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Book Review “Crawford, Joseph. The Twilight of the Gothic: Vampire Fiction and the Rise of Paranormal Romance 1991-2012”

Maria T. Ramos-Garcia

South Dakota State University, Maria.Ramos@sdstate.edu

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Crawford, Joseph. *The Twilight of the Gothic? Vampire Fiction and the Rise of the Paranormal Romance*. Pp. 350. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014. UK £85.00 / US \$140.00. ISBN: 9781783160648.

Review by María T. Ramos-García

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Over the last few years, we have witnessed the publication of masses of books on the *Twilight Saga*, some addressed to the general public, others geared toward an academic audience (for example, *Twilight and Philosophy: Vampires, Vegetarians, and the Pursuit of Immortality*; *The Twilight Mystique: Critical Essays on the Novels and Films*; *The Twilight Saga: Exploring the Global Phenomenon*; *Twilight and History* among others). In *The Twilight of the Gothic? Vampire Fiction and Rise of Paranormal Romance*, Joseph Crawford tries to offer a more comprehensive perspective on the ascent of the paranormal romance in the twenty-first century, a goal he only partially achieves.

The title prefigures the tension between the conflicting focuses that vie for the author's attention, and that results in a very informative and valuable book for paranormal romance studies, but not the groundbreaking holistic interpretation of the genre that, as a scholar, I was hoping for. The word play on the first part of the title indicates its focus on the *Twilight Saga*, as well as the generic point of departure for the study: the Gothic, Crawford's area of expertise, and the topic of much of his previous critical production, especially his previous book *Gothic Fiction and the Invention of Terrorism: The Politics and Aesthetics of Fear in the Age of the Reign of Terror* (2013). The second part of the title shows a duality that is not easy to reconcile: vampire fiction and paranormal romance are very different categories. There is a lot of vampire fiction that is not romance, and paranormal romance, although it often includes vampires, is rarely about vampires alone.

The brief introduction is very promising. Beginning with a personal anecdote about a graduate student reading group of popular fiction, he points out the negative and visceral reactions that *Twilight* awoke among sophisticated readers interested in other popular genres, regardless of their "literary value". He insightfully observes that "[c]learly the *Twilight* books had accomplished *something*, something that strongly appealed to an extremely wide contemporary audience: no author sells over 100 million books by accident" (3, emphasis in the original). He compares the saga's success to that of the *Harry Potter* series, which was largely positively received, and concludes that "the much more

heavily contested success of *Twilight*, which can count both its fans and its detractors by the tens of millions, points to its position astride a major fault line in contemporary culture” (3). Crawford’s reading of the controversy surrounding Stephenie Meyer’s books is right on target, but it is in the framing of the saga that his argument becomes murky. On page four he establishes a cause and effect relationship between the success of *Twilight* and the rise of the genre “sometimes labelled ‘paranormal romance’ and sometimes ‘dark fantasy’, but always awash with novels featuring red, white and black covers” (4). Crawford establishes a periodization in which he considers a *pre-history* of the genre in the 1970s and 1980s (where vampires are portrayed as more humanized), a *consolidation* between 1989 and 2001 (the emergence of vampires appearing as love interests), and *generic maturity* between 2002 and 2005 (the year of publication of the first *Twilight* installment). However, on page eight, he considers 2000-2008 “the crucial years . . . in which the paranormal romance moved from being an obscure subgenre to an extremely popular (and extremely controversial) form of mainstream fiction”. The implicit tension in Crawford’s periodization, where “generic maturity” precedes (rather than coincides with) mainstream success, reflects Crawford’s oscillation between an interpretation in which *Twilight* is at the center of the paranormal phenomenon, and another in which the saga is just the most popular manifestation of an ongoing trend in which it is somehow an outlier. *Twilight* does not imitate other books already being published (Stephenie Meyer has been very outspoken about the fact that she does not read paranormal romance herself) but it has definitely captured an existing zeitgeist. On the other hand, it boosted the visibility and sales of a genre that was already growing and developing a significant readership at the time. In fact, as Crawford admits later in the book, many of the most enthusiastic *Twilight* fans do not enjoy other paranormal romance authors. Crawford’s reluctant acknowledgement of and dismissiveness towards these other authors provides a skewed perspective of the evolution of the genre.

