time and face-to-face?

With the Adult and Adolescent discussion groups, I moved past the pilot study original question of ‘what discourses do readers use to explain their reactions to the *Twilight* series?’ and into an entirely different realm of questions that related to reader identity, the employment of subjectivity, and context. Rather naively, I went into the study thinking that people used their online anonymous reviewing as a type of shield, and that by stripping the reviewers—the participants—of that anonymity, I could find the ways in which readers modify their reviews the books and view the series in order to fit in with the group. Even though I did not use the internet “shield”, I did ask my participants to supply me with their feedback in journals. I wanted a written response from each woman that would only be seen by me. I did so out of the expectation that my participants might use the relative privacy of this writing, as a place where they could tell me what they *really* thought of the book, and of the other group member’s opinions of the text. I mistakenly thought that some people might hesitate to say how they *really* felt about the series in the group, but their journal writing would give me an A-Ha! moment
in my research, wherein the mysteries of readers’ responses would be answered. None of this, of course, actually occurred in the study.

This was not disappointing, but it was unexpected. It reveals, if nothing else, the extent to which I had continued to hold on to the idea of a false social self and a true private self. I have come to appreciate the honesty with which each participant approached this study, for, if the comparison between what they wrote in their journals and what they said in the group can be called an accurate measure of their openness, they laid their feelings bare in the group discussions and hid little from each other. The participants did not use their journals to reveal secrets kept from the group, but rather used the journals to think more deeply about the ideas that were raised in the group, which in turn informed their discussions in the next session. While it is possible that they could have hidden some negative feelings or thoughts that were contradictory to what they perceived as my agenda in the study, the earnestness of their journal entries and their discussions suggests that overall, they were open to exploring their own experiences and the experiences that others had with the texts.

So what does that imply? I believe that for most of the participants, the desire to form a respectful and somewhat coherent group of respondents, a community, overrode any desire for extreme individuality. This does not mean that they hid or lied about their real interpretations of the text, but rather that they were willing to find some middle ground in which they found enough commonalities in their experiences of the texts that they could tolerate their differences.

This desire for community caused me to shift the focus of the dissertation: that is, I realized early on that I was not necessarily looking for true private and false public
identities, that the participants came in with many identities that were in one way or another true to them: identities tied to academic communities, communities of women or girls, feminist communities, community of adulthood or adolescence; communities of love and friendship. They had the capacity, even if they were not completely conscious of it, to take bits and pieces from these identifications to find commonalities within the discussion groups; they were able to form a new community, this time a small community of women/girls who formed because of a willingness to help me by discussing together their experiences of the Twilight books. From their experiences with other communities, they hypothesized the best ways to express their identifications and subjective experiences in this community, which included ways they would (or should) interpret the series and the struggle they should show over feeling ashamed or confused by their individual responses that in some way diverged from the expectations they had for themselves, each other, and me.

In Chapter Three, Exercises in Subjectivity, I wrote about how some of the participants wrestled with how readers might react to particular aspects of the series: the gender tropes, the discourses on sexuality and assumptions about age and maturity. It was the younger members of the study who were enraged at the “betrayal” of Jacob when he forcefully kisses Bella, and the older women who, while they did not like Jacob, did not think the scene was of as much consequence as the Adolescent Group. This is a prime example of what David Buckingham (1993) theorizes in his book, Reading Audiences: Young People and the Media: we worry that everyone else is at danger, when, in reality, no one necessarily loses their subjectivity and becomes subsumed within a text. He writes, “The risk here is that subjectivity is thus represented as no more than a sum of the
social relations [within a context] and the socially available discourses in which subjects come to be, and to know, their positions (p. 41).”

In a way, Chapter Four’s *Articulations of Identity* also dealt with the topic of subjectification. The initial research question I posed, whether or not readers’ experiences of pleasure in questionable texts demonstrates the very fact that they have become damaged subjects by subjecting themselves to “bad” discourses in the text, grew into a question of whether the enjoyment of losing oneself in the discourses of a text could be deemed “bad” or “good” in some final or total way. Furthermore, I wondered whether finding enjoyment in a “bad” discourse mean you embody that discourse outside your reading of the text? While my Adult Group represented these questions with their struggles over aligning their academic and feminist identities with their reader identity (one that, in their opinion, should not fit together), taking a psychoanalytic approach to their and my concerns opens up new possibilities for reconsidering experiences of domination. Karen and Sascha seemed to enjoy subjecting themselves to “bad” discourses, because, in the end, it gave them some freedom from the overwhelming or dreary demands or domination of being good, but did so in ways that they could limit or control.

