On Young Women's Enjoyment of Silly Novels

A Study of the 'Reading Girl' in
Northanger Abbey and *Twilight*

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Abstract

This thesis looks at representations of girls who read in literature, the literary figure I have chosen to call the ‘reading girl’, as well as the attitudes and reservations about these ‘reading girls’ within society. I explore the history of the English novel as a ‘woman’s form’ during the 18th and 19th centuries, and the young adult genre of the 21st century, focusing mainly on two texts: *Northanger Abbey* by Jane Austen and *Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer. I particularly reflect on the social anxieties surrounding the idea of a female mode of reading, which encompasses engrossed, unapologetic literary consumption, historically referred to as ‘inappropriate reading’. I argue that novels that embrace a young female readership, exemplified by *Northanger Abbey* and *Twilight*, have sustained extensive social criticism which discourages female literary enjoyment of such novels. Despite this, the trope of the reading girl is also utilized by women writers as a literary device to encourage engrossed female reading. As such, I am writing this thesis to analyze how the reading girl has a dual function; she is both a figure of celebration and ridicule. However, though female communities revel in the trope of the reading girl, a misogynistic society will continue to ostracize female passion and literary enjoyment.

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Introduction

As a young girl, I used to be an avid reader of novels. I would spend most of my free time, both at school and at home, reading. I would frequent my elementary school's small library and the librarians in my home town library recognized me well. A defining moment in my career as a 'reading girl' was a parent-teacher conference in the fifth grade where my teacher blatantly told my mother and me that I needed to read less. At the time, and still today, this statement shocked me, and being an obsequious child, too afraid to disobey and eager to please, I listened. My teacher's words stuck with me, and for many years of my adolescence I became completely discouraged from reading.

The literary figure that I refer to as 'the reading girl', can be found in all genres of literature, but it is perhaps most prevalent in fiction written by women. Within this thesis I attempt to define what encompasses the trope of the reading girl and how she emphasizes societal anxieties surrounding what can historically be seen as 'female mode' of reading. When referring to a female mode of reading, I am aiming at the archetype of the enthusiastically engaged woman reader. Usually it encapsulates reading novels – as opposed to other types of literature – written by women writers. The female mode of reading includes – but is not excusive to – the gothic novel, the romance genre, the paranormal romance, young adult literature, and a plethora of other specific genres of fiction. Furthermore, reading for enjoyment and pleasure, as opposed to for information, is also something that seems particularly female. Women have often been considered readers of the trivial, or "common readers", who are usually "worse educated" (Woolf 11). Historically, the belief that women were more disposed to 'inappropriate reading' was widespread, and resulted in particularly masculine anxieties concerning female naiveté, women's affectability, and misidentification with characters. Comprehensively, the way in which women read was, and still is, considered 'bad reading' by many individually but also systemically by the patriarchal society as a whole.

The idea for this thesis was initially ignited by 21st century literature aimed for and specifically read by teenage girls. It started as a fascination with the antipathy that surrounded media that became wildly popular among a young female demographic. It was first after delving into Romantic and gothic literature of the 18th century and the history of English female writers that I became curiously aware of the similarities in reception. The first chapter of this thesis will evidence the fact that female-centered literature has always been disproportionally condemned by society. The phenomenon is a deep-rooted issue that has

merely shifted and evolved throughout the centuries as a gender biased appreciation or condemnation of literature still prevails. Books and genres of literature written by or aimed at women often face more criticism than male-centered literature. As evidenced by the second chapter of the thesis, the genres of literature associated with women have since shifted and become more particular: instead of simply novels being considered a 'woman's form', we have instead romance novels, 'chick-lit', or paranormal romances. This thesis stresses the idea that there exists a gender biased disapprobation of everything and anything that young women enjoy. I particularly explore one of these pleasures, namely novel reading, but there are countless other aspects of culture, like music, hobbies, even career choices, that are unfairly judged if associated with womanhood.

My excitement for reading that was dwindling in my youth as a result of adult interference and discouragement came back in full force when I, one summer as a pre-teen read a novel called *Twilight* by the debut author Stephenie Meyer. The year was 2008 and there was already quite a lot of buzz and excitement around the novel which had a film adaptation due to premiere later that same year. Although there was something mesmerizing and addicting about the novel and its sequels – which I devoured in record time – I nonetheless felt a certain shame in my excitement and enjoyment of the series. In hindsight, this shame was undoubtedly a result of my social upbringing and previous attitudes I had encountered about girls showing too much enjoyment in reading. Additionally, there was the growing and garish negative critique and public opinion of the *Twilight* series, which was becoming unavoidable within youth spaces. The internet in particular was becoming an echo chamber, claiming that practically anything was "still a better love story than Twilight".

My reason for revisiting the *Twilight* series now as an adult and from an academic point of view is partly because there is a recent resurgence in popularity of the *Twilight* books and the five films adaptations. There are multiple reasons for what the media and the online fan community has named the "*Twilight* Renaissance" that is occurring now over a decade after the initial heyday of its success; Meyer's 2020 release of the long-awaited companion novel to *Twilight, Midnight Sun*, which offers the reader Edward Cullen's perspective, was undoubtedly one of the factors that set off a new interest in the original books and the whole franchise itself; Netflix releasing the complete collection of films on its streaming platform in 2021 is certainly another pivotal reason. Arguably, social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok have also been instrumental in the rising popularity of the franchise lately, rallying an allegiance of young people either discovering or rediscovering their interest in the popular series, its characters, and actors. The so-called "Twilight Renaissance" has

initiated conversations about previously held objections towards the books and the widespread mockery and contempt it endured. People are investigating their own critiques and supposed animosity, questioning why they at one point carried so much disdain for the novels and the films.

Speaking from personal experience, and drawing on the accounts of both friends and strangers online, many who were fans as preteens later went through a phase of harsh criticism and disparagement towards the series. The backlash against *Twilight*, particularly online, was especially severe around 2008-2013 (Crawford 191), heightened by the blockbuster release of the high-budgeted sequels of *Twilight* (2008). The films gained such mainstream success with the help of widespread media coverage, that the *Twilight* franchise became a household name, and people who were far away from the intended demographic had knowledge of the series. Despite the mainstream success, it has been consistently ridiculed for its lack of literary value. Critics across all channels have argued and debated about everything from the literary quality of the text, to whether or not it is anti-feminist, the consequences of its influence, or even if it is a good depiction of vampirism and the paranormal. Mostly though, the debates have been less about the innate literary quality of the book, and more about its intended and actual readership – namely the young female reader. The general consensus in the 2010s seemed to be that the engaged reader of *Twilight* – the enthusiastic teen girl – was to blame for its controversy and the contempt that the franchise garnered: "What I suspect most of us hate about *Twilight* isn't the book itself, but the legion of rabid, terrifying fangirls" (Khanh). Like this reviewer on Goodreads expresses, it is not the quality or readability of the book itself that is condemned, it is its readers and their commitment that is deemed inappropriate or disconcerting.

The need to monitor what, how and to what extent girls are reading is both universal and perpetual. The concern about young women's affectability seems to be a common preoccupation in societal and literary critique of the types of literature girls enjoy. In their pioneering work of feminist literary critique, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar plainly point out that the "novel is a status-deprived genre … because it is closely associated with a status-deprived gender (131). They especially point out that this is what Jane Austen is trying to express in a particular part of her novel *Northanger Abbey*, in which she extensively defends the novel as a genre, as well as women's rights to both read and write novels. Gilbert and Gubar also argue that just as her characters, "Austen herself was clearly one of those

young women whose imagination had, in fact, been inalterably affected by all the escapist literature provided them, then as now" (115).

The question that has become monumental for me in my research for this thesis and in my consideration of literary critique in general is: Why is there such stigma surrounding literature that is loved or embraced by young women? There is obviously a historical and recurring link between gender and status-deprived genres of literature. That is why I have chosen to look at the inception of the English novel in the 18th century, and its inherent link to women as both readers and writers. Austen herself was adamant about highlighting this gendered discrepancy between "good" or "bad" modes of reading, which is why I have chosen to analyze her novel *Northanger Abbey* in the first chapter of the thesis. At first glance *Northanger Abbey* and *Twilight* might seem like vastly dissimilar novels beyond comparison; obviously they were written centuries apart, their authors have very different literary reputations, legacies and social statuses, and their writing styles and plots greatly diverge. Nevertheless, when it comes to the trope of the reading girl, the discrepancy between the narratives and characterizations of the two novels is not as severe as one might initially imagine. As the two protagonists share a passion for reading, and are judged for their enthusiasm and female mode of reading, the novels are both narratives about reading.

Dorothee Birke argues that novels with narratives of reading are instrumental to the understanding of reading as a cultural phenomenon, specifically novels that feature what she calls "obsessive reading" are important in "defining the cultural value of reading" (Birke 3, 4). Social and historical attitudes towards reading as a cultural practice can be studied within the narratives of novels themselves, and *Northanger Abbey* and *Twilight* are both salient examples of this. As *Northanger Abbey* was published when the novel as a genre was relatively young, and heavily features reading as a cultural practice, it reflects the contemporary opinions and values placed upon novels, the act of reading, and the readers themselves. When it comes to the unwarranted gender-biased value of reading, *Twilight* becomes more interesting and relevant when we consider the particularly intense reception of the novel, which in return says a lot about 21st century attitudes towards girls reading. The academic scholarship about the importance of Catherine Morland being a reader in *Northanger Abbey*, and what the treatment of her character says about gendered reading and writing is a topic that is quite well covered within the field. Equally, I want to highlight the fact that not much emphasis has been placed on Bella Swan being a reader in academic discourse about *Twilight*. I examine the importance of her being a 'reading girl' and what that might do to encourage young women to read, or be less shameful of their reading. Although

the thematic link to reading might not be as obvious in *Twilight* as it is in *Northanger Abbey*, the theme and trope of reading is, in fact, intertwined throughout the whole narrative.

Although the thesis is not defined by one particular theoretical framework, but instead combines several approaches including reception theory, feminist criticism, concepts of the gothic, and theories of children's and young adult literature; the most important one is arguably reader-response criticism and theories of the implied reader. As this thesis is concerned with the reader as a trope and the act of reading, it is only natural to consider a theoretical explanation of what a reader actually is, and what defines reading as an act. On the politics of reading, Andrew Bennett comments that "reading as an isolated, silent activity can be put into historical context, and decisions about what to read, where to read, when to read, and how to read can be understood to be determined by social, religious or political restraints and codes" (Bennett 5). Reading then is a socially determined act that is unique to each individual reader, but also something that defines and congregates groups of people – for example young women.

One of the leading theorists within reader-response theory, Wolfgang Iser, uses his theories to highlight the effects that literature has on its readers. According to Iser, reading is an interactive phenomenon happening between the reader and the text itself, and therefore the only way to properly study a text is to also study its reader. In this literary study of *Northanger Abbey* and *Twilight*, his term 'implied reader' is instrumental to the understanding of the 'reading girl' figure and of the correlation between the protagonists of the text, the authors and the readers. Iser states that the implied reader "incorporates both the prestructuring of the potential meaning by the text, and the reader's actualization of this potential through the reading process" (*The Implied Reader*, xii). Meaning is therefore produced by an interaction between the text and the reader. The relationship between the writer of a text and the reader is also important to the literary understanding of a text. In *S/Z,* Roland Barthes argues that the reader alongside the author is a producer of the text, as opposed to simply a consumer. Accordingly, the ideal text should blur the distinction between the writer and the reader. Lastly, this thesis also draws on Sara K. Day's theories of 'Narrative Intimacy', which she defines as the "construction of the narrator-narratee relationship as a reflection or model of intimate interpersonal relationships, established through the disclosure of information and the experience of the story as a space that the narrator shares with the reader" (68). In both *Twilight* and *Northanger Abbey*, the narrative intimacy between the protagonists and the readers is heightened by the actualization of the 'reading girl' trope and the literary references and intertextuality of the texts.

1. The Eighteenth-Century Reading Girl

"Have you ever read Udolpho, Mr. Thorpe?"
"Udolpho! Oh lord! not I; I never read novels; I have something else to do."
(*Northanger Abbey*, 31)

"Have you been abroad then?" said Henry, a little surprised.
"Oh! no, I only mean what I have read about. It always puts me in mind of the country that Emily and her father travelled through, in the 'Mysteries of Udolpho.' But you never read novels, I dare say?"
"Why not?"
"Because they are not clever enough for you – gentlemen read better books."
(*Northanger Abbey*, 72)

Although Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* was famously published posthumously, biographers generally agree that preceding versions of the novel were started as early as 1798, and it is believed to be her earliest completed novel, as a full manuscript was sent to a publisher in 1803. The novel held the names of *Susan*, and later *Catherine*, then ultimately it was published as *Northanger Abbey* by her brother Henry Austen in December 1817, a few months after her passing. The novel is generally known for being Austen's attempt at a gothic satire, but its most compelling and extraordinary aspect is definitely the unapologetic and passionate defense of the novel as a genre and of women as its writers and readers. In the introduction to the Norton Critical Edition of the novel, Susan Fraiman argues that "*Northanger Abbey* just happens to contain one of the boldest, most self-confident artistic manifestoes in the history of literature" (Fraiman vii). In many ways, *Northanger Abbey* can be considered a novel in favor of the novel. Austen chooses to spend extensive paragraphs of the narration criticizing the male-dominated field of literature and the condescension the women within it experienced. It is also a call for other women writers to leave self-deprecation behind and to also stand up for other female novelists: "Let us not desert one another; we are an injured body. Although our productions have afforded more extensive and unaffected pleasure than those of any other literary corporation in the world, no species of composition has been so much decried" (Austen 22). She is unapologetic in her justification of the novel, both when it comes to reading it or writing it. The defense of the novel and novelists is fundamentally a defense of women, which is, in part, what this thesis will attempt to enact.