Most relevant for the readers of this journal is Crawford’s overly superficial treatment of generic issues. After dismissing Pamela Regis’ definition of the romance novel as ahistorical, and the RWA’s definition of the genre as too restrictive, he makes a generic distinction between novels that would be strictly paranormal romance (here defined as “[a] work that tells the story of the development and consummation of a positive, loving romantic relationship between a human and a vampire”) and those that also include “mystery and action adventure storylines” (9). His example of the first kind is Lori Herter’s *De Morrisey* series (1991-1993), while his examples of the second kind all fall into what most publishers, readers, and critics would consider urban fantasy, a term that Crawford uses later in the book but that is not mentioned in the introduction. The problem with this definition of genre is that Herter’s novels are an early example whose lack of real conflict actually make them generic outliers. According to this clear-cut distinction between paranormal romance and urban fantasy, virtually no paranormal novels published since 2000 could be considered strictly romance because even those that end each novel with the ‘happily ever after’ (HEA) of a new couple include “mystery and action storylines” that occupy a large percentage of the text and are essential to the world-building and reading experience.

Chapter 1, “The First 800 years”, begins with the use of the term romance meaning a text written in a Romance language as opposed to Latin, and its early use as a narrative form of fantasy and adventure versus the more realistic genre of the novel. Crawford then

moves to the Gothic novels of Ann Radcliffe and the romance novels of Jane Austen, introducing one of his major arguments: that both genres came from the same origins, and both converge again in the paranormal romance of today. He also argues that the Byronic hero is another unifying element of both romance and the Gothic that manifests itself in the paranormal romance, in which the supernatural character of the hero exacerbates the Byronic elements of the alpha-male. This chapter touches on all the mandatory canonical texts, from *Jane Eyre* (1847) to *Clarissa* (1748), and, already in the twentieth century, *Rebecca* (1938) and *The Sheik* (1919), tracking the evolution of the Byronic hero in both the Gothic and the romance. From those early twentieth-century texts, Crawford moves to the 1970s with the publication of *Interview with the Vampire* (1977) and *The Flame and the Flower* (1972) as examples of the evolution of the vampire and the romance novel respectively. While the information included in the chapter is hardly new, the synthesis is informative and the interpretation solid.

Chapter 2, "Romancing the Paranormal", continues where chapter 1 left off, with the beginnings of the paranormal romance itself. This is the most valuable chapter, since it tracks the development of the vampire and other paranormal beings from monsters into love interests, incorporating less-well-known texts and offering insightful analysis. He traces the shift from the sympathetic vampire of the 1970s and 1980s in literature and film to the vampire as a love interest and, therefore, the first actual romance novels. He focuses on the work of Lori Herter in the *De Morrisey* series (1991-1993), Maggy Shayne's *Wings of the Night* series (1993-), and Linda Lael Miller's *Vampire* series (1993-1996), as well as Harlequin Mills & Boon's first attempt at publishing a paranormal line, *Silhouette Shadows*, from 1993 to 1996. He also establishes a parallel with changes to vampire films in the 1990s, especially Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), as well as other influential paranormal box office successes of the period, such as *Ghost* (1990) or *Angel for Hire* (1991). While again, his focus is on the vampire, Crawford's examples also include werewolves, witches, ghosts and other paranormal characters and themes. The last part of the chapter is devoted to the rise of the young adult paranormal romance, especially Annette Curtis Klause and L. J. Smith.

This analysis is continued in Chapter 3 "Sleeping with the Enemy", which includes an extensive analysis of Hamilton's *Anita Blake* series (one of the early urban fantasy series, starting in 1993) and Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and *Angel* (1999-2004) TV series. Crawford admits that Hamilton's series, which was still going in 2014, has undergone a very drastic and unique evolution unusual for the genre, but there is no doubt that it is a major milestone in the development of the paranormal. That is the case even more so in the two TV series, especially *Buffy*, which was undoubtedly a major influence that reached a much larger audience than the early novels ever could.

Chapter 4, "The New Millenium" begins with an analysis of Christine Feehan's *Carpathian Series* (1999-) and Charlaine Harris' *Sookie Stackhouse* (2001-2013). Crawford's discomfort with the romance makes its first appearance here. It becomes evident that his analysis is much more insightful when it comes to Harris' series (usually classified as urban fantasy) than Feehan's (definitely romance). However, after a few pages on each author, the largest part of the chapter is devoted to the *Twilight* saga, which is also the subject of the entire next chapter, appropriately entitled "The *Twilight* Controversy". Contrary to the author's discomfort with the previous texts, his analysis of *Twilight* shows significantly more enthusiasm for the subject, and provides a great synthesis of criticism (scholarly and

otherwise) on the bestseller collection. One of the most provocative ideas in the book is its analysis of the “cultural fault line” that reactions to *Twilight* bring to the forefront. Crawford points out that while supporters of the saga are reading the characters’ actions within the framework of the genre—and therefore not necessarily as models of real-life behavior—its detractors are not utilizing those generic conventions and therefore consider the characters as dangerous role models for readers who, in their view, don’t know any better. Ideologically, he points out how the text is multi-vocal, so while it touches on potentially controversial topics such as marriage, abortion, and premarital sex, it is easy to read *Twilight* as advocating opposing ideologies, if the reader chooses to ignore its tensions and contradictions.