The Adolescent Group proved to be in complete contrast to the Adult Group in this sense; they shared no qualms about admitting when they enjoyed parts of the texts they would not wish to experience in real life (Bella and Edward’s relationship; Jacob forcefully kissing Bella) and they freely admitted that they were still attracted to characters like Jacob and Edward, even though they found much to be problematic in their characterization. Lena put it brilliantly, when asked to speculate on the popularity of
the series, she replied that the series was fun and a joy to read—and such pleasure taken from the text does not necessarily have any impact on her behavior, judgment, or intellect.

The roots of this struggle over the meanings of our pleasures in popular texts grow out of the assumptions of previous research on the power of media, wherein the consumer becomes a puppet of the discourses within a text (or movie, or video game, or song, etc.) produced by a dangerous – even if only stupidly dangerous and not malevolent—other. This argument, with its undertones of moral panic, is an old one and can be traced to many scholars work on children’s literature and social mores. The tradition of too much or too little didacticism in kids’ books is a prominent topic: from Heinrich Hoffman’s original parody of contemporary cautionary tales, Struwwelpeter [Slovenly Peter] (1858), that revealed horrific repercussions of children’s bad behavior to Jack Zipes’ more recent, and earnest, cautionary thesis (Sticks and Stones: The Troublesome Success of Children’s Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter, 2002) that posits that consumerist media has destroyed the ability for children to reject its bad social discourses.

Yet, I undertook a study that has results which indicate propagating these fears may have as much to do with the researchers’ fear about the meanings of polyvocal desires as it does any lack of criticality on the part of readers. Readers of all ages do not lose their criticality – even at times when they might like to be able to -- and are not unknowingly subsumed by any discourse. The possibility for individual reader response, accommodation, and/or rejection of the text always exists, and the failure to be critical in a way that another might find desirable does no more speaks to the destruction of the
critical faculty than it does to the frustration that we cannot make others think and feel as we think they should or must.

So why does pop culture—including popular literature like *Twilight*—get such a bad reputation if its “bad” discourses do not overwhelm the subjectivity of the reader? Jenkins claims that these fears grow primarily out of a political and puritanical viewpoint (2002). Pop culture is low culture accessible to the masses, not high culture known by a select few; pop culture is pleasurable and easy to understand, not strict and scholarly (p.26). Popular media does not, as Fiske argues, reinforce the intellectual stance of ironic distance and the denial of direct pleasures (2004).

Perhaps in part we insist that we can know what a bad book is, and we can know that reading it will produce bad effects in children, because we so badly want to believe that through supplying children with good texts, we can help to create a better social future. Popular media raises questions amongst those who ignore the myriad forms of thinking present in readers’ responses and interactions with one another and the text, in favor of asking, “Is there anything for the children to *learn* from these books, and if so, what are the “correct” and “unapproved” messages to learn within this literature?” While it is worrying to think of simplistic or overtly sexist, racist, or classist discourses being reproduced through popular adolescent literature, it is important to note that in their discussions, my participants were more and not less likely to discuss, analyze and argue for strong critical perspectives on exactly those points that they found objectionable.

Credaro (2006) distinguishes popular literature from “quality” literature used within curriculum as a type characterized by frequently requested books by readers (within libraries or stores) but books which are not necessarily “celebrated or approved”
from a scholarly standpoint. Specific reasons cited for not using popular books included claims that popular literature is characterized by repetitious storylines and poor character development. This leads me to assume that the main fear behind not using these desired texts rests in the assumption that these books cannot teach anything to our children: if they cannot learn to recognize proper character development, would their schooling suffer? The implication is not only must something specific be learned from literature, but there are only specific, “approved” messages or ideas to learn. Anything outside of the approved knowledge taken from a text is not considered knowledge.

For example, within the Pennsylvania and Massachusetts state educational standards reports, they state that students across grades 3 through 11 need to be able to identify or recognize literary terms (e.g.-genre (type of book), themes, characters, etc.), begin or expand their vocabulary, and grasp the “facts” or main ideas within a book being studied, with each category expanding in comprehensive knowledge gained as the students get older (Pennsylvania Board of Education 2002). Could these same standards be applied to popular literature? Is it impossible to identify themes within *Harry Potter*? Are children unable to improve their vocabulary from *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*? Perhaps more to the point, however, is the fact that such mandated considerations of texts seem inconsequential with set alongside the wide-ranging, deeply personal and profoundly political discussions of my Adolescent Group.

