

Vampires, Werewolves, and the Racialized Other

Briley Welch

ABSTRACT

The *Twilight* series by Stephanie Meyer captured the attention of millions when the first book was released in 2005. The series has long been criticized for an array of issues, but this essay analyzes the representation of race within the books and how Meyer contributes to Othering, particularly racial Othering. The paper begins with an introduction to Othering and the different ways in which the process unfolds and then goes into an exploration of Othering in the fantasy genre, particularly in low fantasy, before shifting into the main focus of the essay of racial Othering within the *Twilight* series. This article combines previous scholarship on the topic with literary analysis to argue that Othering within the *Twilight* series contributes to racial Othering in the real world. As a solution, fantasy authors should strive for belongingness in their stories so that, in the real world, society is one step closer to achieving it.

Introduction

While Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series has dominated teen pop culture for over a decade, its representation of racial minorities as the "Other" is rarely a topic of discussion. The depiction of the racialized Other in the media, such as the *Twilight* series, is both common and controversial. "Othering" is a complicated and nuanced term that is defined and discussed by several scholars such as Jean-Francois Staszak. Staszak is a well-established researcher who discusses the impact geographical boundaries have on human perception of Others in his book, *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*. According to him, an Other refers to a "member of a dominated out-group, whose identity is considered lacking and who may be subject to discrimination by the in-group," while Othering refers to the actual process of creating the Other by transforming a difference to create an out-group, or the Other, and an in-group (Staszak 1).

There are contrasting methods used to create these differences. According to writers John Powell and Stephen Menendian, some differences used in the process of Othering are "religion, sex, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status (class), disability, sexual orientation, and skin tone" (17). The in-group, or a dominant group in a society, manipulates these differences to effectively create the Other, which then ostracizes them from the rest of the community. There are several speculated causes of Othering, but Powell and Menendian argue that the act is typically driven by anxiety and fear influenced by racism, nativism, or xenophobia (19). Staszak's opinion on the cause of Othering is closely aligned with these two scholars, asserting that Othering is not so much about the perceived difference of the Other, but more about the personal beliefs and views of the in-group who fear the Others overthrowing their domination of society (1). Thus, it is evident that there are numerous differences that cause one to become the Other and that the process is typically based on fears, anxieties, and previously held beliefs of the in-group.

While these scholars focus on Othering in real life, my focus is Othering depicted in fiction, which is caused by a lack of representation; this issue is common in fantasy books. The genre of fantasy refers to a story set in some sort of magical world and often contains fantastical elements such as dragons or vampires ("Fantasy Fiction Definition"). It is one of the most expansive and impactful categories of literature. There are many kinds of fantasy, but the genre is often divided into low and high fantasy. The primary difference between these two sub-genres is the setting, with low fantasy taking place in the real world that features a magic system and high fantasy taking place in a secondary world consisting of magical elements (Simmonds). No matter the sub-genre a fantasy novel fits into, fantasy books are extremely popular and impactful, but authors

of these books do not always do the best job representing and accurately depicting the diversity of those who enjoy their stories. A common motif found in popular fantasy series, such as the *Harry Potter* or original *Percy Jackson* series, is a lack of racial diversity, and when there is diversity, it is not done well. The characters who drive the plot in fantasy novels are typically white males, creating a major issue for millions of fantasy lovers: there is no hero in their favorite stories who looks like them.

One popular low fantasy series that falls into this lack of representation and contributes to the process of Othering is Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series. The series is made up of four lengthy novels: *Twilight*, *New Moon*, *Eclipse*, and *Breaking Dawn*. The primary setting of the novels is Forks, Washington, where 17-year-old Bella moves in with her sheriff father, Charlie. She quickly becomes acquainted with elusive and intriguing Edward Cullen, whom she later discovers is part of a family of vampires who lives in Forks. Despite attempts to stay away from one another, the two quickly enter a romantic relationship (Meyer *Twilight*). Eventually, a love triangle unfolds between Edward, Bella, and Bella's old friend, Jacob, who readers later discover is a shapeshifting werewolf, because Edward briefly leaves Forks (Meyer *New Moon*). However, Bella does eventually pick Edward, although she and Jacob remain great friends (Meyer *Eclipse*). After Bella and Edward's wedding in the final book, the two of them have a hybrid vampire-human baby before Bella herself becomes a vampire. The child, Renesmee, angers the evil group of vampires, the Volturi, because vampire children are extremely powerful and dangerous. After narrowly avoiding a battle with the Volturi, the Cullens convince the Volturi of Renesmee's innocence, and they go on to live happily in eternity together (Meyer *Breaking Dawn*). The series remains one of the most popular fantasy series of all time, selling over 100 million copies (Parker) and producing five full-length films, with the last book, *Breaking Dawn*, being split into two parts. Due to the popularity of this series, the lack of representation and acts of Othering are especially impactful and significant.