Reading Crawford’s book, one might think that *Twilight* is both the highlight and culmination of the paranormal romance, because the sixth and last chapter, “Mutations”, is devoted almost exclusively to film and television adaptations of previously published paranormal romances, especially the films based on the *Twilight* series and the television series *True Blood* (2008-2014)), based on Harris’ *Sookie Stackhouse*, and L. J. Smith’s *Vampire Diaries* (2009-). These visual versions are what the author considers in his epilogue the manifestation of the “maturity of the genre” (271); a genre that in his opinion is in decadence—at least in its form as a novel. His evidence for this conclusion again shows the problems inherent in his equating of paranormal with vampires; Roxanne Longstreet, who publishes a young adult paranormal series as Rachel Caine, told Crawford that “most editors in traditional publishing that I’ve spoken to are no longer seeking vampire-themed material” (271), which Crawford takes to be evidence that paranormal fiction on the whole is past its prime. Yet a quick look at two of the most successful authors in the 2014 *New York Times* Best Sellers list confirms that J. R. Ward had two number one bestsellers, one of them in her *Black Dagger Brotherhood* series, in which vampires are the protagonists, and one featuring other paranormal beings, while Patricia Briggs (who writes paranormals without vampires) also had a number one bestseller. There simply is not evidence that if vampires are not in, paranormal is out.

The alternating definition of vampire romance at some times and paranormal romance at other times is one of the methodological problems of Crawford’s book. It is debatable whether such a distinction can even be made, since virtually all series combine an ever-increasing array of paranormal beings, of which vampires are only one. However, his initial definition of paranormal romance in the introduction only included “a loving romantic relationship between a human and a vampire” (9). This definition grossly simplifies the complex and varied pairings that are created in these texts. Just to mention a few examples, in J.R. Ward’s *The Black Dagger Brotherhood*, most pairings are among vampires, and those initially human turn out to not be really humans or change into something else, such as a ghost before their HEA. In other series, such as *Sookie Stackhouse*, although vampires are the first supernatural species the reader learns about, all kinds of shapeshifters, and even demons make an appearance. Even the protagonist, as we eventually learn, is part fairy and achieves her HEA with a shapeshifter. In Sherrilyn Kenyon’s world, there are no actual vampires (although daemons can be considered similar since they cannot withstand sunlight and live off human souls—not blood), but the characters and pairing that take place, although at the beginning of the series include some humans, are mostly among dark-hunters, shapeshifters, gods and goddesses of varied mythologies, dream-hunters and other supernatural beings. In fact, paranormal romance

sometimes even pushes the boundaries of heteronormativity (a homosexual couple are the protagonists in *Lover at Last* (2013) by J. R. Ward, and in Lynn Viehl's *Dreamveil* (2010) the HEA is between a woman and two men).

There is also a lack of explicit criteria in the selection of authors and texts included in the analysis. Crawford glosses over most of the bestseller paranormal authors of the twenty-first century. Authors such as Patricia Briggs, Kresley Cole, Kim Harrison, Richelle Mead, and Carrie Vaughn are barely mentioned. J. R. Ward, Jeaniene Frost, Tanya Huff, Sherrilyn Kenyon, and Jane Ann Krentz are mentioned little more, and authors such as Gena Showalter, Nalini Singh, Katie McAlister, Linsay Sands, Lynn Viehl or Kerrilyn Sparks (to name a few of the authors that were publishing paranormal by 2007 and are still publishing today) are not included at all. Crawford also displays a certain tone of condescension towards romance in general and the paranormal romance in particular, even if he never quite displays the contempt of other critics of the genre. This attitude may help explain the fact that he draws a direct line from the early 1990s through Feehan and Harris straight to Meyer, and then describes a supposed decline of the genre, which in his view survives only in film and television. Crawford also ignores the historical context in which the genre developed; while he includes historical interpretations of earlier texts, no socio-historical contextualization is given for newer texts.

In spite of the major gaps outlined above, overall, Joseph Crawford's book is well-written and informative. He pulls together valuable information and creates a genealogy that includes both the Gothic and the romance strands which converge in the paranormal romance, and proffers some provocative interpretations of this connection. The book is strong in the areas the author is familiar with (the Gothic, *Twilight*, and the television programmes and films he analyzes) and his description of the trajectory of the paranormal from Ann Rice to the romances of the 1990s is the best and most complete that I have yet seen. However, while the book covers the years 1990-2000 reasonably well, it is definitely not a study of the paranormal romance in the twenty-first century, as the title (which states the years 1990-2012 as the period being analyzed) seems to indicate. If the reader keeps in mind the limitations in its scope, Crawford's new book is a valuable contribution worth reading for anyone interested in this genre.

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