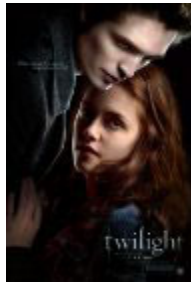




Editor's Note:

Anticipating this week's release of ECLIPSE (the third film in the phenomenally successful TWILIGHT SAGA series), Rachel Weinberg offers FILMS FOR TWO® readers this recap of films one (TWILIGHT) & two (NEW MOON).



Directed
by
Catherine
Hardwicke

TWILIGHT SAGA Lacks Bite: A Recap by Rachel Weinberg

Screenplays by Melissa Rosenberg
Based on Novels by Stephenie Meyer



Directed
by
Chris
Weitz

The film journey of the four-part TWILIGHT SAGA begins with a shot of a deer being chased through the woods. This uninspired moment marks the beginning of TWILIGHT, one of the decade's most eagerly awaited films, and it is a foreshadowing of disappointments to come.

Based on the best-selling book series by Stephenie Meyer, the TWILIGHT SAGA chronicles the romance of mortal "Bella Swan" (Kristen Stewart) and her vampire boyfriend "Edward Cullen" (Robert Pattinson). Throughout the first two films, TWILIGHT and its sequel NEW MOON, Bella and Edward face obstacles that threaten to break their relationship apart—or just situations that threaten to break one of klutzy Bella's bones.

TWILIGHT opens as Bella moves from sunny Arizona (where her mom lives) to the gloomy town of Forks, WA (where her dad lives). For Bella, life in Forks seems unpromising. That is, until she meets Edward Cullen and his family. Bella first lays eyes on the Cullens as they glide into her high school's cafeteria during lunch on an otherwise ordinary day. Bella immediately becomes intrigued by Edward, and Stewart's yearning is entirely believable as evidenced by her inquisitive facial expressions and incessant questioning of her new

Forks friends, "Jessica" (Anna Kendrick) and "Angela" (Christian Serratos).

There's only one problem with Bella's newfound curiosity: Edward Cullen wants nothing to do with her. During one of the film's funnier moments, Bella has her first encounter with Edward in science class. As she sits beside him, he plugs his nose and throws convincing looks of disgust in her direction. When the bell rings, he bolts immediately. The scene is laugh-out-loud funny, but it displays the couple's incredible onscreen chemistry—one of the film series' most redeeming qualities.

Although the onscreen chemistry between Stewart and Pattinson is worth watching, many other elements fall flat. Screenwriter Melissa Rosenberg stayed close to the book's original material and captured the spirit of the writing in her script, yet many of the book's themes feel contrived when placed on the screen. In the book, Bella comes across as an intelligent and levelheaded, if klutzy, teenage girl. In the movie, however, her lack of balance is magnified to the point where she becomes ditzy.

Many scenes in TWILIGHT display Bella as a "damsel in distress," frequently in need of Edward to come along and be her "knight in shining armor." When Bella ventures into the nearby town of Port Angeles with Jessica and Angela about halfway through the movie, she becomes lost after leaving a local bookstore. Searching for her way back to her friends, Bella is approached by a group of dangerous guys with clearly bad intentions. Lacking any method of self-defense, Bella must wait until Edward pulls up in his car and saves the day.

The subsequent scene, showing their conversation as Edward speeds back to Forks, doesn't help matters. Bella comes across as weak and needy.

"Why did you hate me so much when we met?" Bella asks.

"I did. Only because I want you so badly," Edward replies.

The two pair of eyes lock in a passionate gaze—the tension is palpable and the chemistry is real, but the dialogue feels forced. Their eye contact proves that subtlety works best for this film, whereas dialogue often falls flat.

Grandiose gestures also fail to impress in TWILIGHT. A scene where the Cullens play vampire baseball in the rain is played out in slow motion, making it entirely melodramatic.

TWILIGHT is steeped in these over-the-top moments. It's a significant flaw in this first film. The pattern continues in the second film NEW MOON, and is made even worse by the introduction of "Jacob Black" (Taylor Lautner) as a major character. NEW MOON begins with Bella running in slow motion amidst a sea of people dressed in red. This moment, completely befuddling to those who have not seen the first film, makes for an unsatisfying rendering of one of NEW MOON's most pivotal moments. Bella must save Edward from the clutches of the sadistic Volturi vampires. The potential suspense in this opening scene becomes lost in the slow movement of the action.

Like the opening scene, the rest of NEW MOON moves at a glacial pace. Action-packed moments are so rare in this film that it left me feeling as cold as Edward's icy skin—in desperate need of some excitement before I succumbed to frostbite.

