

## Film in the College Classroom: Using *Twilight* to Examine Adolescent Development

Jennifer T. Tagsold<sup>1a</sup> and Jessica Decuir-Gunby<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*William Peace University, Raleigh, NC 27604*

<sup>b</sup>*North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC 27695*

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### Abstract

The hit movie saga *Twilight* has made an impact on viewers of all ages. This article seeks to explore the uses of film in psychology classes with a focus on ways in which instructors may find scenes from the *Twilight* series helpful and engaging for students. The authors describe scenes and themes from the first three movies in the series (*Twilight*, *New Moon*, and *Eclipse*) that relate to adolescent development theories, as well as other disciplines, such as English, Sociology, and History. Authors also provide a list of suggestions for using film as a teaching tool.

**Keywords:** Film, *Twilight*, teaching.

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Adolescence is a time of exploration that often leads to questioning one's sense of self. This questioning often leads to wanting to better understand what is reality and what is fiction. Adolescents begin to explore their lives, focusing on who they are in the present and the possibilities of what they can become in the future. Through this search, many adolescents may engage in fantasy as a means of changing their realities. Such adolescents can become interested in exploring elements of fantasy and supernatural events such as angels, ghosts, zombies and vampires. By reading novels and viewing films regarding supernatural events, young adults can delve into the "darker side of humanity while validating one's belief in the supernatural" (Meloni, 2007). This helps adolescents to better develop an enhanced sense of identity. In addition, by exploring new ways of thinking outside of their own daily lives, adolescents become aware that there is a big world outside of themselves to discover. One way in which college students are able to engage in fantasy is through media, particularly film. As such, film is particularly useful in helping adolescents to better understand themselves as well as essential to helping inform those that work with adolescents. The purpose of this article is to discuss how educators can use film to help teach an adolescent development course. Specifically, we focus on the *Twilight* movie series and demonstrate how it can help college students to better understand adolescent development theories. We also discuss how film can be used in other disciplines for enhanced instruction.

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author's email: [jtagsold@gmail.com](mailto:jtagsold@gmail.com)

## Media, Adolescence, & *Twilight*

There has been a growing impact of media on the lives of adolescents (Strasburger, 2005). For instance, there are magazines and web sites that are dedicated to addressing the interests of adolescents. Advertisers even focus on the adolescent population in order to help sell a variety of products ranging from beverages to clothing. There are numerous books and book series that feature adolescent protagonists. Also, there are many songs that discuss the lives of teenagers. In addition, there have been an increasing number of films over that last few decades that feature adolescents as the central characters and/or focus on adolescent themes. One such film, *Twilight*, has been extremely influential to the lives of adolescents.

The *Twilight* movie series is based upon the similarly titled book series written by Stephenie Meyer (Interview with Stephanie Meyer, 2006). The *Twilight* book series has sold over 116 million copies world-wide and the movie trilogy has made over \$1 billion world-wide (Publishers Weekly, 2010). The movie series has been so successful that there will be two more installments, in both 2011 and 2012 (Access Hollywood, 2010). Meyer began writing the series after awakening from a vivid dream:

I can see a young woman in the embrace of a very handsome young man, in a beautiful meadow surrounded by forest, and somehow I know that he is a vampire. In the dream there is a powerful attraction between the two. When I started to write this, I had no idea where it was going; I had no idea at all in the beginning that I was writing a book. I started writing out the scene from my dream, and when I got done I was so interested in the characters that I wanted to see what would happen to them next. And so, I just wrote and let whatever happened happen. (Interview with Stephenie Meyer, 631)

The series focuses on Bella, a human adolescent that is attracted to a vampire named Edward. The movies explore the many adventures that result from their love affair in “a place where anyone could believe magic existed. A place where you just expected Snow White to walk right in with her apple in hand, or a unicorn to stop and nibble at the rose-bushes” (Meyer, 2005, 479). Through the development of Bella and Edward’s relationship, the movies help explicate a variety of topics that are relevant to an adolescent development course.