The Emergence of the English Novel

From its conception, the novel as a genre has always been closely associated with womanhood. It is generally acknowledged that the English novel came into being sometime during the reign of George I and George II in the 18th century. The genre is believed to have emerged within the rising middle class, to satisfy a need for 'formal realism' as opposed to the Romantic poetry that dominated the literary field at the time. The novel found particular popularity among a specific class of women, "especially bourgeois women who, above all, had the leisure to read novels" (Speck 100-101). Additionally, many of the early novels featured or centered around fictional women – for example Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, and Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* and *Clarissa* – which undoubtedly contributed to their popularity among women. As more and more women found enjoyment in novels during their rise in popularity, discouragement and policing quickly ensued. Subsequently, women and girls were advised to abstain from consuming novels, either due to their conceivable or alleged effects on impressionable girls, or simply just as a way for men to unassumingly control the influences on women. These discouragements and beliefs can be observed, among other places, in this 1784 poem by Robert Burns:

> O leave novels, ye Mauchline belles,
> Ye're safer at your spinning-wheel;
> Such witching books are baited hooks
> For rakish rooks, like Rob Mossgiel. (Burns, lines 1-4)

When the first wave of the rise of the novel – dominated by authors like Richardson, Fielding, and Defoe – seemingly came to an end, the genre was practically commandeered by women writers. According to Stuart Curran, at the end of the 18th century women accounted for over half of the novels written, and "the novel c[a]me to be identified as a woman's form" (Curran 182). However, Curran notes that this succeeding generation of novels written by female writers was for a very long time overlooked by literary historians and even excluded from many standard modern college curricula about eighteenth-century English literature.

The emergence of the novel as a 'woman's form' did have multiple social implications. Discernibly, it spoke to women's aptitude and intelligence, and their ability to seize and occupy a literary space not initially intended for them, perhaps even improving the genre without truly being acknowledged and recognized for doing so. On the other hand, Curran also highlights a more negative effect that came with the development – mainly that it accentuated the even more historically rigid and elitist power that genres like poetry held, which "had been sealed off as a male, upper-class fiefdom, requiring for its license not simply

birth and breeding, but a common education and exclusive standards of shared taste" (Curran 182). For the most part, it was another exclusive club that women were not particularly welcome in, at least not without a level of skepticism and a cold shoulder.

During the eighteenth century, the novel was often compared and contrasted with the more esteemed genre of the Romances. The novel was generally looked at as a lower form of literature, and often accused of corrupting people and society. Romances, on the other hand, were virtuous and pure. In his essay "On Novel Reading" from 1779, Vicesimus Knox reflects the contemporary dichotomy between the two genres:

> If it be true, that the present age is more corrupt than the preceding, the great multiplication of Novels has probably contributed to its degeneracy. Fifty years ago there was scarcely a Novel in the kingdom. Romances, indeed, abounded; but they, it is supposed, were rather favourable to virtue. Their pictures of human nature were not exact, but they were flattering resemblances. By exhibiting patterns of perfection, they stimulated emulation to aim at it. They led the fancy through a beautiful wilderness of delights: and they filled the heart with pure, manly, bold, and liberal sentiments. (Knox 185)

It is obvious with Knox's descriptions of the Romances as "manly" and "bold" that the genre carried more masculine connotations, whereas the novel was implied to be feminine. Lennard J. Davis argues that there was a "profound rapture" and "a discursive chasm" between the two genres, emphasizing the point that "[t]he romance is not usefully seen as a forebear of, a relative of, or an influence on the novel" (Davis 25). The novel was also habitually degraded and not seriously considered by prominent figures of the Romantic Period. William Wordsworth was vocal about his skepticism and aversion to the genre, believing that the "frantic novels" were not comparable to the Romantic and epic poetry that he himself and his colleagues produced (Wordsworth 307). Fraiman points out that by "frantic novels", Wordsworth was undoubtedly referring to gothic novels (219n2). Furthermore, authors like Samuel Coleridge shared his disdain towards novel reading. In *Biographia Literaria* he spent time criticizing the popular circulating libraries, which made novel reading a more accessible pastime, referring to it as "a sort of beggarly day-dreaming, during which the mind of the dreamer furnishes for itself nothing but laziness" (Coleridge 48). Essentially, these writers and critics wanted to emphasize the fact that the novel had nothing in common with the Romance; they evidently believed the two genres were on widely different planes, and therefore should be treated as such.

The circulating libraries that Coleridge criticized were in fact one of the contributing factors to the popularity of novel reading among women. At the time, innovations like these circulating libraries could be considered "a means for the intellectual liberation of women of small means" (Erickson 577) or simply a possibility for women, especially those who were not rich, to have easy access to literature. The genre of literature that was most often associated with these libraries was the novel, as they were considered "disposable pleasures to be read once and forgotten" (Erickson 578). Reading was not a social activity that was considered widely acceptable for women but rather something that "represent[ed] a withdrawal from a woman's proper social concerns" (584). As the accessibility of novels made the genre more popular with women, it consequently associated novels with the status-deprived gender. Furthermore, these libraries showcased the low social value of novels and the fiction genre. The novel was, thus, most famously associated with the lower class and women, two groups of people that did not hold very much cultural capital in their contemporary society. Especially prevalent additions to the circulating libraries were gothic novels, as the leading publisher of gothic fiction in England, Minerva Press, was coincidentally also the sole provider of complete circulating libraries for wholesale (Erickson 582).

The Gothic Novel

During the 1790s, the popularity of gothic novels in England exploded, and as with the novel itself, it was particularly popular among a female readership. Although Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* might be considered the first true English gothic novel, the genre was mostly pioneered and ultimately dominated by women, as Ann Radcliffe became the most popular and best-paid English author of the eighteenth century. In her chapter on the "Female Gothic" in *Literary Women*, Ellen Moers claims that Radcliffe will prevail as "mistress of the pure Gothic form" even to the modern reader (Moers 91). With the publishing of novels like *The Mysteries of Udolpho* in 1794 and *The Italian* in 1797, Radcliffe introduced the "female Gothic" by bringing the focus of gothic literature to female characters, and also "reclaiming a certain textual space for a woman as reader and writer" (Wolstenholme 16). Radcliffe's novels offered a duality and complexity to female characters, who could be simultaneously the "persecuted victim" and the "courageous heroine" (Moers 91). In many ways, it is not surprising that the gothic form was so suitable for the woman writer and the female audience. In *Gothic (Re)Visions: Writing Women as Readers*, Susan Wolstenholme claims that there is something inherently female about gothic literature, and that the genre seems to be especially

suitable as a means of dealing with gender issues, and "suggest[s] a meditation on the issue of writing as a woman" (Wolstenholme xi). Furthermore, Ellen Moody suggests that "Gothic and anti-gothic texts function therapeutically. They enable readers, especially women, to experience distorted mirrors of their own lives" (Moody 1). Gothic texts function analogously alongside the everyday lives of women, and often bring up concerns that are "denied or erased from public discourse" (Moody 1). As a particularly female genre, it is also not surprising that the Gothic novel was especially disregarded by reviewers and society in general.

Radcliffe's works became an unparalleled and instrumental facet of the gothic genre, or "terror fiction", as her contemporaries knew it. Although there was widespread support and acknowledgement of Radcliffe's works – so much so that works by other authors in the same tradition came to belong under the "Radcliffe school" (Clery 51) – there were still troubles with reception and genre disputes. As Clery points out, though critics were willing to consider Radcliffe's novels "as works far above the common run of popular fiction, they were nonetheless novels, designed to attract a broad audience" (58). Efforts were put in by Radcliffe to place her gothic fiction with the higher end of the literary market. She incorporated elements from epics and tragedies, which were the prestigiously reigning genres of the time, into her novels, in an attempt to place "fiction on a new footing within the hierarchy of genres" (53). The sublimity and terror that were integral parts of gothic fiction were undoubtedly connected with the epic and tragedy of Romantic poetry. What sets the genres apart, however, was pretention and the status of the writer. Critics like Lucy Newlyn have commented on the pretention emanating from Romantic writers like Wordsworth and Coleridge, well known for their distaste for the gothic. Newlyn also argues that they often felt the need to "distanc[e] themselves" from more commercially popular writers of the time like Lord Byron, and that "a certain bitterness crept into the Lake Poets' response to the British reading-public" (9). As well-regarded men in the movement they presumably held certain privileges that Radcliffe as a woman writer was not granted. With their pretention and skepticism towards popular literature, they held the "desire to mould public taste in a direction they themselves found palatable" (9), whereas Radcliffe was arguably working to elevate her writing in order to gain more literary respect.

As this thesis will explore, the conceptualization of the novel as a woman's form is in its essence related to anxiety: anxiety about women, about control, and about influence, something that was clearly evident at the turn of the nineteenth century, but is also hugely prevalent in today's society and literary discourse, which will become clear in the second chapter of the thesis. Still today, literary genres that are associated with femininity are

subjected to far more scrutiny than the traditionally non-feminine genres. What about gothic fiction, and its successors, seems to invoke such particular anxieties about gender and influence? As will be further explored, it has even come to invoke hatred towards the literature itself, its authors, and most importantly, the people (women and girls) who read it.

Anxieties about Women's Reading

Many literary critics have written about the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' literary anxieties, including the anxieties about authorship, or of reception. Newlyn, for example, argues that anxiety "is given a particular inflection by the competitive-collaborative relationship between poets, reviewers, and critics" (39). Another anxiety that was clearly prominent was the anxiety about women's reading, particularly concerning influence. In *The Woman Reader*, Kate Flint addresses the fact that "the debate about what women should, and should not read, and how they read, was not a new one, nor has it disappeared" (16). The contemporary anxieties about women's reading were numerous and diverse, but generally it came down to concerns about women's affectability.

When it came to women reading, it was widely believed that literature and novels "might corrupt her innocent mind, hence diminishing her value as a woman", enforcing the idea that women were supposed to be pure and untainted, and how that directly correlated with their worth. There was also the fear that reading, especially in excess, may lead to unproductivity, and that it would interfere with 'female duties' as it "wastes time which may more valuably be employed elsewhere" (24). Greed and corruption as the consequences of excessive female reading was for instance detailed in Thomas Gisborne's *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex*. He argues that to "indulge in a practice of reading novels is … liable to produce mischievous effects": "The appetite becomes too keen to be denied" as the "produce of the book-club, and the contents of the circulating library, are devoured with indiscriminate and insatiable avidity. Hence the mind is secretly corrupted" (Gisborne 148). Essentially, reading was seen as a threat to the status-quo of the patriarchal society: if more and more women were consuming novels, thus neglecting their womanly duties, society would become corrupt and doomed for failure.

It was also widely indicated that women were especially prone to "inappropriate reading", which governed the concern that women were likely to "misidentify with female heroines or take for fact what should be understood as fiction" (Beetham 66). The idea that young women were incapable of distinguishing between fact and fiction was widespread. Furthermore, it was supposed that women were "particularly susceptible to emotionally

provocative material" and that they were "likely to be governed by feeling rather than intellect" (Flint 22, Beetham 67). These arguments were often used when discussing novels of romance, which was a particularly favored subject in novels among young women. The fear that romance novels might teach young, unmarried women about sexuality was a source of much anxiety, as it was believed that "their reading was shaped by their lack of rationality and the romantic plot of the novel could only exacerbate this" (Beetham 67). Moreover, "women's preference for novels was taken as a sign of their intellectual weakness" because reading fiction was seen as easy (67). As evidenced, the anxieties surrounding fiction and novel reading were quite paradoxical; on the one hand, there was the fear that pernicious literature might influence and corrupt the female mind, while on the other hand, the contents of these novels were seen as juvenile and inferior to other forms of literature.

The concerns about the morality of novel reading and possible negative repercussions that followed also extended to young people in general, making young women especially targeted. Reverend Knox expressed his anxiety about youthful reading in "On Novel Reading", stating that: "It is to be feared, the moral view is rarely regarded by youthful and inexperienced readers, who naturally pay the chief attention to the lively description of love, and its effects; and who, while they read, long to be actors in the scenes which they admire" (Knox 187). According to Knox novels were seen as a "sentimental" fiction, and he accused novelists of giving "the mind a degree of weakness". Thus, it was argued that the morality of young people, and especially young women, was weakened and corrupted by the consumption of novels.

Just as Flint argued that the debate about what and how women read had not disappeared as she was publishing *The Woman Reader* in 1993, I want to emphasise the fact that the debate and anxiety surrounding it is still prevalent. The anxiety about negative influence still seems to be one of the biggest concerns about young women's reading today. Often criticism of literature targeted towards teenage girls will be overly preoccupied with how the novel might negatively affect the reader. As I will demonstrate in the second chapter of this thesis, sentiments like these have not diminished tremendously in today's society; there is still palpable societal anxiety about what women – especially young women – read, and what the consequences of their novelistic consumption might be. In reality, the implications of this societal anxiety can and do have a potentially detrimental effect on young women as readers. On a tangible level the implications might be that the demographic becomes discouraged from reading, or that what they choose to read and enjoy is something to be ashamed of, but on a systemic level it teaches girls from a young age that their gender has

severe and restricting implications. The reality that young women are not fundamentally respected as consumers ultimately points to a larger issue of gender inequality.