The influence of media—popular and otherwise—has been studied in conjunction with the negotiation period between childhood and adulthood (defined here as adolescence) by several scholars (Buckingham, 1996; Cheu, 2008; Turnbull, 1998). Several scholars research the divide between literature’s influence on the individual
reader’s identity formation and identity negotiation amongst a peer group of readers (Comber and Nixon, 2005; Keddie, 2006; DeBlase, 2003). I want to revisit Durham’s study (1999), which I mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, which locates the internalization (by adolescent viewers or readers) of what is perceived as objectionable beliefs and behaviors—i.e.-anything that falls outside a category of normativity—and how it leads to low self-esteem and even possibly harmful or destructive behavior in young women. This is the opposite of what happened in my study, in the sense that I question what values are being internalized. There were no instances of discourses overriding the readers’ beliefs—or, put more bluntly, the Twilight series and the discussion of it did not seem “bad” for anyone. The series might not have the most challenging vocabulary, nor strongest character development, and we can argue that the author uses poorly-formed plot devices, but the series provided plenty of enjoyment for its readers who were capable of placing this text alongside many other experiences of media, community and personal desire.

Is reader subjectivity still a pertinent topic of conversation amongst children’s literature scholars? I would answer this question with a most definite affirmative. There is a very active occurrence amongst adults, who from my perspective or experience in teaching and from the results of this particular study, that still wrestle with their subjectification of younger readers and adolescent literature (consciously or unconsciously). A tendency arises once scholars and peers reach a certain level of acumen: we can get complacent and some awareness of our own limitations in scholarship or teaching disappears. I spoke with, and analyzed, a group of very intelligent and capable women who, I could argue, would be horrified with any suggestion that they
subjectified a younger reading audience—especially one comprised of readers like the Adolescent Group in this study who provided nuanced, clever, and honest reactions to the texts. Such tendencies by adults, though, slip easily into our vernacular (as was the case with my Adult Group) and without, I believe, any malicious intentions. This dissertation shows that work is still to be done in the scholarly, and lay, circles that define children’s and adolescent literature.

The applications of this study to women’s and gender studies follows a similar line of thought; that is, scholars in such fields need to be aware of what, if any, limitations they place upon the theoretical reach of their epistemologies. What does it mean to be a feminist? What does it mean to live “feministly”, as Brianna termed it? Does defining yourself as feminist mean you limit what you find pleasurable?

This dissertation contains very concrete and current examples of women muddling through the answers to these questions. Ironically, feminism has a history of exclusivity rather than inclusivity (examples of such history can be found within much of Chandra Mohanty’s work on the democratization of feminist theory). This dissertation work implies that feminists, girlhood studies, and gender theorists should not only be open to various peoples’ interpretations of feminism, but also that one person’s definition of feminism might change within different contexts across time. Feminism, at least in the examples found within this dissertation, comes to occupy a dominant role that is at direct odds with the libratory goals implied by the theory and theorists. Allegorically, the challenge in furthering feminist scholarship falls not only with who gets to join-in at the feminist table, but also what conversations are included amongst those members at the table. To limit our definition of what it means to be feminist based on excluding what we
find pleasurable is just as limiting/dangerous as limiting the voices of feminism to those of a particular race, sex, age, orientation, and class.

Closing Thoughts

As a PhD candidate in a College of Education, it was hard for me to avoid the feeling that I should somehow relate my findings to an educational “implication for practice”. I resisted this because I wanted to avoid falling into the children’s-literature-as-didactic teaching tool trap. I wanted to try to understand my participant’s responses to the literature outside any sense on their part or mine of what “should” be discussed or appreciated in school. After I began analyzing the data, I realized that such separations are really not possible. My participants did not put aside their “student selves” when they came to our discussions. While this may be in part because the role of the group within my research prompted them to enact this identity, it is also because identities are not so separate that we do not carry valued or cautionary pieces from one setting to another.

If, in fact, my participants found positive values – a tentative hypothesis about how to “belong” in this new group, for example – from their knowledge as students to an out-of-school setting, might not there be elements of this study that could be positively carried in a school setting? On a very basic level, the study suggests to me that as a teacher of future teachers of children’s literature, I might advocate for a greater appreciation of the value of curiosity about students’ potential for fluid and situational, appropriate criticality. In the past, I have participated in evaluating my own students and encouraging them to evaluate one another and their future students through univocal standards that marked desired reactions, resistance, and accommodations to the text’s
discourses. How could I have forgotten about the student part of the equation, especially after being an advocate of reader-response theory?