### Using the *Twilight* Films as Teaching Tools for Adolescent Development

The use of film to help illustrate concepts is a pedagogical technique that has been commonly used in the college classroom. Film has been used to teach a variety of academic disciplines including education (English & Steffy, 1997), counseling (Higgins & Dermer, 2001), psychology (Bluestone, 2000; Boyatzis, 1994), sociology (Leblanc, 1998), business (Champoux, 1998), theology (Mercadante, 2007), foreign language (Sturm, 2012) and medicine (Alexander, Pavlov, & Lenahan, 2007). Instructors may select a film based on the type of lesson or assignment that will follow the film. Key characteristics of films that work well in the classroom include strong themes, good character development, pretty faces (such as well-known celebrities), a quickly paced plot, and cultural significance

(Fluitt-Dupuy, 2001). Assignments which utilize film in the classroom range from creating a film adaptation of a literary work and remaking the film in another language or through the lens of another culture (Sturm, 2012) to having students write a review of the film, screen-write alternative endings for the film, or act out scenes from the film (Fluitt-Dupuy, 2001).

The second author uses film in her classrooms in a variety of ways. One particular way is a film assignment in her undergraduate and graduate adolescent development classes that are largely composed of pre-service teachers and counselors. The assignment allows students to review and analyze a movie that pertains to adolescence. For the assignment, students have to analyze a movie of their choosing in terms of four major theories or concepts that are relevant to adolescent development. There are several key themes that are discussed in both undergraduate and graduate adolescent development courses that students can choose from: puberty, cognition, families, culture, gender, peer groups, schools, work and leisure, media, identity, sexuality (including relationships), and psychosocial problems (Santrock, 2009). Students are required to explain why the movie is relevant to the study of adolescent development; explicate how the movie has impacted their understanding of adolescents or their interactions with adolescents; and describe a psychological, counseling, or classroom implication for the movie. Students are also required to provide outside sources to help support their claims.

Although the second author has used this assignment for several years, many students are increasingly choosing to review one of the *Twilight* movies, including the first author when she was enrolled in the second author's graduate adolescent development course. Because of this increased interest, the authors have begun to further explore how the *Twilight* movies can be used in conjunction with course readings to explore a variety of adolescent development theories. In writing this article, the authors reviewed the first three movies in the series: *Twilight (I)*, *New Moon (II)*, and *Eclipse (III)*. We then picked significant scenes or themes from the various movies as they related to a variety of adolescent development theories and topics. We also examined how those theories and topics related to specific topics that can be explored using readings other than course core texts (see Table I for details). It must be added that this table can be expanded with the addition of the fourth and fifth installments to the film series.

The summary provided in Table I highlights the many ways in which connections can be made between *Twilight* and adolescent development theories. It also summarizes how the films can be segmented to help showcase particular themes. Using *Twilight* in teaching adolescent development is useful for both individual and whole class activities. When using individual activities such as the aforementioned assignment, students are able to make connections between the film and almost all major adolescent development theories. When using whole class activities, educators can emphasize specific adolescent theories. Educators can use specific film clips to reinforce the course readings and to expand students' applications of the theories.

**Table I: Adolescent Development Themes in Twilight**

Movie	Scene/Theme	Adolescent Development Topic(s)	Additional Reading Topics
I, II, III	Interactions with parents Talks with parents about love and sex	Families Sexuality	Single Parent Homes
I, II, III	School—cafeteria, gym, bio class, prom, around town, graduation	Schools Peer Groups	Popularity Peer Influences
I, II, III	Town of Forks	Culture	Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory
I	Bella’s questioning and observing of Edward’s behavior Exploring Quileute legend and learning about vampires	Cognition	Piaget’s Stages of Development Brain Development
I, II, III	Social system of vampires	Family Peer Groups Culture	Bandura’s theory of reciprocal determinism
I, II, III	Edward & Bella relationship	Sexuality Identity Puberty	Romance relationships Sexual desire
I, III	Jacob/Quileute tribe and reservation Tribal meeting/history Tribal legends	Identity Cognition Culture	Native American adolescent development Racial/Ethnic Identity of Native Americans
I, II, III	Activities with the Cullen Family Cullen Family’s protection of Bella	Peer Groups Family	Blended families Non-traditional families,
I, III	Fighting with other vampires Vampire gang	Peer Groups Psychosocial Problems	Adolescent Aggression Gangs
II	Bella’s isolation and nightmares	Psychosocial Problems	Depression
II	Bella’s riding with biker Bella’s riding motorcycles with Jacob Bella’s jumping in water off the cliff	Psychosocial Problems	Attention-Seeking Behavior Suicidal Behavior
II, III	Visit to Volturi Bella’s deciding to become a vampire Friends’ reactions to Bella’s decision to become a vampire	Identity Peer Groups	Erikson’s Stages of Man Marcia’s Identity Statuses
II, III	Women Vampires Men Vampires Werewolves Bella Bella’s girl friends	Gender Identity	Sex roles and stereotypes