The series is considered low fantasy because the events unfold in the real world with magical elements, like vampires and werewolves, existing within the realms of our world. Since the series is set in the real world, its acts of Othering and lack of representation are more dangerous and impactful. A real-world setting makes representation more important because it is closer to our world and easier to influence Othering within it. In recent years, fantasy has had a renaissance, especially low fantasy books (Barron 31). This resurgence shows the enormous audience low fantasy draws in, especially novels like the *Twilight* series. Examining the Othering and lack of representation present within these novels is exceedingly important because a great

number of people encounter the books. Moreover, when people read something they enjoy, they are more likely to be understanding and empathetic to other people (Bal and Veltcamp 11). Due to this increased empathy and the popularity of *Twilight*, it can be assumed that the lack of representation and acts of Othering in the series are important and dangerous because the material within the story greatly impacts people. Since minority groups are rarely if ever represented in the books, people do not see them in the story and, thus, cannot empathize with them as easily. Also, since low fantasy is set in the real world, events that take place, such as acts of Othering, are far more likely to happen in our world. This Othering also promotes the ideal that white people should have the spotlight in the real world because that is all that is reflected in these books, which may be difficult for readers to distinguish. Therefore, it is incredibly important to analyze the *Twilight* series as a representation of the fantasy genre because its negative aspects are extremely potent. This series exemplifies the lack of racial diversity and representation that exists within the fantasy genre, which continues the idea of the racial Other that exists in real life.

Othering in General Fantasy

When examining Othering in *Twilight*, it is first important to understand Othering and representation in the fantasy genre. Many scholars have expressed disdain at the lack of representation in fantasy literature. For example, in her book *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness*, author Helen Young explains that, because fantasy is so often rooted in Medieval English culture and history, it “has a reputation for being a Eurocentric genre, that is, one which is by, for, and about White people” (1). She also argues that fantasy actually has room to be an extremely representative genre, because it defies logic by including creatures like vampires and dragons, so there is no reason that fantasy cannot represent the expansive diversity of its readers (2). Similarly, in his master’s thesis, John Henry Rumsby argues that fantasy has great opportunity to bring magical worlds to life with diverse representation but instead creates white and Eurocentric worlds that:

are at best unintentionally racist, at others, reminiscent of the most vile works of white supremacy propaganda. Though there are many exceptions to the rule, a large majority of Fantasy works are reductive in their representations of ‘the other,’ treating non-WASP ethnicities as subhuman, and progressive ideologies as inherently dangerous. (2)

Thus, despite characters like elves, dragons, Orcs, and other mystical beings, fantasy as a genre often falls flat in terms of representing minority groups.

Not only does the fantasy genre have a lack of representation, but it also

contributes to the act of Othering that is mirrored in real life. One way this Othering happens is by depicting negative racial stereotypes. Young argues that fantasy “habitually constructs the Self through Whiteness and Otherness through an array of racist stereotypes with Blackness” (11). This act of Othering through racial stereotypes could be done in a variety of ways; one notable example Young gives comes from arguably one of the most popular fantasy series: *Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien. Young argues that the Orcs in Tolkien’s medieval European-esque Middle Earth harbor negative racial stereotypes, as they are described as dark-skinned, slant-eyed, and “inherently evil” (96). This portrayal of dark-skinned evil figures depicts racial minorities as evil and opposed to the white main characters, effectively making them the Other. In addition, Rumsby argues that many non-human creatures in fantasy are based on negative racial and ethnic stereotypes. He says that white characters are often put into situations where they must fight the oppression of these “evil” characters and creatures, or the racialized Other, and these situations “mirror those of real-world discriminated minorities” (22). These situations make the white characters the heroes and these Other characters evil based upon racial and ethnic stereotypes because they are dangerous to not only the hero, but the betterment of the world as well. While these examples of negative racial representation and racial Othering are numerous and potent within the overall genre of fantasy, they are extremely evident in the *Twilight* series, which can give readers a sense of what is happening both in broader fantasy and the real world.

