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Reader Expectations and Delayed Gratification in Genre Fiction
(With An Emphasis on Vampire Novels)

Whether mysteries, fantasies, romances, horrors, thrillers, or science fiction novels are a reader's topic of choice, many millions of people read genre fiction each year. And most of those readers come back for more; they identify with a certain genre. People will claim to be mystery fans, to love romances, to be addicted to fantasy novels. But what is it that keeps them reading in a specific genre? Arguably, it's the feeling of the familiar; it's knowing what's going to happen. Readers love genre fiction because their expectations are met every time. In every romance novel, there is love. In every mystery, there is an injustice committed and then put right. And in every vampire novel, there is a point in which one character must suck another's blood.

Recently, there have been a rash of young adult vampire-themed novels in the market place. From Stephanie Meyer's runaway best-sellers *Twilight* and *New Moon*, to Melissa De la Cruz's gossip-girl-meets-Dracula series *Blue Bloods*, Ellen Shreiber's series *Vampire Kisses*, Mari Mancusi's *Boys that Bite* and Cynthia Leitich Smith's *Tantalize*, it seems that teens can't get enough of vampires. Much of the appeal is the expectation of what goes along with vampire novels. Once a reader has read one vampire novel, he or she knows what to expect: at some point in the story there will be a sexy scene in which a vampire sucks someone's blood, or someone has his or her blood

sucked, depending of the point of view of the narration. Many of the vampire novels out there play with this expectation, delaying and delaying gratification—sometimes until the book ends and beyond.

Before this vampire craze, M.T. Anderson wrote *Thirsty* in 2001. This book seems to have been a forerunner to the current delayed gratification vampire novels on the market. In this book a teenage boy, Chris, realizes he's turning into a vampire. In his world a vampire is a terrible thing to be, so he fights against his vampire urges. But the reader is left thinking that at some point, he will give in. All vampires must feed on human blood.

Anderson feeds into this expectation by repeatedly mentioning Chris's hunger for blood. The first explicit mention is on page 52:

*"I dream that night of killing Tom.
I dream we are in a fight. He says that something is blue, and I say that it's green. So we fight, and I kill him and drink his warm blood; and as I do, I go from strength to strength."*

After this, the reader's expectation is elevated. Dreams often foreshadow events, readers know. But not this time. References continue to build in the following pages, but Chris only thinks about his blood lust, he doesn't act upon it. That is, until the reader reaches the scene in which Chris's father is teaching him how to shave.

"I am cutting the hell out of my face. And I'm loving it. I'm licking and licking like I am one big happy Fudgsicle; and pretty soon, I'm laughing and the jazzy cockatoos and cockatrices are laughing with me" (68).

Chris has now sucked his own blood—the reader, along with the protagonist, is momentarily satiated, but is waiting for more. Then Anderson delivers another scene in which Chris feeds on his own blood and two scenes of vampire parties in which others feed on already dead humans. But as the book draws to a close, Chris still hasn't sucked

the blood of another person, even though he's repeatedly warned that if he doesn't, he'll die.

As the reader turns the pages at the end of *Thirsty*, he comes to realize that his expectations of a vampire novel haven't truly been met. The author has played with these expectations. And all the way, until the very end of the epilogue, he continues to do so:

*"I would never jump on a member of my family and drink their sweet, tart blood.
I would never.
Soon it will be the loneliest part of the night.
Soon it will be the quiet hour.
My chin is wet.
Muscles twitch.
No, I think.
Don't do what you're.
Don't do.
No, please.
Behind the door.
I am thirsty.
Oh, god.
I am
so
thirsty" (249)*

And that is where the book ends, mid thought. Readers who have finished this novel have realized that although Anderson hinted that their expectations would be fulfilled, his delays did not lead to final gratification. However, readers may appreciate this subversion of their expectations and end the book feeling tantalized, wanting more vampires.

And the market is happy to fulfill their desire. In Stephanie Meyers' books *Twilight* and *New Moon*, a shy, quiet girl named Bella falls in love with a gorgeous, powerful vampire named Edward. Edward and his family long ago decided to drink the blood of animals instead of humans, but doing so is a fight. They are still tempted by

human blood—Edward desires Bella in a sexual way, but he also desires her blood. As Bella and Edward fall more and more in love, it seems to Bella—and to readers—that the only way they can be together is for Edward to bite Bella and turn her into a vampire too. But he refuses. He doesn't want her to have to struggle with the same wants and desires he does. By the end of *Twilight*, Bella is still human and Edward is still a vampire, and no human blood has been sucked in the entire novel. Meyer, too, subverts reader expectations.

In the second book in the series, *New Moon*, she continues this subversion. In fact, book opens after the vampires have disappeared. Meyer has created a vampire novel without any vampire characters until page 235. Bella, just like the reader, has been anticipating the vampires' arrival. Meyer writes, “‘Laurent!’ I cried in surprised pleasure. It was an irrational response. I probably should have stopped in fear” (235). In the scene that follows, Laurent threatens to suck Bella's blood, but werewolves arrive to save her and the blood-sucking plan is aborted. However, Meyer now sets up the expectation that indeed the vampires will finally all return and turn Bella into one of them.

She continues planting this expectation while Bella flies to Italy with Edward's sister Alice, another vampire, to find him.

“‘You saw me become one of you,’ I barely mouthed the words. She sighed. ‘It was a possibility at the time.’ ‘At the time,’ I repeated. ‘Actually, Bella...’ She hesitated, and then seemed to make her choice. ‘Honestly, I think it’s all gotten beyond ridiculous. I’m debating whether to just change you myself’” (436).

Then, once Alice and Bella find Edward in Italy, the three of them have an audience with the powerful Volturi vampire family. Meyer creates a scene in which the Volturi want to turn Bella into a vampire because they think, as one of them, she will be gifted with great powers.

“‘Caius, surely you see the potential,’ Aro chided him affectionately. ‘I haven’t seen a prospective talent so promising since we found Jane and Alec. Can you imagine the possibilities when she is one of us?’” (477).

This continues the reader’s anticipation that Bella will be turned into a vampire in this novel, even though she wasn’t in the last—if not by Alice or Edward, then by the Volturi. Then, the Volturi extract a promise from Alice and Edward that in time they will turn Bella themselves, otherwise the Volturi will do it for them. But once they are home, Edward dodges that promise too.

“‘Well, we have plenty of time to think it through. Time means something very different to them than it does to you, or even me. They count years the way you count days. I wouldn’t be surprised if you were thirty before you crossed their minds again,’ he added lightly” (517).

So now the reader is nearing the end of the book, and thinking that perhaps Bella will not be turned into a vampire after all, even though that’s what the story has been building to for the past two books. Then Edward gives Bella an ultimatum: He’ll turn her into a vampire if she marries him. She refuses, so he refuses, and it seems to Bella and the reader that she will remain human, at least a while longer. But then Bella realizes that she can ask one of his family members to turn her and thinks that once she graduates high school that might just be the thing to do. But this book ends before that happens, leaving readers to expect Bella to turn into a vampire in the next book in the series.

While readers expect certain events when reading stories in specific genres, it seems—at least with the current trend in vampire novels—that subverting those expectations is what makes a book popular. Perhaps this is because delayed gratification is something young adults deal with often—they’re working toward an adulthood far in the future; they’re waiting for high school graduation, college acceptances, losing their virginity, getting kissed for the first time, all events that seem far off and that can be delayed, sometimes even often. Teen lives are filled with delayed gratification, so perhaps it’s a subversion of their expectations that makes them feel comforted while reading these novels. Even though the characters are vampires, teens see their lives—filled with wanting and waiting—mirrored in these stories.