### **Implications for Using *Twilight* and Other Popular Films in the College Classroom**

The *Twilight* series presents an exciting variety of uses for the college classrooms. There are numerous relevant themes that can be further explored in many disciplines. For example, in English classes, teachers can draw direct parallels between the books and the movies, having students explore the similarities and differences between literature and film. Also, English professors can explore the role of myths in literature through the use

of film. Writing instructors could have students model their own review of the movie after organizational patterns of exemplary reviews; this method could be useful for teaching students about rhetoric and the structure and argumentative writing (Fluitt-Dupuy, 2001). Another discipline that can utilize the *Twilight* series is history. When discussing Native Americans, history professors can discuss the Quileute tribe as well as customs, traditions, and legends associated with various Native American tribes. They may use the movie to help illustrate how films can promote a distorted view of history. In addition, a variety of disciplines (e.g. English, Psychology, Sociology, etc) could use *Twilight* to help create writing assignments in which students use vampire lore as a lens to view cultural phenomena. Students can think of the identity associated with a vampire and use that to analyze a cultural concept. One could argue that vampires deviate from the norm much like those whom society considers outsiders. By creating assignments that require students to take on the role of the other, professors can help students attain deeper levels of understanding identity. One of our colleagues who teaches English at a local university has successfully used this approach. Instructors may find it useful to create a table like the one below for their discipline before using film in the college classroom. The table could become a useful tool for insuring that the chosen film has plenty of scenes and themes appropriate to the classroom content. It may be useful, as well, to place the responsibility of creating a table in the students' hands; this way, they could view the video with the intent of identifying scenes which exemplify the theories and/or themes already discussed in class.

In addition, it is important to acknowledge that films in general can be used to help teach a variety of college courses. For instance, the *Harry Potter* series could be used in English and Communication classes; *The Wire* series could be used in teaching criminal justice courses; *Precious* provides a range of elements that are relevant to social work, while *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* can accompany the teaching of business management. With the substantial amount of films available, there are a plethora of opportunities to incorporate film in just about every discipline. However, when choosing to use film as a teaching tool, it is important to take several issues into consideration:

1. *Determine purpose of film use.* Films can be used in both individual assignments and whole-class activities. When using film for individual assignments, create activities that require students to examine the film as an entirety. For whole-class activities, choose films that can be segmented in order to highlight relevant course themes in short increments.
2. *Choose recent films.* Students are less distracted when the film has been made in recent years. For instance, students will not get caught up in outdated clothing and ways of speaking. More recent movies appear more socially and culturally relevant to the students.
3. *Demonstrate multiple levels of relevance.* Make certain that the film is relevant to the subject area you are teaching in a variety of ways. It is best to use films that address several major themes or constructs in your disciplines.
4. *Use external readings as support.* Find related readings outside the assigned texts to help support the themes that are found in the films. In order to insure learning,

it is important to provide readings that extend the themes captured in the films and extend the core class texts.

5. *Provide opportunities for self-reflection.* Activities that accompany films should provide opportunities for students to discuss the relevance of the film to their lives or future lives. Relating the film to their lives allows students to better understand the themes discuss as well as make better connections between themes.

The *Twilight* series is relevant to various courses due to its portrayal of numerous adolescent theories. The series can better help educators understand adolescents' motives. The film reminds educators and helping professionals that adolescents are exploring reality and the supernatural. Adolescents are expanding their dreams and goals as well as pushing the boundaries during this period. They have a fascination with those different from themselves and sometimes adolescents are more accepting of others than adults.

It is important for adolescents to recognize the changes occurring within their minds and bodies as completely normal parts of becoming an adult. Films like *Twilight* can help ease and shed light on the complex adventure that is adolescence, particularly for those who are being trained to work with adolescent populations. It is the authors' hope that the suggestions in this article may help instructors design learning environments that are stimulating, informative, and relevant.

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