NEW MOON's first Bella/Edward scene oozes with cheesiness. Bella, standing in the middle of the Forks High School parking lot, swivels her head around as Edward walks toward her—again in slow motion. The scene becomes increasingly awkward when Jacob shows up.

"You should switch schools, you can hang out with us pale faces," Bella jokes awkwardly to Jacob (who is Native American).

"I prefer the 'res' schools for their exclusivity," Jacob replies woodenly.

The use of slang in this scene not only further alienates those unfamiliar with the TWILIGHT SAGA, but also manages to astound in its gracelessness. Stewart's interactions with Pattinson and Lautner feel contrived. All the actors seem unnatural, and Lautner manages to squash any of his acting potential within a single moment. His voice and facial expressions remain unchanged and devoid of emotion—he will continue to maintain the same expression for the rest of the film.

As the novel's plot indicates, Edward and Bella are kept apart for the majority of the film. With Edward's early departure, the audience is deprived of the authentic onscreen chemistry Pattinson and Stewart displayed in the first film. Instead, viewers are forced to watch Lautner's dry performance, and more awkward interactions with Stewart.



Kristen Stewart (as "Bella Swan") & Robert Pattinson (as her vampire boyfriend "Edward Cullen") have authentic onscreen chemistry!

Once Edward leaves Forks, Bella becomes racked with misery—a misery that lasts several minutes too long on screen. At first, Stewart demonstrates her acting potential as she pines for her lost love. Her depression feels genuine and believable, for a moment. As the seasons change, Stewart remains in her room and watches the world fly by her. At night, she becomes seized by nightmares and hysterical screams. Stewart's screams are tolerable the first time, but by the time her fourth nightmare rolled around, I wanted to scream right back at her in sheer annoyance.

Just when I'm starting to consider shutting off the DVD player and calling it a day, *NEW MOON* introduces a minor plot twist: Bella decides to stop brooding and go visit Jacob. At first, their relationship proves a source of comfort for Bella. Then Jacob pulls away, and retreats into his house. And Bella returns to her brooding, leaving me in anguish.

More brooding, and Jacob's secret is finally revealed. In a blissful, real time moment, Jacob runs out of his house... and turns into a werewolf!

"Guess the wolf's out of the bag," one of Jacob's friends remarks.

The line seems almost funny, a monumental accomplishment for the dull *NEW MOON*.

Although the special effects in *NEW MOON* are an improvement over those in *TWILIGHT*, the werewolves are a disappointment. Instead of resembling wild animals, Jacob and his friends look like giant, fluffy dogs with oversize coats.

The flaws in *NEW MOON* continue to mount as the film drags on, but it does have a few redeeming qualities. Ashley Greene, in the role of

Edward's vampire sister "Alice," adds some much needed cheer. With her sweet, short stature and chic bob, Greene breathes life into this lifeless film, contributing personality and flair.

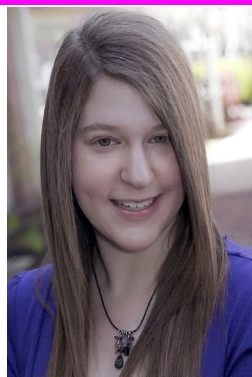
The scene with the cruel Volturi vampires is another hidden gem. In a rare turn of events, the Volturi actors display true depth, and are delightfully cruel. Michael Sheen bestows "Aro," the Volturi leader, with an elegant brutality, and Dakota Fanning shines as the sinister and manipulative vampire "Jane," milking her small part for maximum dramatic effect.

The special effects in this scene are equally bright. After the dark, shadowlike setting of Forks, the grand Volturi castle in Italy is truly a sight to behold. Filled with light, the building reflects the piercing red eyes of the Volturi. But even though this scene is magnificent, it occurs too late to redeem the rest of the movie.

On the whole, although the TWILIGHT SAGA films stay true to their source material, they fail to do much else. The intense chemistry between Stewart and Pattinson is the core of both movies, so NEW MOON completely falls apart because the two are seldom onscreen together. On the other hand, Lautner's complete lack of acting ability brings the weaker qualities of Stewart's acting to the forefront (i.e., monotonous line deliveries and constantly sullen facial expressions).

ECLIPSE premieres in theaters on June 30, so I'm hoping the third film in the TWILIGHT SAGA will help it live up to its epic name because so far, the franchise has failed to do so.

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Rachel Weinberg is a recent graduate of the Francis W. Parker School in Chicago. She will be attending the University of Pennsylvania in the fall, where she major in Communications.

In 08/09, Rachel was a member of the Cindy Bandle Young Critics Circle (cosponsored by Good man Theatre and the Association for Women Journalists—Chicago). Rachel did her first review for FF2 on 27 DRESSES.