What would happen if we teachers gave our students free choice over what literature they could choose for elementary, middle school, and high school English classes? Would chaos ensue? Would the American Library Association’s annual list of banned books explode from too many records of controversial novels pulled off of library shelves? Would parents rejoice over the sight of their child reading, with an unplugged Playstation and turned-off television gathering dust in the living room? What is so threatening about the use of popular literature in our schools that we continually recycle book choices from the classic canon but ignore the books flying off of the shelves at our local libraries and bookstores? What is so dangerous about the inclusion of popular literature? Could it be that pop culture gives rise to too many demonstrations that our buttoned down, politically-controlled selves do not overwrite other desires, fantasies, and needs? If literature is a mirror to our cultural soul, are we just too fearful of what our reflection might show us?

Students’ lack of motivation in classroom literature discussions has been a focus of previous reader ethnographies and case studies (Marsh 2003; Boldt, 2006). By implementing the usage of popular culture as part of a critical literacy curriculum, readers may sometimes “interrogate” texts in order to address embedded cultural normativities—those “traditional gendered positions” and “stereotypes”—that affect their interpretations (2003). The usage of popular media within the classroom cannot only hook students’ attention, but it also can facilitate discussions in line with a critical pedagogical position.
Rosenblatt’s theories (1994) on the two types of reading seem to be especially applicable here: she wrote that a clear demarcation between efferent and aesthetic reading affected how a reader approaches and interprets a text. Efferent reading strictly implies that the reader searches the text for a particular meaning to be taken away; that is, the reader learns something quantifiable from a book. Within aesthetic reading, the reader approaches and interprets a text solely to gain pleasure. Enjoyment is a key factor while moving through the text (Rosenblatt, 1994). It is within that vein of thought that I wish to challenge any current teaching processes that use a traditional literary canon within the English classroom: all readers are capable of initiating a dialogue about literature through their own responses to a text…why not use a text which readers enjoy reading?

At the same time, however, I must admit that readers’ responses to texts may, and do, entail pleasures and uses of pleasures that are not readily identifiable as critical within the constraints of most identity theories. As my use of psychoanalytic readings of Karen and Sascha’s responses demonstrated, to be comfortable with the use of popular materials in the classroom means that as teachers we have to consider that we cannot know the meanings of all of the experiences and expressions our students make; but insofar as we insist that all responses that do not toe the party line are failed responses, we run the risk of imposing our political commitments as its own form of domination. That is not to say that all responses are really hidden expressions of critical consciousness (or that we should never challenge a students’ response), but it does suggest that curiosity and humility rather than certainty and pre-determined judgments might characterize our conversations with our students.
Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* book series has proven to be a young adult crossover series with exceptionally high marketing value. The final tome in the series sold nearly four million copies nationwide within the first 24 hours (Memmott, 2008). Book signings and appearances by the author turned her into an idol long before teenage girls (and boys) plunked down their money to watch the *Twilight* movie released in the fall of 2008.

While academic criticism on the series only recently has begun to emerge (Arnaudin, 2008; Byron, 2008), the books themselves have fallen into the pile of popular literature ignored within a system all too happy to turn up its nose on the importance of books that are devoured by youth on a mass scale. Fans of the series dedicate their weblogs (‘blogs) to critical interpretations of the series characters and storylines; they also pack fansites with retellings or variations on the plots within *Twilight* (commonly called “fan fiction”); and they cover message boards with any questions or inconsistencies they might find within the stories.

All of these instances, including the discussions and journal writing from my participants, lead me to infer that these readers—specifically of *Twilight*, but across the popular fiction genre as well—are thinking critically about the texts’ themes, characterizations, and plotlines all the while enjoying their engagements with the texts. Marsh’s (2003) research focused heavily on the importance of fun— the *pleasurable* aspects of literature—within her proposed critical literacy curriculum. I take that argument further: my view of a more ideal classroom is one in which popular literature (e.g.- comic books, graphic novels, manga, “chick lit”, romance novels, etc.) that students enjoy reading and discussing could prove to spur discussions that are not only just as “critical” in their stance as the canon which we as teachers have used in the past and
which we continue to use to this day, but that also question the orthodoxies of what we believe we should believe. Why postpone discussions of popular literature until university-level English classes, which institute their own forms of worried orthodoxy, when we could be opening opportunities to explore polyvocal identifications, multiple pleasures, and critical thinking at a much earlier grade level?

Perhaps in the end what I am advocating most of all is that teachers and students might be able to experience the same kind of pleasure, community, intellectual discussion, emotional support, and opportunity to keep what was good and reconsider what was too narrow, as I experienced with the participants in my study. Like my participants, students are far more than the calculus of what I, or they, demonstrate that they know or what they enjoy in any one setting. Because I set aside the “teacher self” who saw it as my job to intervene or fix – also known as “to educate” through controlling the discussion of a piece of literature—I learned far more about my participants than I ever could have through trying to direct them to a particular range of responses to the books. What if one powerful way to be a good teacher of children’s literature would be to foreground an understanding of the child in studying literature with children? After all, as Jacqueline Rose points out, children’s or adolescents’ literature is not written by children or adolescents but is written about them and for them (1984).