Northanger Abbey

In more than one aspect *Northanger Abbey* is the perfect eighteenth-century novel to showcase the anxieties about women as writers and readers, as well as the gendered anxieties about influence. Not only is Austen strongly advocating for herself and her colleagues as female writers by highlighting their mistreatment within the literary sphere, but the novel is also itself a narrative about a reading girl who endures large amounts of scrutiny for the literature and genres she enjoys. With *Northanger Abbey*, I argue that Austen is highlighting the masculine anxieties around women's reading and rejecting the idea of negative influence that the patriarchal society has enforced on feminine modes of reading or types of literature aimed at girls. As previously mentioned, Austen's posthumous novel is fundamentally a parody of the gothic novel, specifically in the Radcliffean tradition. Clery argues that "Radcliffe's heroines are women of imagination", and she even goes as far as to argue that they are "effectively the co-authors of their own stories" (Clery 51). I would like to argue that Austen has copied and adapted this trope in her own heroine in *Northanger Abbey*. Reiterating this point, I argue that the young female readers of *Northanger Abbey* (or any similar text) mirror the protagonist of the novel, in that they too become co-authors of *their* own stories. Reading girls are essentially Radcliffean heroines in their own fashion.

As Austen satirizes the gothic genre and its tropes, some level of disapproval or mockery of the genre would be unsurprising or even expected. The term "parody" or satire is often associated with a level of mockery or superiority. Some works of parody certainly have a negative intent, but it is commonly and widely believed that *Northanger Abbey* is not one of them. Instead, Austen utilizes the gothic tropes to mock modern society and the literary scene. Arguably this is one of the biggest difference between Austen and some of her male counterparts and the Romantic writers: when it comes to attitudes towards the gothic, her level of respect for the genre is apparent. Although her novels are typically far more domestic than they are gothic (*Northanger Abbey* is the outlier), Austen never denigrates the genre that she satirizes, and she especially does not ridicule the engaged readers of said genre. *Northanger Abbey* is very obviously a parody of Radcliffe's works and heroines, but I would like to emphasize that it is never a parody in ill favor. It never ridicules Radcliffe's novels or the genre in a malicious way, instead it emphasizes and reinvents some of the tropes of the genre, using them to prove a point about society's arrogance and mistreatment of the female

reader. Ultimately, Austen is respectful of the gothic tradition, in contrast to some her contemporary male writers.

Many critics do, however, believe that there are faults to Austen's attempt at satirizing the gothic. As Waldo S. Glock points out, many critics of *Northanger Abbey* argue that the Gothic burlesque of the novel "is imperfectly joined to the main narrative" (33), or in other words, that there is a lack of logical connection between the two parts of the novel, both structurally, thematically, and when it comes to the psychology of Catherine's character. The fact that Catherine becomes a victim of Gothic illusions, as well as the satirical use of her character, he believes "persuade many critics to question the structural unity of the novel" (Glock 33). What this comes down to is most likely a dichotomy between the expectations of the domestic novel and the gothic novel, which could lead some readers to experience a "sense of discomfort" as the supposed imaginative continuity of the novel is broken (34).

However, one of the most memorable and prevalent parts of *Northanger Abbey* is certainly the manifesto-like statement – not unlike the aesthetics of the Romantic poems of the time – in defense of the novel and novelists, which encourages solidarity among female writers (Fraiman 23n3). Sarah Raff argues that the defense "breaks from the literary ideology of its time by omitting to make any claim for the pedagogical efficacy of novels" (3). Although the narrative refrains from commenting on the pedagogy of novel reading, it is unquestionably in favor of girls as readers and supporters of novels, particularly portrayed through the protagonist Catherine Morland. Austen's narrative tangent at the end of Chapter Five successfully summarizes the attitudes towards novels and the readers that indulge in them:

> "I am no novel reader – I seldom look into novels – Do not imagine that I often read novels – It is really very well for a novel." Such is the common cant. "And what are you reading, Miss ------?" "Oh! It is only a novel!" replies the young lady; while she lays down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame. – "It is only Cecilia, or Camilla or Belinda;" (Austen 22)

She highlights and criticizes the common prejudices towards novels in a casual yet impactful manner, pointing out that it is most often young ladies that are criticized or mocked and subjected to shame over what they read. Austen's defense of the genre and the woman writer, together with Catherine Morland as a novel-reading heroine, is what makes *Northanger Abbey* such a strong portrayal of what it means to be a female reader, specifically during the turn of the nineteenth century, but somehow also equally relevant today. It beautifully

emphasizes the importance of enthusiastic and engaged reading, despite the many anxieties and reservations that society has about 'the reading girl'.

As a novel, *Northanger Abbey* can also be read as a vindication of the woman writer. As a prevalent female writer in the 1790s and early 1800s herself, it is obvious and self-evident that Austen should defend her profession. Nevertheless, her solidarity with other novelists is admirable, especially as a writer of more domestic novels, as she refuses to mock the gothic genre even as she satirizes it. She is using her voice and narrative to highlight the misogyny of the literary domain, and society in general, that female writers have to endure and navigate. She emphasizes the shame that especially young women experience or are expected to experience as a result of the novels they are enthusiastic about. Her advocacy for herself and her female contemporaries is certainly a leap towards early feminist mentality, following in the footsteps of feminist revolutionaries like Mary Wollstonecraft. Through the narration of *Northanger Abbey,* Austen urges female solidarity within the field of literature, questioning "if the heroine of one novel be not patronized by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard? I cannot approve of it" (22). Sentiments like these are what makes *Northanger Abbey* an imperative piece of work towards a greater acceptance of women's writing, and a unification of women within the literary sphere: "Let us leave it to the Reviewers to abuse such effusions of fancy at their leisure" (22).

Reading in *Northanger Abbey*

Although *Northanger Abbey* is quintessentially an exploration of the gothic that satirizes the genre's tropes, as well as a vindication of the woman writer, it is also a text about reading and the social importance and implications of the act. As a narrative on reading, Austen's novel self-referentially binds the reader to the narrative that features a reading protagonist. One of the ways in which Austen utilized the gothic aspects of the novel was precisely to satirize the anxieties about female readership that were so prevalent in her contemporary society and the literary establishment. As Margaret Beetham points out "Austen herself clearly read and enjoyed" gothic novels, which becomes fairly obvious to the reader of *Northanger Abbey*. It is also obvious, according to Beetham, that Austen assumed her readers also were readers or enthusiasts of gothic literature (65). She also assumes that the readers, being a part of the contemporary society, had some knowledge and awareness of the "long-established concerns about the deficiencies of female reading, in terms of both what and how women read" (65).

With all of these assumptions that are placed upon the readership, and considering Wolfgang Iser's ideas about the implied reader, it is evident that Austen has certain

expectations for her implied readership. Iser uses the term implied reader to describe the hypothetical reader to whom the text is intended or designed (Bennett 236). Austen assumes that the reader of *Northanger Abbey* is familiar with the historical and contemporary attitudes towards female readers, presumably because the implied reader of the novel *is* female, and obviously a reader of novels.

The idea of the implied reader of *Northanger Abbey* has already been analyzed and contemplated by several Austenian critics. One of these critics, Sarah Raff, argues that the implied reader is Austen's niece Fanny Knight. According to Raff, "Fanny Knight appears in Northanger Abbey both as the reader and as that ideal heroine whom the narrator declines to write about", essentially, she is "the "picture of perfection" Catherine Morland is not" (Raff 1). In this thesis, I want to argue that the implied reader of *Northanger Abbey* is slightly more generalized than Raff's ideation; the implied reader is the 'reading girl', someone who identifies with Catherine and her love of gothic novels, someone who wishes to vindicate the woman reader and writer. As evidenced throughout this thesis, this figure is a recurring trope in many novels, and although its manifestations are not unchanged throughout literary history, often the same implications and attitudes towards the trope can still be applied.

When it comes to *Northanger Abbey*, the relationship and similarities between the implied reader and the protagonist brings a level of verisimilitude to the narrative. Presumably, it is relatively easy for the implied reader of the novel – which, considering the time of publication, was most likely female – to relate to the protagonist, the leaps in imagination that are required of the reader are presumably not long. Iser implies that the process of reading "removes the subject-object division", and that the reader will become "'occupied' by the thought of the author" (293). Just as Clery argued about the Radcliffean heroine, the readers of *Northanger Abbey* become "co-authors of their own stories" (51), like Catherine does as well. Iser also argues that "in reading the reader becomes the subject that does the thinking" (292). Within the narrative of *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine, alongside Austen, becomes the co-author of her own story, but furthermore, the implied reader of *Northanger Abbey* also becomes an author and a subject. It could then be argued that the reader of *Northanger Abbey* internalizes the thoughts of the narrator and that the implied reader of Austen's novel mirrors the protagonist. Ultimately, the author, the narrator, the protagonist, and the reader are all interconnected in a web of imagination and authorship, altogether accentuated by Austen's choice in writing a narrative on reading.

Catherine as a 'Reading Girl'

Already in the opening sentence of *Northanger Abbey,* Austen challenges the idea and conception of the Radcliffean heroine: "No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be a heroine. Her situation in life, the character of her father and mother, her own person and disposition, were all equally against her" (Austen 5). From the beginning, the reader is subjected to Catherine as a plain and seemingly unremarkable character. The descriptions of her as a child portray her as "often inattentive, and occasionally stupid" (6) and that she was "fond of all boys' plays, and greatly preferred cricket … to the more heroic enjoyments of infancy, nursing a dormouse, feeding a canary-bird, or watering a rose-bush" (5). In other words, she did not care for the typical conventions or attributes generally connected with the literary heroine. Furthermore, her childhood does not contain what you could call a formal education, as she grew up in a family of ten children, where the responsibility of education landed on the parents. Her education is described as rather mediocre: "Writing and accounts she was taught by her father; French by her mother: her proficiency in either was not remarkable, and she shirked her lessons in both whenever she could" (6).

Although Catherine's formal education was lacking, as she grew up she began to develop a liking and appreciation for reading. The narrator comments that "from fifteen to seventeen she was in training for a heroine; she read all such works as heroines must read" (Austen 7). Throughout the course of the novel, the reader gets to observe Catherine's growing fondness for reading and literary fiction, and gothic novels in particular. Her excitement over the gothic works by, for instance, Ann Radcliffe is an integral part of the novels narrative, and is something that impacts and shapes her as a person – arguably both positively and negatively. Her love for *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, introduced to her by the equally eager Isabella Thorpe, reveals her to be a very enthusiastic and engaged reader; "Oh! I am delighted with the book! I should like to spend my whole life in reading it. I assure you, if it had not been to meet you, I would not have come away from it for all the world." (24). Catherine and Isabella go on an extended discussion of Radcliffe's novels and other "horrid" stories, and as a reader there is something beautiful about Catherine's passion for the gothic and horrific, as she is so unapologetic in her enjoyment, even as she is criticized for it.

However, within the narrative of *Northanger Abbey* it is implied that the type of reading that Catherine indulges in has lesser value in society as it is particularly female and uninformed. In her collections of essays on *The Common Reader*, Virginia Woolf comments on her contemporary society's ideas of readership and the values placed upon different modes

of reading. Catherine certainly fits the characteristics of the 'common reader', who "differs from the critic and the scholar", in that they are "worse educated" and read "for [their] own pleasure rather than to impart knowledge or correct the opinions of other" (Woolf 11). The common reader can be seen in opposition to Stanley Fish's construct of the "informed reader"; someone who is familiar with the conventions of language and literary tradition, which usually implies someone who is educated, and in the eighteenth-century tradition, probably male (Bennett 237). Contrary to Catherine, Henry Tilney is propositioned as the perfect informed reader within the text; he is well read, educated, and has sophisticated ideas about language and linguistics. In many ways, the modes of reading represented in Catherine and Mr. Tilney can be read as opposites. Although they have read several of the same books – including *The Mysteries of Udolpho* – the way in which they do so seems remarkably dissimilar. When discussing Radcliffe's novel, Mr. Tilney promptly steers the conversation away from Catherine's enthusiastic praise and into a didactic lesson on the use of language, which leaves Catherine with a "misplaced shame" about her ignorance (Austen 76).

In her young life, Catherine's inclination towards reading could be defined as quite trivial. On the subject of books she never had any objections "provided that nothing like useful knowledge could be gained from them, provided they were all story and no reflection" (7). Moreover, she had never shown any real interest in "books of information" (7). What the narrator of *Northanger Abbey* teaches us about Catherine's character is that she reads for her own pleasure (or rather her own "horror"), not to impress the people around her, or for her character to appear more well-rounded and informed. The narrator reminds us that Catherine's "mind is about as ignorant and uninformed as the female mind at seventeen usually is" (9). Through Catherine's mode of reading, Austen reminds the implied reader – the one that reads her novels for enjoyment – that reading does not always need to be informational; readers are permitted to consume books simply for their own trivial pleasure. Therefore, despite lecturing and being made to feel ashamed about her reading, Catherine can nevertheless be observed as she enjoys her gothic horrors and her "silly novels by lady novelists"[1], just as the reader of *Northanger Abbey.*

Throughout the course of *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine's reading is conspicuously and repeatedly criticised, predominantly by two of the male characters, John Thorpe and Henry Tilney, though it is important to note that there is a noticeable distinction to their criticisms. The purposes of the two characters are obviously quite distinct; Thorpe is presented to the

[1] In reference to George Eliot's famous essay "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists", in which she criticizes a particular group of female writers that according to her were writing frivolous and pointless novels.

reader as something of an antagonist, and an annoying character that continuously hinders the development and happiness of our heroine. Tilney, on the other hand, is of course the primary love interest who, in the end, is seen as a good influence on Catherine's character. Nevertheless, they both present themselves as above Catherine and her enthusiastic reading, regardless of their good or bad intentions. Austen's inclusion of multiple masculine critiques of Catherine's character and especially her engagement with the Gothic novel particularly highlights the condescension of the very female gothic genre, and women as readers, consumers and writers of novels in general.