Othering in *Twilight*

Due to a lack of positive representation in the *Twilight* series, the act of Othering is extremely potent in its pages; one of the most glaring acts of Othering is the depiction of the vampires themselves. When Bella first sees the vampires, she is instantly blown away by their pale beauty. First, Bella notices that, despite looking different, all the vampires are extremely pale, almost albino, and describes them as “the palest of all the students living in this sunless town” (Meyer *Twilight* 18). However, Bella denotes that the reason she cannot look away from the vampires is because of their exquisite beauty. She thinks, “I stared because their faces, so different, so similar, were all devastatingly, inhumanly beautiful. They were faces you never expected to see except perhaps on the airbrushed pages of a fashion magazine. Or painted by an old master as the face of an angel” (Meyer *Twilight* 19). With this introduction to the vampires, Bella and readers automatically associate the pale and white Cullens with beauty and angels, which are often symbols of perfection and purity. The depiction of the vampires as perfect and pure contributes to Othering because it paints the pale and white vampires as perfect, or the in-group or self. In addition to this introduction, there are several times where Bella

describes Edward's perfection and beauty in direct conversation with his whiteness. For example, when thinking about Edward, Bella says: "the inhuman beauty, the pale, frigid skin" and another time describes Edward's "pale, glorious face" (Meyer *Twilight* 137, 193). With both instances, Bella marvels at Edward's beauty which is inherently tied to his paleness and whiteness. Thus, the depiction of the vampires' beauty tied to their whiteness contributes to Othering because the vampires' pale skin is at least in part, what makes them so undeniably beautiful.

However, even the indisputably beautiful pale vampires are presented as more dangerous and less perfect when associated with the color black. In the series, the vampires' eyes change depending on their diet, and the Cullens, who only consume animal blood, have golden eyes, while vampires who drink human blood have red eyes. When a vampire is hungry, however, their eyes turn to black as an indication that they thirst for human blood, making them a greater threat (Meyer *Twilight*). In the book *Bitten by Twilight: Youth Culture, Media, & the Vampire Franchise*, author Natalie Wilson argues that "even the heroic Cullens are presented as more dangerous when their eyes turn black, suggesting that those who are 'white and delightful' are also 'susceptible to evil'" (56). This association of evilness with the color black, as described by Wilson, is seen many times throughout the *Twilight* series. For example, when Edward's eyes are black, he is more dangerous to Bella, but when his eyes are a lighter color, he is less dangerous (Meyer *Twilight* 126). Because of this, the *Twilight* series contributes to Othering as Meyer paints the pure and perfect white vampires as susceptible to evil by the color black, which may symbolize race and skin color since there is such a heavy emphasis on the pale perfection of the vampires.

While most vampires in the series are associated with whiteness and purity, there are a few examples of vampires who are not strictly "white," and they are either evil or no longer associated with perfection. For example, in the last book, *Breaking Dawn*, many of the Cullens' vampire friends from all over the world gather to defend Renesmee from the Volturi. One group of vampires that come to the aid of the Cullens are the Amazonians, two women who Bella describes as being "wild in every way" and that she had "never met any vampire less civilized" (Meyer 612, 613). With this example, Bella clearly depicts these vampires as the Other, viewing them as savage and less like the civilized, white, perfect Cullens. In addition, Laurent, a vampire who is white in the book series, was cast as a black man in the movies, but director Catherine Hardwicke claims she had a tough time getting Meyer to agree to this casting. About the vampires, Meyer allegedly said, "I wrote that they had this pale glistening skin," so they had to be white in the films. Eventually, she did agree to let Kenyan American actor Edi Gathegi play Laurent, who,

coincidentally, is evil and attacks Bella in the second book *New Moon* (Zimmerman). While this casting decision does provide representation for some fans, it is problematic and rooted in Othering because Meyer only sees her perfect vampires as white and pale, making anyone who is not white and pale the outsider and thus, the Other. These representations go back to the idea of people with dark skin being evil or the perpetrator against white people commonly found in the fantasy genre.

In addition to vampires, the description of the Quileute tribe members, who are shape shifting werewolves, furthers the idea of the racialized Other. Unlike the vampires, the Quileutes are based on a real Native American tribe; when Bella first encounters members of the tribe, she describes them as having “straight black hair and copper skin” and gives them the moniker of “newcomers” (Meyer *Twilight* 117). This description and name given to the tribe members is incredibly important because, in this scene, Bella’s friends wonder why she invited the “newcomers” or outsiders to the beach, which immediately paints the Quileutes as the out-group and Others upon readers’ first introduction to them. This scene also establishes the werewolves as having dark skin and features, which is in stark contrast to the paleness and golden eyes of the vampires. In addition, as the books continue, Bella describes the Quileutes as very similar to one another, saying they are “all tall and russet-skinned” and having “strikingly similar hostility in every pair of eyes” (Meyer *New Moon* 263, 323). Throughout the books, the appearance of the Quileutes is reduced to being extremely similar or entirely the same, as demonstrated in these two examples. Furthermore, Wilson notes that the werewolves are constantly referred to as “the wolf pack,” while the vampires are usually referred to on an individual basis, furthering the idea that werewolves are all one and the same (62). This idea of all people of one race appearing similar is problematic and contributes to Othering because it reduces people of the same race, who may have little else in common, to being the same and, thus, automatically the outsiders because they are not like the self or in-group.