Children’s literature does not in itself give us any insights into children or adolescents. That can only come if we are curious and open to the multiple iterations of self that can occur in response to literature, if we do not close such conversations down. Literary discussions, especially in school, should not be focused on producing a line of correct thinking, but rather, producing a sense of personal efficacy in the readers. Such a
line of thinking is at the heart of political efficacy and should expose students to a community of differences in which enough commonalities can exist to make co-existence pleasurable, or at least pleasurable enough. Instead of limiting the line of response, we should recognize that popular literature can, and does, open criticality. There are no texts with purely “bad” or “good” discourses for all readers within all contexts. Discussions of popular books should not be about the emergence of correct thinking, but about gaining a broader sense of one’s multiple selves.
References


http://warriorlibrarian.com/LIBRARY/qual_vs_pop.html


Appendix

Summaries of the books in

Stephenie Meyer’s Twilight Series

Twilight

The first novel in the series begins with Bella relocating from Arizona, where she lived with her mother, to Washington in order to live with her father. At school, she begins to notice a group of other students who all seem to be incredibly attractive, if not especially pallid. One member of this group, known as the Cullen family, is her soul mate: Edward. Despite knowing Edward is a vampire, Bella falls in-love with him and they being their relationship. Another vampire, James (who is not of the Cullen family), comes into town and finds Bella too attractive to resist and intends to kill her. A fight for Bella’s survival then ensues. At the novel’s conclusion, Bella is almost killed by James, but is rescued by Edward, who also kills James.

New Moon

The second novel in the series deviates from the Edward and Bella single love story and grows into a love triangle between Edward, Bella, and a new character, Jacob. Feeling guilt from Bella’s near death both at the hands of James in Twilight and from the hands of one of his Cullen vampire “family” members, Edward leaves Bella and the town of Forks, Washington. Bella forms a friendship with Jacob, a local boy and son of her father’s friend. Jacob falls in-love with Bella, and, although Bella does not reciprocate his feelings, she does rely on Jacob’s friendship to pull her out of her depression following her break-up with Edward. Meanwhile, James’ vampire mate Victoria seeks revenge on
Edward for killing James. She plots revenge as the Cullens and Jacob slowly become aware of her plans. A misunderstanding ensues where Edward, who has been keeping tabs on Bella the entire time he was away from Forks, believes Bella has already died. In the vein of *Romeo and Juliet*, he attempts to commit suicide once he learns Bella is dead. All is resolved, however, when Edward’s clairvoyant vampire “sister”, Alice, sees his suicidal intentions and has Bella prevent his death. Edward inadvertently exposes himself as a vampire to humans and must face a tribunal for punishment: his life is spared on the condition that Bella is turned into a vampire.

*Eclipse*

With Bella and Edward reunited, Jacob becomes morose. We also learn that he has turned into a werewolf and is part of a werewolf pack that is eternally at-odds with vampires. Victoria, now with an army of vampires behind her, comes to Forks to kill Bella and anyone else—human or non-human—who stands in the way. The werewolves and vampires team-up in order to protect Bella; they destroy Victoria and her army. At this point in the trilogy, Bella is insistent on becoming a vampire in order to live eternally with Edward. Edward refuses to subject her to, as he sees it, an immortal but sad life. After much persistence, Edward accepts Bella’s desire to become a vampire and agrees to turn her on one condition: that she marry him. As a child of divorced parents, Bella is extremely reluctant to marry. The novel ends with Bella tentatively accepting his marriage proposal.

*Breaking Dawn*

Edward and Bella marry. They consummate their marriage on their wedding night, after which Bella remarks that she is bruised and feeling beaten-up because of Edward’s
vampiric strength. Bella becomes pregnant after this first night and the baby rapidly develops in utero into a half-human, half-vampire child. The child drains her strength and nearly kills her as she gives birth to it; during labor, as she lays dying from blood loss, Edward finally—if hesitatingly—turns Bella into a vampire in order for Bella to survive the ordeal. The Cullen family comes under fire by the same tribunal of vampires that spared Edward’s life, for having turned a child into a vampire. After a confrontation and explanation that the child was conceived naturally, and not a human child that was later turned into a vampire, the Cullens are left in peace to reside for eternity in Forks, Washington.
Vita of Julianne Guillard

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