In early Austenian criticism, Henry Tilney was generally seen as one of Austen's more favourable heroes, and was sometimes even referred to as a "fully endorsed spokesman of Austen herself" (Raff 3). It was not until the 1970s that critics began fully inspecting the faults and shortcomings of Tilney's character. Claudia L. Johnson is one of the critics that identified many of his faults, particularly his tendency to "bully" both his sister and Catherine, and the fact that he "believes that he knows women's minds better than they do" (C. Johnson 37). When it comes to Henry Tilney's attitude towards Catherine's reading, it is not so much that he disagrees with her love of gothic novels, but more that his education and inclination towards literature is presented as more refined and superior to Catherine's. His criticism of Catherine comes in the form of light teasing of her vocabulary and how she chooses to express her literary opinions. For example, when Catherine uses the word "nice" to describe *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Tilney replies teasingly but still rather condescendingly: "The nicest;—by which I suppose you mean the neatest. That must depend upon the binding." (73). Furthermore, he reprimands her for using the verb "to torment" where he himself would have used "to instruct" (75). Johnson contends that although it is probably meant as banter, while Tilney boasts his "linguistic and intellectual superiority" he is essentially upholding the conservative classist and sexist ideals of the hegemonic language (C. Johnson 38). While his intentions undoubtedly are meant to be honourable and playfully educational, they could appear somewhat patronising. Through these discussions and conversations, Henry Tilney comes to represents the seemingly masculine urge to educate women, especially on the things they enjoy and choose to partake in. Henry's sister, Eleanor Tilney, even denounces his treatment of Catherine, calling it "very impertinent", emphasising that this behaviour is typical of Mr. Tilney: "he is treating [Catherine] exactly as he does his sister. He is for ever finding fault with [her]" (73).

Jodi L. Wyett argues that in *Northanger Abbey,* Austen is working to "break down gendered binaries between good and bad reading" (Wyett 262). Henry Tilney's character is

arguably offered in comparison and opposition to Catherine when it comes to representations of 'good' and 'bad' readers, or the common reader versus the informed reader. Catherine's mediocre education, her enthusiastic appreciation for female writers and the gothic, and limited reading – as she admits that she "do[es] not much like any other" (74) genre than gothic novels – is highly contrastive to Mr. Tilney's superior education and knowledge of a large variety of literature and genres, which together with his gender and social standing posit him as an informed 'ideal reader'. Contrastively, as a young woman at the end of the 18th century, Catherine's reading is more often than not considered 'bad' or inferior. Even Catherine herself assumes that Tilney has not read *The Mysteries of Udolpho,* "Because they are not clever enough for you – gentlemen read better books" (Austen 72). Due to society's influence and negative attitude towards genres popular with women, Catherine mistakenly and unsurprisingly assumes that such books are beneath Tilney and his preferences. Other than just general lack of respect towards the gothic genre, Catherine's assumptions presumably are influenced by a previous conversation about *Udolpho* with John Thorpe.

Meanwhile, John Thorpe's disparagement towards Catherine's reading strongly highlights the societal views on women's writing and the genres popular with women at the fin de siècle. In contrast to Mr. Tilney, Thorpe outright discourages and disparages the reading of gothic novels. When Catherine asks him if he has read *The Mysteries of Udolpho,* his answer seems riddled with revulsion as he replies "Udolpho! Oh, Lord! not I; I never read novels; I have something else to do [...] Novels are all so full of nonsense and stuff [...] they are the stupidest things in creation" (Austen 31). The narrator expresses that Catherine's reaction to this exclamation is to feel "humbled and ashamed", as she even feels compelled to apologize for her question (31). Mr. Thorpe goes on to further criticize the genre by arguing that there has not been a decent novel produced in decades, except for Matthew Gregory Lewis' *The Monk*, which fittingly was written by a man and heavily features mistreatment of women. In his sexist, ignorant, and even quite racist dismissal of novels, John Thorpe manages to perfectly represent both society's disapproving attitude towards female-centric literature like the gothic and novels in general, as well as the pervasive distain and dismissal of women writers.

John Thorpe is quite obviously presented to the reader as perhaps *the* most exasperating and disagreeable character within the novel. It is largely evident that he is meant to function as a repellant character, as he is categorically narcissistic, condescending, bad-mannered, and unsympathetic. Considering his mostly negative characterization, it is interesting to analyze Thorpe in regard to what being a 'good reader' entails. When it comes

to reading, we can assume that Thorpe is not as well-read as Mr. Tilney, evidenced by his aforementioned exclamation informing us that he does not read novels, as well as his general lack knowledge about the literary. He does however seem to be under the belief that he holds himself to a higher standard of literature, especially because he avoids novels, gothic literature, or literature written by women. As the masculine view on novels and female readership is personified through Thorpe, his character is largely set in opposition to both Catherine and to the intended reader. As the reader is encouraged to dislike Thorpe's character through the narration, it is evident that when it comes to reading and opinions on the value of reading, the implied reader is patently supposed to relate to Catherine and not to Mr. Thorpe. Being above novels and gothic literature does not improve the morality of your character. With John Thorpe, Austen clearly emphasizes that there is no inherent link between being a 'good reader' and a good person. Similarly, being what society deems a 'bad reader' does not condemn or soil your character.

Consequences of a Gothic Imagination?

When it comes to affectability, both characters within the narrative of *Northanger Abbey*, and critics of the novel itself seem preoccupied and concerned with the effects of Catherine's gothic reading. Ultimately, whether or not there are definite consequences of Catherine reading gothic literature is debatable. Many scholars of Austen and *Northanger Abbey* have studied the impacts of Catherine's reading of gothic novels. Routledge and Chapman argue that Catherine is deemed a 'bad reader' because she approaches the novels she reads in a "truth-committed" manner, which then creates difficulties for her within the narrative and her society (Routledge and Chapman 8). This reading is offered in opposition to what they call "non truth-committed" discourse, which they define as "a lack of commitment either to the truth or to the falsity of the propositions it contains", it is characterized by a methodical ambivalence towards a logical reading of a novel (1). They argue that Catherine's approach to the novels she reads is "inappropriately non-literary, or truth-committed", as Catherine's reading of the world is intertwined with her reading of novels, meaning that she applies the rules of fiction to 'real life' (2). Consequently, they argue that it is not the novels that Catherine consumes that are harmful to her, but instead, the way in which she reads them.

Other critics argue that although Catherine is "definitively shaped by her reading material", in the end, "[b]ooks seem to play no role in the growth of Catherine's character or in the accomplishing of her happiness" (Sundet 2). According to Leta M. Sundet, Catherine "feeds unhealthily on horror stories until they alter her perception of reality", which

consequently means that Catherine needs to "learn to read better" – both books, herself, and others (2). While "[t]he liberty which her imagination had dared to take" (Austen 137) does seem to have some repercussions for Catherine, I ague that it is questionable how severe these consequences are in actuality. My argument seems to align more with critics who believe that "Catherine's interpretative instincts have been honed and her engaged reading put to good use" (Wyett 269).

Arguably, the underlying moral of the novel is not that Catherine Morland should be reprimanded or cured for her love of the gothic novel, but instead that enthusiastic and engaged reading is fundamentally harmless. Nonetheless, Austen does not shy away from portraying the implications of engaged reading on the impressionable imagination: both the reader and Catherine herself recognize that, during the second half of the novel set at the Abbey, Catherine has indeed become influenced by the gothic narratives she reads. However, in light of how the novel concludes, I argue that the moral of the narrative is not that 'bad reading' has consequences, but that it instead can be used as a helpful tool in navigating society and deceitful characters. Under the influence of Radcliffean horror stories, Catherine has used her perceptions and imagination to her own advantage, which has ultimately granted her with a decent judgement of character.

Catherine's exclamation "Oh! Mr. Tilney, how frightful! – This is just like a book!" (Austen 108) during their journey to Northanger Abbey, accurately describes the experience of her visit. The gothic elements of Austen's novel are thoroughly explored and satirized in the second volume where the setting changes. Catherine's stay at the abbey, which she often spends in solitude, becomes increasingly painted by her "fearful curiosity" (112), as she explores the premises expecting uncover some horrific event. In a parallel to *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Catherine becomes convinced that General Tilney has either – like the villain of Radcliffe's novel –hidden away his wife, "shut up for causes unknown" (129), or that he has killed her. According to her the General perfectly fits the description of a horrid villain in the Radcliffean tradition as he had "the air and attitude of a Montoni!" (128). Throughout the novel, the biggest consequence of Catherine's gothic influences thus becomes her perception of General Tilney and the crimes she supposes he has committed against his wife.

Although General Tilney is not guilty of these crimes, Catherine's aversion to his character and disposition is still pertinent, especially considering his eventual behavior towards her as a guest and the object of his son's affection. As he essentially banishes her from Northanger Abbey and hastily sends her away without being accompanied, he thoughtlessly endangers her life. Fraiman argues that this rude ejection is a gothic abduction

trope in reverse, as she is forced into a carriage alone and sent home to her family, through gothic elements of coercion and danger still ensue (Fraiman 158n4). His treatment towards Catherine is effectively deemed inexcusable, and as Mr. and Mrs. Morland reflected upon their daughters return: "General Tilney had acted neither honourably nor feelingly – neither as a gentleman nor as a parent" (161). Subsequently, it is revealed to both the reader and to Catherine that the reason for General Tilney's poor treatment of her is to do with his own prejudices. The only conviction she was guilty of in the eyes of the General was "being less rich than he had supposed her to be" (168).

Catherine recognizes that she has let her imagination run wild and consequently feels guilty and remorseful about jumping to conclusions about the General actions and the history of Northanger Abbey. Just like the reader is inclined to feel embarrassment about Catherine's leaps in judgment, the narrator emphasizes that the protagonist is also embarrassed and ashamed of her own thoughts and actions: "The liberty which her imagination had dared to take with the character of [Mr. Tilney's] father, could he ever forgive it? The absurdity of her curiosity and her fears, could they ever be forgotten? She hated herself more than she could express" (137). Furthermore, the narrator declares that it had all been "a voluntary, self-inflicted delusion" and that it "might be traced to the influence of that sort of reading which she had there indulged" (137). Part of her character development is dependent on the fact that she is very self-aware, she recognizes that she wrongfully allowed herself to be influenced by the things she read and she is determined to be better. Ultimately, the whole experience becomes a lesson for her, and an inclination to be more considerate in the future: "her resolution formed, of always judging and acting in future with the greatest good sense" (138).

What I argue to be the significant message or morality concerning Catherine's reading becomes evident at the end of the novel. After having learned all the facts of what had transpired with the General, Catherine concludes that "in suspecting General Tilney of either murdering or shutting up his wife, she had scarcely sinned against his character, or magnified his cruelty" (170). Discernably, Catherine was in some way correct in her reading of his character: General Tilney is ultimately not a gentleman or a good character. Therefore, the parting sentiment is arguably that Catherine is justified in her reading and aversion to his character. Besides, the consequences of her reading are ultimately not grave, there was no unrecoverable damage or harm inflicted on any of the main characters as a result of her misjudgments, and in the end, they did receive their happy-ever-after. As the last paragraph emphasizes, "it will not appear, after all the dreadful delays occasioned by the General's cruelty, that they were essentially hurt by it" (174).

The function of this chapter has been to highlight – through *Northanger Abbey* – the anxiety, expectations and misjudgments that are placed upon the reading of women, especially the young ones. All throughout *Northanger Abbey* people have opinions about Catherine's reading. In fact, this even extends outside of the narrative of the novel: all the literary critics of Austen also have opinions and judgements about the fictional teenagers reading, an on young women reading in general, and to not be hypocritical, obviously so does this thesis as well. This first chapter has laid out, perhaps not a complete but at least a fundamental historical account of novel reading girls. It shows that as soon as the first English novel was written, women were there to read it, circulate it, and further the genre. Novels were often written about women, read by women, and eventually often written by women as well. Of course, the views and opinions on women reading today have evolved since the 18th and 19th centuries, and the novel as a specific genre has obviously gained respect and perceived importance. It would be baseless to argue that the contemporary novel today is still a 'female form'. However, this does not mean that women have gained substantial respect as literary consumers, it simply points to a shift in the perceived literary value of novels and the fact that women are now associated with more specific genres of literature. Novels and gothic novels are no longer purely associated with women. Instead, these genres have since evolved into new women-centric genres, like the romance novel, 'chick-lit' and the supernatural romance, which again hold little respect in the contemporary field of literature.

Cultural anxieties about women's reading are still prevalent in today's society. I argue that during the 2010s, teenage girls became a target of ridicule due to their enthusiastic reading. The idea that young women are especially prone to 'inappropriate reading' is still pertinent to this day, as the case study of Stephenie Meyer's supernatural romance *Twilight* will indicate in the following chapter. Anne Morey argues that because "the "Twilight" saga was written by a woman and has largely female devotees, questions of taste become more political then they often are in discussions of popular culture" (6). The monumental antipathy surrounding *Twilight* and similar novels that became wildly popular among a young female demographic suggests that the politics of reading point to a patriarchal determined notion that young girls are 'bad readers'. The female mode of reading is still considered inappropriate, inconsequential and less intellectual. As Catherine Morland misguidedly points out: "gentlemen read better books" (Austen 72).

2. The Twenty-First Century Reading Girl

"Hand me that book, will you?" I asked, pointing over his shoulder. His eyebrows pulled together in confusion, but he gave it to me quickly.

"This again?" He asked.