Continuing, while the white and perfect Cullens are portrayed as civilized, with Edward even being able to date a human girl and control his blood thirst around her, the werewolf Quileutes are portrayed as savage and vicious, furthering the idea of the racialized Other. In *Eclipse*, Edward describes the wolves as “mutant canines” while Bella describes them as “big idiot wolf boys” (Meyer 31, 231). Throughout the books, the tribe members are characterized more as near-human intelligent animals rather than humans, with Bella noting that, after Jacob becomes a werewolf/shape shifter, he could eat an entire cow (Meyer *Eclipse* 243). Additionally, as the series wraps up, Aro, the leader of the Volturi, notes that the werewolves would be great guard dogs (Meyer *Breaking Dawn*

700). As Wilson argues, these references and descriptions reduce the Quileute tribe members to animals with near-human intelligence, who have more value as wolves than as humans (62). Thus, the Quileute tribe members are Othered by being portrayed as less than human, furthering the idea that they are the outsiders and do not belong in the dominant group because they are not civilized or intelligent enough, traits that are tied very closely with the color of their skin.

Conclusion

Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series makes it evident that the fantasy genre of literature sometimes lacks greatly in representation and racial diversity, which perpetuates the idea of the racialized Other that exists in the real world. By painting the vampires as white and perfect and the Native American werewolves as less than human and savage, Meyer continues negative stereotypes pertaining to Native Americans and paints them as the Other. When the vampires are associated with the color black, like their eyes changing because they are hungry, Meyer shows them as dangerous and violent. However, when their eyes are the light, golden color, they are safe and civilized. Also, on the rare occasion when vampires are anything but white, like Laurent in the films and the Amazonian vampires, they are either depicted as evil or animalistic and savage, which further contributes to Othering by depicting minorities as scary outsiders.

By failing to depict minorities in a positive light and showing them as savage and dangerous, Meyer contributes to Othering because she paints minorities as outsiders and harbors a them-versus-us attitude. In the series, the white and beautiful vampires are the self, while the savage werewolves and evil, dark vampires are the Other. This attitude is furthered by the conflicts between the self and Other, with the self always coming out on top. Meyer's acts of Othering most closely align with Powell and Menéndez's explanation of Othering happening because of anxiety and fear fueled by racism (19). These acts of Othering are a gross misuse and disrespect to fantasy's wonderful ability to recontextualize and change how people think about the world and people unlike themselves.

For centuries, fantasy has remained one of the most popular literary genres and, regardless of if a book fits low or high fantasy categorization, it often misses out on opportunities to change the way people think and not only help people see minorities as equal, but as heroes. Rumsby argues that the racist and insensitive history of the fantasy genre is a tool to help readers rethink these literary worlds where the impossible becomes possible (175). Because fantasy can have characters ride dragons, fight with magic, and turn into vampires, it also has the ability to paint minority characters, specifically characters of color, in a positive and heroic light, which is something the genre commonly

fails to do, often because of “historical accuracy” since many stories are inspired by medieval Europe (Rumsby 28). However, if fantasy books can host an epic eight-hundred-page story inspired by medieval Europe that features elves and dragons, there is no real reason that they cannot contain positive depictions of minorities except for racism which contributes to Othering. Low fantasy, like the *Twilight* series, has a fantastic opportunity to use its boundary-pushing depictions of the real world to positively and accurately portray minority characters, specifically characters of color. Because low fantasy is set in the real world and is closest to our world, it is important to look at stories within this subgenre because of its popularity and impact on people, as well as because the Othering that happens in these stories is all the more dangerous as it could more easily transfer to the real world.

A great way to combat the Othering found in low fantasy books is to contribute to and strive for the idea of belongingness instead. According to Powell and Menendian, inclusion in society is one of the foundational human concerns and belongingness goes beyond tolerating and understanding differences and is about “ensuring that all people are welcome and feel they belong in the society” (33). This idea is coined “the circle of human concern” by these two researchers, and that is where negative representations and stereotypes of the racialized Other must be challenged. One way to ensure belongingness is to give “voice” to minority groups, which gives them expression and focuses on their group needs. In the end, these two scholars support the creation of “inclusive narratives, identities, and structures” (33-34).

One major way to implement this strategy is to provide inclusion in popular literary genres, such as low fantasy. By including representation of minorities in fantasy literature, particularly low fantasy, society becomes one step closer to belongingness. As Bal and Veltkamp argue, what we read is important, because it impacts us heavily and increases empathy for people unlike ourselves (11). Because readers see positive attitudes and heroic depictions of minority characters, this empathetic understanding can transfer into real life as well. Instead of creating fear and anxiety of the Other by depicting them as savage and outsiders, positively depicting and representing them can improve attitudes surrounding minority groups. With belongingness in fictional magical versions of our world, we become one step closer to achieving belongingness without swords and dragons.

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