"I just wanted to find this one part I remembered … to see how she said it …" I flipped through the book, finding the page I wanted easily. The corner was dog-eared from the many times I'd stopped here. "Cathy's a monster, but there were a few things she got right," I muttered. I read the lines quietly, mostly to myself. "If all else perished, and he remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger"

(*Eclipse, 541)*

Young Adult Fiction and the 'Girl Reader'

Much as the novel was a "young, malleable, and less than reputable" (Fraiman vii) genre in the eighteenth century, the young adult novel shared the same reputation and connotation over two centuries later. The trend of writing and publishing literature intended for teenage consumption picked up somewhere around the middle of the twentieth century. Of course, even considering teenagers or young adults as their own cultural group was a fairly new phenomenon at that point. In the United States, youth culture started taking form as universal education was advancing and students were assembling in high school, and society saw the need for defining this developmental stage between childhood and adulthood. Gradually, over the course of the twentieth century, the emergence of literature for adolescents became more prominent, and the young adult genre was conceptualized. While most of children's literature was primarily didactic in its nature, some authors and publishers of young adult fiction were experimenting with more realistic and gritty portrayals of adolescence, attempting to define or depict the struggles within the emerging youth culture – to the outrage of the adults and the elation of the youths (Cart 18). Youth culture "picked up steam in the 1940s as marketers realized that these kids – whom they called, variously, teens, teensters, and finally (in 1941) teenagers – were an attractive new market in the making" although "that market wouldn't fully ripen until post-World War II prosperity put money into the kids' own pockets" (Cart 11), and thus began the commodification of the teenage consumer.

While the first golden age of young adult literature is said to have happened in the 1970s to mid 1980s, the real boom in young adult fiction happened in the twenty-first century. After a small decline in young adult publishing in the 1990s, the genre experienced a

renaissance in the new millennium. By the mid-1990s, America experienced a resurgence in youth culture, which again was “a largely market-driven phenomenon” as the country saw a momentous growth in the young adult population (Cart 62). When it comes to commercial success, there is no doubt that young adult fiction, especially serialized fantasy, has been dominating the publishing industry in the 2000s and 2010s. The overwhelming success of series like *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*, dystopian series like *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* and even contemporary fiction like John Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars* – which have all been adapted into successful Hollywood films – are all proof of this. According to Levy and Mendlesohn the “Young Adult fiction movement was essentially a US phenomenon” and the “concept of Young Adult was one the US fiction market nurtured” (Levy and Mendlesohn 198). Young adult fiction’s immense popularity in the United States and its close ties to Hollywood – evident through a period of time where seemingly every young adult novel was turned into a film, in an attempt to mimic the success of the *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* films – made it a multi-million-dollar industry. Perhaps due to its growing mainstream presence, today the young adult genre seems to be widely read by both teenagers and adults alike: a study from 2012 revealed that around 55 per cent of buyers of young adult books were adults, where 78 per cent of the buyers intended to read the books themselves (McLean).

Femininity in Teen Fiction

Levy and Mendlesohn acknowledge the trend that “the readers and protagonists of teen and Young Adult fantasy were increasingly poised as female” (196). In 1998 Phillip Pullman raised what is known as ‘The Problem with Susan’, in which he criticizes the fate of C. S Lewis’ character Susan in *The Last Battle*, who is practically shunned from Narnia for being “interested in nothing nowadays except nylons and lipstick and invitations. She always has a jolly sight too keen on being grown-up” (Lewis 168). In the column published in *The Guardian*, Pullman argues that there should be a space for feminine girls within the teen fantasy genre, which has historically favored a more boyish representation (Levy and Mendlesohn 196). As teen culture was flourishing in the late nineties and early 2000s, when the boom of teen fantasy literature happened, many ‘Susans’ were sold this specific genre of what Levy and Mendlesohn call ‘Lipstick and Nylons’ fantasy (196). Fantasy literature was no longer only for the outcasts seeking refuge in fiction, as it opened up space for ‘girly girls’ as well.

Furthermore, Levy and Mendlesohn argue that the paranormal romance happened as a logical extension of the Lipstick and Nylon fantasies. They reference the popularity and

success of Anne Rice's *The Vampire Chronicles* as foundational to this development, as well as the TV show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. These are both paranormal romances that do not shy away from portrayals of femininity within a fantastic or paranormal setting. Buffy's character, played by Sarah Michelle Gellar, is presented as a traditionally beautiful, blonde high school girl, who is also audacious and single-handedly defeats monsters and vampires. Hence, Buffy's gender expression is traditionally contradictory as she is "simultaneously embodying traits of the hyperfeminine and wielding strength and heroism" (Becker 5). Both of these vampire romance series arguably paved the way for the success of the *Twilight* saga, and helped conceptualize the vampire as something romantic and 'hot' that appealed to teens. During the years leading up to the release of *Twilight*, there were definitely teen vampire romances being published – for example *The Silver Kiss* by Anette Curtis Klause or *The Vampire Diaries* series by J. L Smith, both published in the nineties – however none of them ever reached the success of Meyer's debut novel. Instead, *The Vampire Diaries* actually found more commercial success as a result of the *Twilight* series, especially as it was developed into a television series in 2009.

The idea of the 'outsider' is something that seems to have always been a popular subject in young adult literature. One of the first defining works of the young adult genre, S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, published in 1967, might have set the precedent for this. The novel follows protagonist Ponyboy as he navigates issues of class conflict and – as the title suggests – feeling like an outsider in your own community. Being only fifteen years old when she began writing the novel, Hinton was attempting to shed light on youth struggle and the quintessential adolescent experience of feeling alone and different, or even ostracized from society. Other popular and successful novels that exemplify the outsider trope in adolescent fiction are J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), or Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999). What all these novels have in common is that they all feature male protagonists. Seemingly, the idea of the outsider might have been historically associated with the masculine, whereas female protagonists in young adult fiction have increasingly been associated with other themes and subjects (for example the nylon and lipstick fiction). I would argue that, with *Twilight*, Stephenie Meyer is diverging back to 'the outsider' trope, reconceptualizing it with a female subject, albeit one that is not typically feminine or popular, but instead a self-proclaimed outcast. Furthermore, I argue that there seems to be an inherent link between 'the reader' and 'the outsider' tropes, as being a reader, specifically as a teenager, is often associated with solitude and being an outsider.

Bella Swan as a Reader and 'Not Like Other Girls'

It is established quite early in *Twilight* that Bella Swan is an avid reader. During her first day of high school in Forks, Washington, we are introduced to her reading habits as she looks over her syllabus for English class: "I kept my eyes down on the reading list the teacher had given me. It was fairly basic: Brontë, Shakespeare, Chaucer, Faulkner. I'd already read everything. That was comforting … and boring" (Meyer 15). Not only can Bella be considered a reader, she is also an avid re-reader, and it is clear that she is more well-read than the average seventeen-year-old high school student. In *The Twilight Saga: The Official Illustrated Guide*, an official companion book that offers extensive background information on everything in the *Twilight*-universe, Meyer even highlights under the 'hobbies' section of her character description that "Bella enjoys reading, especially the classics" (135). Noticeably, it is the author's intent to establish to the audience that being a reader is a defining character trait in the protagonist. It is not unreasonable to assume that part of the reason for *Twilight*'s immense success is due to the relatability of Bella Swan's character to the typical teenage girl that reads. This seems to be an aspect of the books that was most certainly part of Meyer's design and intent: to create a character that mirrors the interests and characteristics of her intended audience, the teenage girl.

Through the first-person narrative of the novel, it is obvious that Bella sees herself as something of an outsider. She does not seem to fit in well with her peers, neither where she grew up in Phoenix, nor her new school in small-town Washington. As she reflects on her inability to fit in at either school she concludes: "I didn't relate well to people my age. Maybe the truth was that I didn't relate well to people, period … Maybe there is a glitch in my brain" (10). She has trouble relating to people with whom she is supposed to have a lot in common. She is introverted, but she is also content with being alone and is used to entertaining herself. The characterization of Bella undoubtedly reflects the inner workings of many teenage girls. The feeling of being an outsider or even a "freak" (10), as Bella also describes herself, seems to be quite fundamental to the teenage experience, accompanied by puberty and attempts at figuring oneself out. Meyer even admits to drawing from personal experience when she created her protagonist, as Bella was somewhat modelled on her own teenage self: "In high school, I was a mousy, A-track wall-flower" (Meyer *FAQ*). Furthermore, it seems emblematic of teenage girls that share Bella's antisocial reserved nature, to find solace in the solitary action of reading. As reading is something that is usually done alone, it is a hobby that particularly resonates with people who often find themselves within their own company. As Bella herself points out, when she contemplates an outing to the bookstore, "they didn't know

how preoccupied I could get when surrounded by books; it was something I preferred to do alone" (156).

Within the narrative of *Twilight*, Meyer plays on the fact that the majority of teenage girls will more easily relate to a character that is the seemingly average and ordinary girl, rather than the stereotypically beautiful and popular girl. The characterization of Bella, particularly in the first book of the series, speaks to the awkward, slightly self-loathing teenager, who despite lacking socialization skills still has a distinct and rich inner personality, visible through Bella's personal narrative. As someone who is self-described as plain and uninteresting, she manages to attract not only the unearthly beautiful unattainable vampire, but also about every other boy in her new high school. Although this might not be realistic for the average teenage girl, it arguably offers a certain hope, and a realization that someone like them might actually be desirable. Longing to be singled out and to feel special is seemingly a quintessential human experience, nevertheless it is plausible that it is particularly heightened during adolescence. Consequently, Bella's character serves to represent the regular, run-of-the-mill teenage girl – perhaps one that finds solace in reading, or lacks self-confidence, or is an introverted, self-proclaimed loner – and she offers the reader hope and optimism, because she along with the reader is interesting and worth celebrating. Because of this, *Twilight* can certainly be read as an ode to the plain girl.

The plainness of Bella's character also allows the reader to more easily relate to or even imagine themselves within the narrative of the text. Bella can arguably be categorized as what is colloquially known as a self-insert character, a term particularly popular on the internet or in fanfiction. Self-insertion is mostly a technique used in fanfiction where "authors construct their identities and romantic experiences through speculative life writing in a fictional (and virtual) context" (Lehtonen 10). This type of fanfiction writing allows authors to take elements from their own experiences and incorporate them within fiction, in order to explore curiosities, desires or other parts of their identities. Although *Twilight* is an original piece of fiction and not fan fiction, the argument for Bella being a so-called self-insertion is fairly convincing, especially considering the fact that Meyer admitted to modelling Bella's character on herself as a teenager, as well as the origins of how the story came to be. The story of *Twilight* was constructed around a vivid dream that Meyer had about a beautiful glittering vampire-boy and an ordinary girl who was watching and listening to him, like Meyer herself from outside her dream. She emphasizes that "the dream really was about him", and that the girl was merely a secondary character (Meyer, *Illustrated Guide* 3). This reveals that *Twilight* was mostly written as an exploration of this mysterious unearthly boy, whereas

Bella was a placeholder for the intrigued "normal girl" trying to understand this alluring figure that the author and eventually the reader could imagine themselves as.

A further analysis and consideration of Meyer as an author is interesting when it comes to the narrative of *Twilight* and the idea of the intended reader. As an author, it is obvious that Meyer knows her intended audience, arguably because in part she herself *is* the intended audience. Considering how the story of *Twilight* was conceptualized through a single dream – which she details in *The Official Illustrated Guide* – it is evident that Meyer identified with the observer and the reader, and that she essentially wrote the story she personally wanted to read. During the early stages of the writing process, before the story was even conceptualized as a book, Meyer was imagining herself as the reader (*Illustrated Guide* 6). She also reveals in this interview that, while revising the text, actually "reading it" was her favorite part of the process (6). At this stage of the writing process she had no intention of publishing the story as a novel; it was merely a way of entertaining herself. In some degree, this is arguably what makes Twilight such a readable narrative. It is a text that is wholly written with the reader in mind. By envisioning herself as the reader, Meyer as a writer has merged herself with the intended reader – making the two a unified component.

French critic and theorist Roland Barthes identifies two distinct and opposite types of literary narratives: 'readerly' and 'writerly'. According to Barthes, readerly texts are distinguished as simple narratives where the meaning of the text is usually blatant and fixed. He also emphasizes that most literature that we read today can be recognized as readerly. On the other hand, Barthes describes writerly literature as distinctively rare, and something that is not easily found in a bookstore. He argues that "the goal of literary work … is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text" (Barthes 4). His argument is therefore that the ideal text should blur the distinction between the writer and the reader. By this he means that in typically writerly texts the ultimate meaning of the text is constructed by the reader, and that through the act of reading, the reader becomes the writer. What Meyer has written is identifiably readerly in its nature – it is a simple narrative that adheres to traditional and linear ideals, with minimal hidden meaning, as it is written with the adolescent reader in mind. Although discernably distinct from the way Barthes intends, this blurred distinction between the writer and the reader that he argues for, is something that Meyer accomplishes with *Twilight*. Through the idea of self-insertion, and the creation of a narrative in which she herself is the intended reader, she successfully blurs the distinction between herself as the writer and the reader. In a manner, Meyer's narrative represents the opposite of what Barthes

describes as a 'writerly' text; instead of the reader becoming the writer, the writer became the reader.

An unfortunate by-product of the blurred distinction between the writer and the reader is that it may reproduce archetypes that are ironically often unfavorable or unflattering to the girl reader. Although Meyer succeeded in making Bella a relatable character to many adolescent girls, the archetypal 'not like other girls' trope that the character adheres to is not without its issues and negative implications. Even though it is obvious to the readers through Bella's first-person narrative that she does not consider herself special in any way, it is nonetheless evident that many other characters in the story do not share her perspective, whether or not she realizes this herself. At multiple times, the novel insinuates in some way that her specific quirks and personality make her a more alluring character. Bella's habitual clumsiness is perceived as perfectly charming and endearing, and her 'natural' plain beauty is appealing to more than one male character. Also, the fact that Bella is the only exception to Edward's telepathic abilities, serves to further the supposed exceptionalness and mystery of her character – in his mind she is singular, no one else in the world is quite like her, because he does not know the inner workings of her mind. When Meyer published *Midnight Sun* in 2020 – the same exact narrative as *Twilight*, except from Edward Cullen's perspective – the idea that Edward finds Bella to be exceptional became even more discernable:

> I watched her as she lifted her face to the light rain with her eyes closed, a slight smile on her lips. What was she thinking? Something about this action seemed off, and I quickly realized why the posture looked unfamiliar to me. Normal human girls wouldn't raise their faces to the drizzle that way; normal human girls usually wore makeup, even here in this wet place. Bella never wore makeup, nor should she. The cosmetics industry made billions of dollars a year from women who were trying to attain skin like hers. (Meyer, *Midnight Sun* 150)

Here Edward is essentially claiming that Bella is not a "normal human girl" simply because she does not wear make-up and has naturally flawless skin. Some of the implications of Bella's character being presented in this way is that it may insinuate that being a girl who is interested in typically feminine things or wears make-up is somehow less interesting or deserving of respect. Bella is romanticized for her distinctiveness, and seen as desirable *because* she is not like 'other girls' – effectively setting her in opposition to and comparing her to her peers. Pitting girls against each other has always been an instrumental tool to the patriarchy, and characterizations like this is partly why Meyer has been accused of writing an anti-feminist text.

Obviously, Meyer is not the first author to utilize the non-conventional heroine: it is a trope that has been well documented since the conception of the novel, and Austen was observably one of the authors that explored this narrative through her protagonists. Although their distinctions are plentiful, there are also several aspects of Catherine Morland's and Bella Swan's characters that are comparable, one of them being the otherness of their characterizations, as well as the plainness of their appearances and personalities in general. In the opening lines of *Northanger Abbey,* we are introduced to Catherine as a non-conventional heroine: "No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be a heroine. Her situation in life, the character of her father and mother, her own person and disposition, were all equally against her" (Austen 5). From the beginning, we are urged to consider the lack of remarkableness and the mundanity of Catherine's character, and this introduction doubtlessly paints the perception of her character for the duration of the narrative. In accordance with Bella Swan, Catherine is introduced as a plain girl, perhaps one that an ordinary reader can associate with. As the reader, we are expected to believe that there is nothing extraordinary about Catherine; neither her personality nor her family are of any supposed interest. Yet, towards the end of the novel we grow to appreciate and value her disposition, and become more inclined to believe that she *is* deserving of the heroine title after all.

Another similarity between the two heroines is their physical attributes and their supposed plainness. Catherine's appearance, at the beginning of *Northanger Abbey*, is described as being "as plain as any", and she has "a thin awkward figure, a sallow skin without colour, dark lank hair, and strong features" (Austen 5). These physical characteristics that define Catherine are unmistakably similar to Bella's description of herself in *Twilight*: "I was ivory-skinned, without even the excuse of blue eyes or red hair, despite the constant sunshine. I had always been slender, but soft somehow, obviously not an athlete; I didn't have the necessary hand eye coordination" (Meyer 10). Furthermore, as Bella examines her own reflection in the bathroom mirror she notes that: "I looked sallower, unhealthy. My skin could be pretty – it was clear, almost translucent-looking – but it all depended on color. I had no color here" (Meyer 10). The similarities in description are almost striking, even down to the choice of descriptive words like 'sallow'. They are both described as thin and awkward, with long dark hair, prominent facial features, and distinctly pale skin. Their similar physical description is not something that was considered at the conception of this thesis, but it is nonetheless a fascinating and coincidental parallel. Ultimately, it might only indicate that their

physical characterizations are not highly innovative but could instead serve as a description of a plethora of girls, which again points to their plainness as a feature of their relatability.

The Intertextuality of Bella's Reading

Meyer's intertextual ambitions are recognizable throughout the whole book series, and direct allusions to Shakespeare, Brontë, and Austen become almost foundational to the narratives. As a devoted and self-proclaimed fan of Jane Austen, Meyer's first installment of the *Twilight* series is very loosely based on or inspired by *Pride and Prejudice*. For the rest of the series her literary influences are far more overt and intentional: the second novel *New Moon* has definite references to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, whereas the third book *Eclipse* is modelled on *Wuthering Heights*. Lastly, with *Breaking Dawn,* Meyer was inspired by other Shakespeare plays, namely *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Merchant of Venice* (Meyer, *Illustrated Guide*, 41-51). By utilizing many intertextual references and mentions of classic literature, Meyer not only appeals to the intellectually interested reader and lover of literature, but she potentially introduces a whole new demographic to the vastness of literary fiction, and a library of classics they otherwise may have felt discouraged from reading.

Bella Swan's knowledge of and interest in classic literature surely surpasses that of the average high school student. She is always days or weeks ahead of her homework schedule, and spends her time writing essays on "[w]hether Shakespeare's treatment of the female characters is misogynistic", to which her classmate reacts by staring at her like she had "just spoken in pig Latin" (Meyer, *Twilight* 143-4). In *Twilight* Bella can be observed reading her shabby "compilation of the works of Jane Austen" in which her "favorites were *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*" (147-8), and in *New Moon*, Edward's sister Alice comments that Bella has "*Romeo and Juliet* memorized" (Meyer, *New Moon* 10). The already literary interested reader may identify with Bella's reading habits, and the feeling of being a more advanced reader with superior knowledge and understanding of literature than their classmates. Bella often relates her own experiences to those of fictional characters, particularly heroines in classic romance stories. Allusions to fairy tales, Shakespearean plays, and novels like *Wuthering Heights* are frequent: "I was like Cathy, like *Wuthering Heights*, only my options were so much better than hers, neither one evil, neither one weak. And here I sat, crying about it, not doing anything productive to make it right. Just like Cathy" (Meyer, *Eclipse* 459).

Sara K. Day identifies the use of "narrative intimacy" in *Twilight* between the protagonist and the reader. She defines narrative intimacy as the "construction of the narrator-

narratee relationship as a reflection or model of intimate interpersonal relationships, established through the disclosure of information and the experience of the story as a space that the narrator shares with the reader" (Day 68). Through the textual relationship between the narrator and reader, Bella shares her love of reading and enthusiasm for classic literature, inspiring the reader to share this interest. Consequentially, her own narrative intimacy to literary characters encourages narrative intimacy between the reader of *Twilight* and the character of Bella. This narrative intimacy that Day describes also arguably correlates to Iser's idea of the implied reader, which was explored in chapter one between the reader of *Northanger Abbey* and the narrator/protagonist and even the author. The assumed or hypothetical reader of *Twilight* will likely easily relate to Bella, perhaps especially when it comes to attitudes towards reading. Like Catherine and the reader of *Northanger Abbey*, Bella and the reader of *Twilight* might incidentally be Radcliffean heroines co-authoring their own story, which again is reminiscent of Barthes' idea of the ideal text that blurs the distinction between the writer and reader.

When it comes to reading it seems that Bella Swan, not unlike Austen's heroine Catherine Morland, is particularly fond of the Gothic novel – another aspect in which the characterizations of the two heroines correspond. Bella's tattered and well-read copy of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* makes multiple appearances throughout the series. The first direct mention of the novel appears in the second chapter, appropriately named "Open Book": "I had decided to read *Wuthering Heights* – the novel we were currently studying in English – yet again for the fun of it" (Meyer, *Twilight* 34-5). Her knowledge and familiarity of the book that she has read, and presumably will reread many times, is so good that she completed a pop quiz on it with comfortable ease during her first week of Forks High School (38). The consequent reactions and attitudes towards what and how the protagonists of *Twilight* and *Northanger Abbey* read are also distinctively similar, especially the reactions of the male heroes Edward Cullen and Mr. Henry Tilney.

In the third installment of the series, *Eclipse*, the intertextual relationship to *Wuthering Heights* becomes prominent. Bella is once again rereading her "much-abused copy" of Brontë's novel whose "binding was so destroyed that it slumped flat to the table" (Meyer, *Eclipse* 7). At several instances in the novel, we are privy to Edward's anxiety and bewilderment about the books Bella chooses to read, especially her attachment to and enjoyment of *Wuthering Heights,* and early in the novel, they quarrel about the readability of Brontë's novel:

> I can't believe you're reading *Wuthering Heights* again. Don't you know it by heart yet? … I don't understand why you like it. The characters are ghastly people who ruin each other's lives. I don't know how Heathcliff and Cathy ended up ranked with couples like Romeo and Juliet or Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy. It isn't a love story, it's a hate story. (24-5)

Edward keeps pressing her to reveal why the novel interests her so much, showing his concern about the potential influence Brontë's novel and its "ghastly" characters have on her. Self-indulgently, he is also scared that Bella compares him to Heathcliff, who in his eyes is a malignant and unredeemable character. To this, Bella assures him, that due to her selfishness, "Catherine is really the source of all the trouble, not Heathcliff" (25). It is obvious that Edward believes Bella to be prone to what Beetham describes as "inappropriate reading", and that he is anxious that she will "misidentify with [the] female heroine" of *Wuthering Heights*, "or take for fact what should be understood as fiction" (Beetham 66). Similarly to Catherine Morland, Bella is not only criticized and condemned for her reading by society at large, but more importantly by the man with whom she is romantically involved.

The narrative intimacy between the reader of *Twilight* – or reader of *Northanger Abbey* for that matter – and the protagonist within the text becomes even stronger because of society's inclination to either condemn or control the interests of young women. When it comes to *Twilight*, it is both interesting and important to highlight that even within the text the young female character is questioned and criticized for her reading. Not only have readers of the *Twilight* series long been examined for their passionate and engaged reading, but this concern is so ingrained in society that it is even present within the text itself. In a book specifically targeted towards teenage girls who read, the trope of reading books – especially the kinds that have been historically dismissed – is condemned by the male hero. The analysis of Edward Cullen as a Byronic hero, akin to Gothic heroes like Heathcliff or Mr. Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, or even the more recent Lestat in *Interview with the Vampire*, is not uncommon in academic scholarship. However, I believe there are definitely grounds for also comparing him to one of Jane Austen's most Gothic heroes, Mr. Henry Tilney, particularly when it comes to attitudes towards his partner's reading habits. Like Mr. Tilney, Edward Cullen does not explicitly police what his love interest is allowed to read, instead he expresses definite anxiety about the potential influence the novels might have on her, as he quietly and implicitly tries to deter her from re-reading her favorite books.

Being "bizarrely moral for a vampire" (475), Edward is presented as a character to be looked up to, both morally and intellectually. It is difficult to overlook his superiority over the

protagonist in a plethora of ways. First of all, his age, being born over a hundred years ago, bestows him with greater lived life experience. Secondly, his advanced education: throughout his long life he has managed to attain two medical degrees and several other graduate degrees in literature, mathematics, engineering, several languages, among others (Meyer, *Illustrated Guide* 97). Additionally, his financial standing is far superior to Bella's, who was raised between two single working-class parents. When you compare Edward's character to Bella Swan – a mere mortal seventeen-year-old girl with a high school education – it is obvious that there is a substantial imbalance between the two characters. Considering the fact that Edward has a degree in literature, his opinions on a classic literary work might appear to hold more significance. However, *Twilight* and Bella's character prove that one need not have a higher education to have a nuanced appreciation for literature. Edward's inability to understand Bella's enjoyment of *Wuthering Heights* and her interest in its flawed characters is slightly staggering. Even with his superior education and knowledge of literature, he is unable to understand, or chooses not to understand her perspective. After his mocking disbelief that eventually turns into sincere curiosity about her rereading habits, Bella finally answers him: "I think it's something about the inevitability. How nothing can keep them apart – not her selfishness, or his evil, or even death, in the end … Their love *is* their only redeeming quality" (25). She is able to find meaning and pleasure in this literary work, and applies characters' struggles and attributions to her own experiences.

Eclipse, and the whole *Twilight* saga by extension, predominantly mirrors *Wuthering Heights* in one distinct manner, which is directly quoted by Bella towards the end of the novel: "'If all else perished and, he remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained, and he were to be annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger.'" (Meyer, *Eclipse* 541). This famous quotation from *Wuthering Heights* accurately portrays the sentiments of the series and the overwhelming feelings the heroine and the hero share for each other. In the end, the *Twilight* saga is about an all-encompassing, overpowering, fairly toxic, irrevocable, passionate love that borders on obsession, which in many ways reflects Heathcliff and Catherine's relationship to each other. Although Edward strongly dislikes the brutal characters of *Wuthering Heights* and opposes any comparison, there is no denying that their own love story is haunted by the same ill-fated passion and intensity. Ultimately, Edward's anxiety about Bella potentially idealizing these characters and their relationship also echoes and reveals the concerns many people have about *Twilight* itself, and anxieties about the influence Bella and Edward's relationship might have on young readers.

Considering *Northanger Abbey*, *Twilight* and *Wuthering Height* altogether, the circularity of intertextuality and influence that they propose is allegorically efficacious. For example, the manner in which Edward's concerns about the toxicity of Heathcliff's character become almost self-referential considering the immense apprehension towards his own character by scholars and casual readers alike, on the grounds of toxic behavior. Both Mr. Tilney and Edward's concerns and anxieties regarding the potential influence romantic and Gothic literature may have on the respective young heroines is a highly successful parallel to the reactions towards teenage fangirls that grew in the general public as a result of *Twilight*'s immense popularity – proving once and for all that the interests of young women will perhaps always be prone to ridicule or skepticism. Additionally, the intertextuality also highlights the concerns and expectations about the potential influence of literature, specifically the romantic influence. Using Bella as an example, her expectations of romance and love are suspected to come from the novels that she reads – Jane Austen's whole bibliography, *Wuthering Heights*, *Romeo and Juliet*. Simultaneously, the reader of *Twilight* might long for a romance akin to the fictional one between Bella and Edward, weaving a long thread of romantic influence, expectations and narrative intimacy.

The Reception of *Twilight* and the Treatment of the Girl Reader

It seems that young girls, more frequently than anyone else, find themselves in the position of having to justify their reading – whether it be the types of literature they choose to divulge in, their level of enthusiasm, simply how they read books, or even what they gain from them. In her essay "How Should One Read a Book?" from 1926, Virginia Woolf comments on this dilemma:

> If the moralists ask us how we can justify our love of reading, we can make use of some such excuse as this. But if we are honest, we know that no such excuse is needed. It is true that we get nothing whatsoever except pleasure from reading; it is true that the wisest of us is unable to say what that pleasure may be. But that pleasure—mysterious, unknown, useless as it is—is enough. (Woolf 52)

She emphasizes and concludes that judgement should not be placed upon the pleasure that one gets out of reading. It seems like many people forget that teenage girls – along the same lines as every other demographic – should be able to enjoy and find pleasure in whatever they choose. Just because some types of literature – typically the ones associated with femaleness and/or adolescence – have less perceived literary value, does not mean they are more innately deserving of critique. Subsequently, *Twilight* has become a perfect example of how the

concerns and anxieties about what girls read are as significantly prevalent today as they were in the eighteenth century, when novels became increasingly popular – both in the way that Bella is treated as a reader within the text, and how the typical readers of *Twilight* themselves have been treated.

There is no doubt that the *Twilight* saga has received its fair share of controversy. In his chapter "The *Twilight* Controversy", Joseph Crawford delves into an extensive investigation of what exactly made the *Twilight* series so controversial as opposed to other popular series like *Harry Potter* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and what it can tell us about contemporary popular culture's attitude towards gender, sex and romance. His immediate conclusion is that the controversy is ultimately due to the overwhelming success of the series (Crawford 181). When a work of literature or franchise reaches the level of success that *Twilight* did in the late 2000s, a level of controversy and criticism is to be expected. Furthermore, when a piece of media has so many enthusiastic and fervent fans there is bound to be backlash against them and the thing they love by proxy. This is certainly the case with *Twilight*. What differentiates the reception of the *Twilight* series from for example *Harry Potter* and *Buffy* – series that are certainly comparable to *Twilight* when it comes to mainstream popularity – is the level of controversy and animosity it received, and the very specific type of criticism that was overly concerned with the gender and adolescence of the audience.

Following the release of *Twilight* in 2005 and *New Moon* in 2006, the books already had a devoted fan base, but the real craze period had not happened yet, therefore the reviews remained relatively inoffensive. For instance, an early reviewer from *The New York Times* called the premise of *Twilight* "attractive and compelling" although "the book suffers at times from overearnest, amateurish writing" (Spires). Crawford notes that by 2008-2009 there was a shift in the focus of the reviews, moving from light-hearted perplexity about the rapid success of the series to more lengthy accounts of concern and criticism about its content (Crawford 181). As the books received mainstream popularity, and became almost impossible to ignore, the overwhelmingly negative reviews became commonplace. The reviews departed from criticism of Meyer's quality of writing and instead focused on the reader. This manifested in concerns about negative influence on the adolescent female audience, as well as criticisms of 'annoying' teen fangirls and hysteric fan culture. Crawford identifies five main channels in which the controversy and criticism of the series played out, which all generated distinctive debates: reviews of the books and films; opinion pieces about the franchise, and of the fan culture surrounding it; open discussions about the series, both in real life and online; internet

fanfiction; and lastly, books, scholarly articles and academic essays on the subject (Crawford 183).

Naturally, early reviews from readers were overwhelmingly positive. By the end of December 2005 there were only a little over one hundred reviews of *Twilight* on Amazon.com, a majority of them awarding the book a five-star rating. These early readers were very enthusiastic in their reviews, claiming that "I've never read a book that touched me so deeply" or "It's my new favourite book" (Crawford 184). Crawford establishes that these types of positive reader-reviews were commonplace in the years 2005-08, as the sequels to *Twilight* were being published. As the book's readership rapidly grew, reviews became increasingly more negative, and by 2007 the reviews had become fairly mixed. Although negative reviews of the books by people that were disappointed with them did exist, they were among a small majority, as so many were perhaps unusually and "extremely vocal about their love" (186). What followed is perhaps only a natural progression in the reception of a piece of media that becomes increasingly popular at a rapid rate: the more mainstream popularity a book gains, the more negative attention it will garner as it moves away from the hands of the intended reader and into the grasp of a larger audience.

Mainstream print and online media did not pay genuine attention to the series until the release of the last book *Breaking Dawn* in 2008, accompanied with growing anticipation for the upcoming film adaptation of *Twilight*. As the *Twilight* series proceeded on a trajectory of fame comparable to *Harry Potter*, Meyer was increasingly compared to J. K. Rowling as an author. At the same time, the content and messages the books offered to young readers were subjected to considerable scrutiny, in addition to close comparison of the different fan bases and their support. As two of the most contemporarily popular franchises aimed at children and young adults, it is fairly inevitable that the media would compare the two extensively. An article in *The Wall Street Journal* from July 2009 quoted Hollywood producer and executive Jeff Gomes comparing the two franchises saying, "even a series as established as "Harry Potter" can be threatened by a franchise like "Twilight," which has exploded so quickly and attracted such ravenous fans" (Schuker). The same article also quotes a thirteen-year-old reader of both *Twilight* and *Harry Potter* who explains she now prefers the *Twilight* books as she finds them more relatable to her, and that "A lot of my friends have gone off 'Harry Potter' and are onto 'Twilight'" (Schuker). Although the *Harry Potter* series seemingly has found a steadier fan base with greater longevity (considering the fact that the franchise is continuously producing blockbuster films to this day), there is something to be said about the

passion and devotion that arose from the typically thirteen-year-old fan of *Twilight* in the late 2000s and early 2010s.

About fan culture, Jessica Sheffield and Elyse Merlo establish that "very few associative groups have found themselves subject to more popular and academic scrutiny than fans" (207). This is especially true of female fans of any type of media, evident by merely examining the dichotomy of associations between the words 'fangirl' and 'fanboy'. As a feminist media scholar focused on fan studies, Melissa A. Click noticed that in 2008 Merriam-Webster had decided to add the word 'fanboy' in the Webster's Collegiate Dictionary but not include the feminine version. She argues that "fanboys have greater visibility in popular culture because their interests and activities have become an unspoken standard. Fangirls' interests and strategies, which do not register when positioned against fanboys', are ignored—or worse, ridiculed" (Click), and that this is particularly prevalent in when it comes to Twilight and the dedicated 'Twi-Hards' (the name that came to describe particularly dedicated fans of the series). However, in today's popular media climate the word 'fangirl' has seemingly become more widespread than its masculine equivalent, presumably as a result of the 'mainstreamification' of female majority fandoms like with *Twilight*, or even in the music industry with boybands and K-pop groups. Although 'fangirls' might have more visibility in today's popular culture, it does not mean that the media they are engrossed in is any more respected, as the associations with the word seem to be overwhelmingly negative.

Essentially, the mainstream media seemed bewildered and surprised at the popularity and success of *Twilight* saga. After the premiere of the first film in 2008 reports from major publications like *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Entertainment Weekly* and *The Boston Globe* described the fans as being "on the rabid side", "in a frenzy" or "ravenous" and that their interests were "enthusiasm bordering on hysteria" (Click). Rhetoric like this became increasingly commonplace in popular media over the next few years. The sheer level of hostility towards the franchise and fandom in the years 2005-2012 was so severe that it created a whole community of anti-fans called "Twi-Hater" who were dedicated to the cause of criticizing, condemning and tearing down the series, particularly in an online setting (Crawford 192). Something about the *Twilight* series in particular seemed to aggravate an excessive level of resistance, presumably a response to the unapologetic fanaticism exhibited by teenage girls (although older fans also did exist, like 'Twilight Moms'), a resistance particularly fueled by the femaleness and youth of the fans.

The rise of internet use and culture also helped cultivate a perfect platform not only for fan spaces, but also thriving anti-fan spaces where people could assemble and share their

dislike. Multiple studies have been done on internet hate, showing that the internet has grown to become a special breeding place for shared animosity. Jablonska and Polkowski argue that the internet "plays a significant role in distributing hate … as well as providing a new environment for making hateful material more visible for a broad audience" (165), especially among young people. Though this study focuses mostly on hate speech, it most certainly also reflects the type of hate *Twilight* received, which was largely rooted in sexism and misogyny. It is certainly arguable that the tendency for collective hate on the internet was a catapult and incubator for negative reactions to the *Twilight* series, especially since the target audience – teenage girls – could be construed as an easy target, as they generally possess little cultural capital and societal respect.

The shame that accompanied feelings of enjoyment and amusement produced by consuming the books is detailed by many readers. In a study by Anne Helen Petersen where she explores the reactions that a group of adult feminists had to reading the *Twilight* books, she argues that "adult readers are ashamed of reading in a style usually associated with young girls" (60). Although, many of the women – including herself – described a sense of enthrallment and incontestable pleasure deriving from the consumption, it was often accompanied by shameful guilt. Multiple women stated that they "hate[d] to admit" that they got caught up in the books, or even that they felt "so sad" about their own indulgence (Petersen 60). Furthermore, Petersen argues that "the pleasures of *Twilight* are strongly linked with the pleasures inherent to teenage girldom, including reading, first love, and the obsession and absorption accompanying both practices" (61). The idea of absorbed reading has somehow become synonymous with how teenage girls read, to the point where older women are inclined to feel ashamed about being thoroughly captivated by a novel.

But it was not only feminist adults that felt shameful about reading and enjoying the books; the sentiment also influenced adolescent girls who observed the societal reactions to the series and its readers. One of these former adolescent readers affirms that, influenced by shame, she concealed her reading of the books to everyone in her life:

> I couldn't get through the novels fast enough, but was also hesitant to cash in on any of the cultural capital — or lack thereof, depending on who you asked — that came with them. I wanted to say I had read the books everyone was talking about, but didn't want to endure detracting remarks from critics. *"Why would you read that?" "You know that they're not any good, right?"* Maybe I was in a "not like other girls phase," where I rejected anything marketed toward women and felt silly for picking the books up in the first place. (H. Johnson)

Ultimately, for many readers the *Twilight* books have generated a 'guilty pleasure' or perhaps a forbidden love between the reader and the novel akin to the one we can observe within the text. Women of all ages, even the ones that are the intended demographic of the novels, have been made to feel embarrassed by society, upholding the patriarchal structure in which things that are seen as feminine are deemed less meaningful and worthy of respect. All of this mirrors the fate of the girl reader in the times of the Gothic novel, during the Romantic and the Victorian periods: regretfully, women have never been able to read without the burden of ridicule and scrutiny.

The reception of *Twilight* has shown that there are serious anxieties about the potential influence of enthusiastic reading especially related to young women. However, what exactly are the consequences of girls enjoying reading, and what is the fundamental reason behind all the anxieties? It is not baseless to assume that, on a societal level, the policing of what girls read is based in the fear that they might develop unfounded ideas that are disadvantageous to the patriarchy. As Kate Flint remarks about Victorian reading in *The Woman Reader*, the reasoning behind the policing of women's reading has always been along the lines of: "certain texts might corrupt her innocent mind, hence diminishing her value as a woman" (22), or that "reading fiction … wastes time which may more valuably be employed elsewhere". A great deal of the blatant aversion to novels like *Twilight* certainly comes from a misguided attempt to protect young women, fueled by the fear that they might be corrupted by the novels they read. Whether or not this is a conscious attempt, it perpetuates the idea that women – especially young women – are incapable of critical reading. Crawford emphasizes this point in his critical reading of the reception of *Twilight*:

> [T]he critics of the series have tended to pronounce with great confidence that such fictional material must be harmful to its readers, who – perhaps because of their presumed youth and femaleness – often seem to be assumed, a priori, to lack the critical faculties necessary to distinguish between fantasy and reality. (Crawford 201)

Ultimately, I think it is safe to assume that most readers of *Twilight* – however young, female and impressionable – recognize that the novels are not biographies or a how-to-manuals on teen relationships, but rather a series of fantasy fiction that serves as entertainment or even escapism.

The Effects of *Twilight*'s Success and Controversy

It is arguable that the success of the *Twilight* series contributed to a resurgence in reading among teenage girls and young women – much like *Harry Potter* did with children some

years earlier – during a period when the act of reading as a hobby was steadily declining among this demographic. The immense popularity of the series, as well as the literary intertextuality and portrayals of reading within the novels, could help reading appear as a more desirable and acceptable pastime.

The sales numbers of the saga definitely prove that a lot of reading was being done, and at this time, the original four books in the saga have sold over 100 million copies combined (Cain). As the final novel in the series was released at the very critical moment of the franchise's popularity in late 2008, *Breaking Dawn* sold over 1.3 million copies in the first twenty-four hours after its publication (Bosman). After 12 years of Meyer not publishing any works related to the *Twilight*-universe, the honorary fifth addition to the original tetralogy sold over one million copies during the first week of its release (Milliot). The sales numbers for the release of *Midnight Sun* in 2020 definitely comment on the longevity of the series and its success. The book was originally intended for publication not long after the conclusion of the initial four-volume saga. However, after an early unfinished manuscript was leaked on the internet Meyer temporarily abandoned the project, subsequently halting the publication for over a decade (Cain).

Not only did Meyer's books themselves sell in abundance, but the success of the series also sparked sales of classic novels. Reported in a 2009 article in *The Telegraph*, the sale of *Wuthering Heights* dramatically increased following the release of *Eclipse* (Adams). Sales reports confirm the fact that the *Twilight* books have contributed to an increased interest in literary classics and reading in general, especially among the young female audience. In 2009, publishing company HarperCollins even published a new edition of *Wuthering Heights* that mimicked the artwork of Meyer's *Twilight* books in order to "attract her fans" (Adams). Paying homage to the intertextual elements in Meyer's series, HarperCollins also published *Romeo and Juliet* and *Pride and Prejudice* in the same *Twilight*-esque design. In a matter of months, this new edition of *Wuthering Heights* sold more than double the amounts of the regular Penguin Classic edition, and Brontë's novel effectively became the bestselling classic in Waterstones that year (Flood).

Twilight also inspired a whole revitalization of especially the vampire romance novel but also supernatural or gothic elements in young adult literature in general. Series like *House of Night* by P. C. and Kristin Cast, Alyson Noël's *Immortals* series (beginning with *Evermore*), and the *Vampire Academy* series by Richelle Mead, all found success as vampire romances in the aftermath of *Twilight* (Levy and Mendlesohn 201). Additionally, other young adult books and series that featured supernatural romances that were marketed to the *Twilight*-

lover, were also successful – including *Shiver* by Maggie Stiefvater, *Beautiful Creatures* by Cami Garcia, and *Hush, Hush* by Becca Fitzpatrick, as well as *The Mortal Instruments* series by Cassandra Clare. The inclusion of supernatural elements and themes, including vampires, werewolves, witchcraft, magic, angels and demons became the new standard in young adult publishing.

Although the trend in publishing of supernatural fiction in the late 2000s/early 2010s proves that many young adults were in fact reading, it is pertinent to question how sustainable this trend in reading actually was. Most statistics show that the number of adolescents and young adults reading for fun is declining (at least in the pre-pandemic era). A survey done by the National Assessment of Educational Progress in 2019-20 shows that the number of 13-year-olds who read for fun in the United States is at its lowest since the 1980s (Schaeffer). One of the findings that the study displays is that the number of 13-year-olds who say they never read is around thirty per cent, compared to only eight per cent in 1984. Additionally, the results of this survey also show that, in all age groups, girls are more inclined to read for fun than boys (Schaeffer). According to Schaeffer, the portion of the survey that dealt with 17-year-olds who read for fun was scheduled for March of 2020, but the NAEP cancelled the survey due to the pandemic. The numbers from 2012, however, show that nineteen per cent report reading every day, while twenty-seven per cent admit to never or hardly ever reading for fun. In general, it is evident that reading for pleasure or as a hobby has steadily declined since the eighties. Even with the huge commercial successes like the *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games* series, the number of teenagers the number of teenagers consecutively reading is not colossal. The lack of up-to-date statistics from the pandemic or post-pandemic era is noteworthy, as Schaeffer points out: "It is unclear whether the pandemic may have changed these patterns". Without any actual supporting statistics defending the argument, I nonetheless advocate for the idea that the pandemic might have shifted this previous trend in reading habits among adolescents.

The 2020s – A New Decade of *Twilight*

As evidenced, the scholarship on the *Twilight* series as a phenomenon and the fandom it cultivated is already extensively covered in academic articles and books. What is not as thoroughly explored yet is the second wave or the renaissance of the series in the 2020s, seeing as the books and films seems to have gained both a newfound and a returning audience. What many people are calling the 'Twilight Renaissance' can be traced back to several catalyzing factors, perhaps most noticeably Meyer's announcement in May 2020 that

Midnight Sun was finally ready for publication. After *Midnight Sun*'s successful publication in the second half of 2020, the online streaming service Netflix acquired the licensing from Lionsgate to release all five film adaptations on their platform in 2021. All of the films performed impressively well, and Netflix's top 10 hourly data reveals that *Twilight* was one of the most watched films on the platform for several weeks after the release – leading to what some called a "Twilight Summer" on Netflix (Moore).

The recent trend in reading among young adults specifically catalyzed by and grown from online influences is becoming increasingly impossible to ignore. During the last couple of years, particularly defined by the pandemic, emerging popular platforms like TikTok have embraced communities that are centering around literature and reading. Book-centered communities on platforms like YouTube and Instagram have been in fact around for a while. Dorothee Birke claims that in 2021 "BookTube (a subset of YouTube) and Bookstagram (a community on Instagram) are currently the most visible hubs for bookish online activities" ("Social Reading" 150). I would like to argue that with the overwhelming growth and popularity of TikTok – presumably triggered by the pandemic and subsequent lockdown – the app has potentially become the most influential platform for current reading trends. Currently, the hashtag #BookTok has over 95.7 billion[2] views on the platform – consequentially it has been recognized by the publishing industry as an enormous influence on book sales. Novels like *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* by Taylor Jenkins Reid, and Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles,* which first came out in 2011, have seen an exponential growth in sales as a result of BookTok exposure (Chaudhry). Chaudhry also argues that the BookTok community particularly highlights "[f]antasy book series" as well as "books marketed to teenagers or book genres – like romance – that are popular among women". Considering this, it is not unexpected that an ostensibly older or 'outdated' series like *Twilight* has done well on the platform. TikTok has essentially become a new and powerful marketing platform, that might very well alter the future trajectory of traditional publishing.

For the *Twilight* franchise specifically, TikTok has been a thriving environment for reemerging interest in the novels and films. It has led to a revival in readership, where readers are either rediscovering the series as adults – perhaps old readers uncovering a new perspective of the same story in *Midnight Sun* – or a new generation of teens are experiencing all the novels for the first time. Users like @twilight_talk, with over 300 000 followers and 24

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[2] This number is almost the double of what it was when the paragraph was initially written, which points to the exceptional growth rate of the platform.

million likes, are completely dedicated to discussing and unfolding the entirety of the franchise. Sarah Elizabeth, the person behind the TikTok account who lovingly criticizes the choices that were made in both the books and films, emphasizes: “I love these books enough to also hate them” and “a lot of people in this fandom see it as their responsibility to talk about the things that are deeply problematic with *Twilight*, and I am one of those people. It doesn’t mean I don’t love it” (@twilight_talk), which seems to be the overarching sentiment of the *Twilight* revival.

The last couple of years there has been an influx of online magazines and tabloids writing articles on the ‘*Twilight* Renaissance’. In one of these articles published by Vice, the author argues that during the pandemic “TikTok became a treasure trove for people to reminisce about *Twilight*” (Ewe). One of the people interviewed in the article was also someone that started gaining online traction on TikTok by addressing the *Twilight* franchise. Kaylee Jaye, who mainly uses her platform on the app to cosplay as Bella Swan, admits in the article that she previously in her life was abhorrently critical towards the series: “I was actually one of the many who despised *Twilight* when it first came out. I think I was around 10 or 11, and I was firmly in my not-like-other-girls phase so I wrote off anything even slightly feminine, including *Twilight* … Now that I'm older, I have a much more nuanced view of the series”. Contrary to Sarah Elizabeth and a whole group of other online creators reminiscing on their adolescent relationship with the series, Kaylee Jaye has a uniquely distinctive perspective on the books and films as a new fan or even ‘reformed hater’. The ‘*Twilight* Renaissance’ is therefore not only a result of grown up ‘Twi-Hards’ rediscovering their love for the series, but also previous ‘Twi-Haters’ who have been newly converted as fans. As Koh Ewe points out in her article: “I’m just now beginning to unironically enjoy the things that my younger self would call lame” (Ewe).

The emergence of communities like BookTok where people discuss, analyze and recommend books is definitely a contributor to the destigmatizing of the teenage girl as a reader and consumer. Important conversations about reading are being held on huge platforms that reach millions of people. I argue that the resurgence of *Twilight* highlights the significance of the reading girl both in society and within the literary narrative. The adolescent girls that grew up reading *Twilight* and other similar novels have now grown up to become adults who can recognize and understand that the stigma they experienced as readers was ultimately an oppressive force of the patriarchy. By taking ownership of their reading, influenced by ‘bookish’ online communities or pandemic induced isolation, their passion and love for *Twilight* or the act of reading becomes political and defiant in its nature. Finding and

consuming the types of literature that is pleasurable and enjoyable to your individual person, as opposed to what society expects you to read, is immensely important. I wish to reinforce the argument that the resurgence of *Twilight* readership represents exactly this – that young women are claiming agency over their own reading and the gratification they gain from it, regardless of the patriarchal society's foregoing attempt at shaming them.

Ultimately, this chapter has been a literary and cultural study of girls who read, using Stephenie Meyer's protagonist in *Twilight* as an archetype of the teenaged female reader. The figure of the reading girl, represented in *Twilight* by Bella Swan, is indicative of a literary legacy in which female authors utilize a protagonist that reflects the reader, in order to produce narrative verisimilitude, relatability, and narrative intimacy. As a reading girl herself, on one side, Bella Swan has encouraged enthusiastic reading among young women, but on the other side she has also become a symbol of ridicule and induced patriarchal distain toward the teenage girl as a consumer. The literary and cultural reception of *Twilight* is emblematic of the treatment of the reading girl within society. As a narrative on reading, in the same way as *Northanger Abbey*, *Twilight* can be used as an effective tool to measure the cultural value of reading. Because the readership of *Twilight* is particularly young and female, and due to its overwhelmingly negative reception, the novel reveals that young women retain neither cultural capital nor value and respect as readers.

Conclusion

The figure of the reading girl can be traced throughout this thesis; she is the protagonist of the novels that are analyzed, she is the implied and actual reader of these novels, and she is the writer. I have explored all the ways in which the narratives of both *Northanger Abbey* and *Twilight* embrace the figure of the reading girl, as a reaction to the anxieties around female readership. Both *Northanger Abbey* and *Twilight*, in their individualistic ways, prove that the trope of the reading girl serves as both a subject of admiration and derision. Furthermore, the figure has been used as a means to diminish the distance between the protagonists and the readers of the texts. Throughout the thesis I demonstrate how literature and protagonist figures represent the social conditions of the reader, and how the manifestations of the reader, the protagonist and the writer are all interconnected. Both Austen and Meyer employs the figure as a way to manufacture relatability and narrative intimacy between the protagonist and the reader of the text. The reader of *Northanger Abbey* and *Twilight*, is – together with Catherine Morland and Bella Swan – the reading girl.

As a literary trope and a figure within the narratives of the two novels, the reading girl embodies the societal anxieties that limit and restrict literature associated with women and female readership. The anxieties surrounding young women who read has been perpetuated uncontestably since the eighteenth-century dawn of the novel to this day. The thesis has explored how this anxiety has shifted and molded, throughout genres and decades, particularly in fiction written by women. Historically, women have been prescribed a specific mode of reading, defined as inappropriate, naïve, engrossed and uneducated, which ultimately perpetuates the idea that women are 'bad readers'. During the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries, the supposed consequences of inappropriate female reading were plentiful. The idea that novels would corrupt the young innocent mind was an adamant belief, which related to the idea that women – because of their innocence and naïveté – were likely to misidentify with characters. Other anxieties related to the fear of unproductivity and the fear that women who partook in excessive reading would neglect their 'womanly duties'.

The first chapter of the thesis explored how these eighteenth-century anxieties about female influence have determined the fate and reputation of literature associated with women. The chapter detailed the history of the novel as a 'woman's form', the reasons it was considered a particularly female genre of literature, and the consequences of this consideration. As the novel rose in popularity within the blossoming middle class of the eighteenth-century, and was read by middle class women who, more than anyone else, had

free time, the genre became associated with women. Consequently, because of its inherent and prevailing link to femininity, the novel has had to endure decades of abuse and scrutiny. Subsequently, I used Austen's novel *Northanger Abbey* as a case study to emphasize the contemporary cultural fears that circumscribed the girl reader. The novel is both a vindication of the woman writer and a defense of reading as a means of pleasure and entertainment, and therefore an integral literary work in favor of female agency and the destigmatization of literature enjoyed by women. In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen satirizes the cultural anxieties that surround young women who indulge in enthusiastic reading, through the character of Catherine Morland who is an avid reader of 'silly novels', and the men in her life that shame her for her enthusiasm. The implied reader of *Northanger Abbey* is, just as Catherine herself, a reading girl, which strengthens the case in favor of enthusiastic 'inappropriate' reading.

The second chapter of the thesis encompasses much of the same anxieties about readership as the first, only through the perspective of the twenty-first century and the teenage girl as a contemporary consumer of novels. As evidenced by the case study of *Twilight*, the anxieties concerning young women's affectability is still the leading criticism of literature marketed towards girls. As many critics of *Twilight* believed that the protagonist embodied anti-feminist sentiments and that the love story was explicitly toxic, the fear that teenage girls would misidentify with Bella Swan was particularly prevalent. Other fears suggested that adolescent girls were unable to distinguish between fact and fiction. However, the overwhelmingly negative reception of the series suggests that it was not the literary substance of the novels that was especially prone to criticism, it was the fanaticism of the readers. The resistance towards the *Twilight* series was acutely aggravated by the fact that the enthusiastic and passionate supporters were particularly young and female. The *Twilight* phenomenon is a perfect contemporary example of the gender biased dichotomy between appreciation and condemnation of different genres of literature. As Morey points out "Meyer is working with a combination of low-status genres – the vampire tale, the romance, the female coming-of-age story" which is why the "political aspects of the saga's genre are both prominent and inextricable from gender" (2). I argue that while the character of Bella Swan has inspired young women to read voraciously, she is simultaneous functioning as a target of gendered mockery that represents the patriarchal contempt for the adolescent girl as a consumer, all the while being dismissed as an anti-feminist character by others.

Although my personal excitement for reading has both soared and falter throughout the course of my adult life, the process of this thesis and the analysis of the figurative reading girl has once again ignited a passion for reading and an urge to defend the feminine

enthusiasm and pleasure that can be found in novels. It has also left me excited to observe how the future trajectory of literary publishing will unfold, especially regarding types of literature predominately associated with women. It has become obvious to me recently that many things that were once considered strictly feminine have later been appropriated by men, thereby losing both its female connotations and negative associations as a result. Perhaps this phenomenon will affect genres of literature that are intrinsically linked to women today, transforming and creating new genres that align with the women of tomorrow. Nevertheless, I will continue to fight for a woman's right to enjoy silly novels.

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