

A Conversation between *Twilight* and the Feminist World

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Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* took the world by storm when first released in 2005. Its success – and the successes of its three companion novels, five movies, novella, and graphic novels – is rivaled in the world of young adult literature by very few works. Conducive to the success of *Twilight* and its companions is the likeability of its main characters: Bella Swan, everyday high school teenager; and Edward Cullen, the immortal Prince Charming whose desire for Bella's blood is equal to his love for her. Meyer has created a fairytale romance that appeals to readers – mainly women – of all ages, yet presents romance in an unrealistic way that endorses domestic violence and discourages female independence. Young Bella is placed at the center of a desirable romance, yet presented – even in her own thoughts – as weak, unassuming, helpless, and undeserving of affection. Such disparity is damaging to the female ideal and completely destroys feminist concepts in two ways: first, it exposes young readers to a patriarchal society in subtle, digestible ways and warps their view of the 21st century woman; and second, it preys on the unconscious desires for idyllic, unobtainable, and fairytale romance in adult women. *Twilight* shows readers that women can only be helpful if their aid relates to the model of male success: men are chivalrous, domineering, and ultimately loveable despite various, blatant warnings of danger. In any other situation, *Twilight* implies that women should follow Bella's model and act only as the damsel in distress. In no way does this tetralogy encourage female independence, and frequently reinforces the idea of female helplessness without the presence of a man. *Twilight* characterizes women through abuse, male dependency, and the presumed inability to successfully function on their own, thus negating the role of the modern, independent woman.

The concept of the modern, independent woman relates directly to the feminist study. Feminism is the approach to sex and gender equality that works to do away with gender inequalities and the resulting power struggle (“What Is Feminism”). The division of feminism most relevant to *Twilight* is the idea of enlightened sexism. While feminism deals heavily with gender roles, enlightened sexism seeks to respond to “the perceived threat of a new gender regime. It insists that women have made plenty of progress because of feminism – indeed, full equality has allegedly been achieved – so now it’s okay, even amusing, to resurrect sexist stereotypes of girls and women” (Douglas 9). Feminism exists in the disparity between traditional gender roles and societal values; enlightened sexism exists behind the façade of female societal achievement. Enlightened sexism illustrates how women must choose between being perfect by societal standards and being independent and equal to men; from there, it illustrates how the media portrays women as vain, “shallow and frivolous” creatures vying for male attention (Douglas 15) and that exemplification appears throughout *Twilight* and its companion media. As one of the most influential series of the 21st century thus far, *Twilight* portrays women as being anything other than vain and incompetent if they are not human. It sets a negative standard for readers and constantly devalues the accomplishments of feminism.

As the first book of the saga, *Twilight* introduces readers to young Bella Swan, the shy teenage narrator and protagonist. Bella is the newly-permanent resident of Forks, Washington, after electing to live with her estranged father rather than with her mother and new stepfather. Bella describes herself as being cast as a “damsel in distress” due to her “crippling clumsiness,” yet her actions prove that she is actually highly intelligent (Meyer 55). Before transferring to Forks high School, Bella was in the advanced placement program at her Phoenix high school, and often acted as her own parent when living with her “loving, erratic, harebrained mother”

(Meyer 4). Although she exhibits intelligence and a great sense of reason, she is considered a helpless novelty by the people – specifically the teenage boys – of Forks. Such consideration extends to Edward Cullen, the 104 year old vampire pretending to be an average seventeen year old high school boy, along with his ‘siblings’ and ‘parents,’ one of whom is a doctor at the local hospital. Edward and his family are described as being “devastatingly, inhumanly beautiful” (Meyer 19) by Bella on her first day at Forks High School. Over the course of the novel, Bella’s life is repeatedly placed in danger, much of which results in Edward coming to her rescue, demeaning her human peculiarities and curiosities and informing her that she will be “the death of [him]” (Meyer 363). It is from this basis that the rest of the novel unfolds.

Accepting of his vampire reality, Edward does not hesitate to tell Bella that it is in her best interest to fear and avoid him, only to change his attitude and tell her that he loves her. He admits to stalking and spying on her, watching her sleep, and has complete access to her home, yet she is flattered by his attention; he dominates and intimidates her – his mood swings prevent her from becoming completely comfortable in his presence. He mentions that he “may not give [her] back” on more than one occasion when he and Bella make plans (Meyer 88), and when Bella threatens to reveal Edward’s dangerous secret, he quickly dismisses her as distraught and irrational, saying that “nobody will believe that” if she tells people about him (Meyer 65). Once he has manipulated Bella into a relationship, Edward does not hesitate to make threats on Bella’s life, such as “your number was up the first time I met you” (Meyer 175), only to follow the comments with a charming smile, deep remorse, or a disarming kiss that lures Bella deeper into his trap. This regular display of behavior does nothing to deter Bella’s obsession with Edward, or her desire to remain in the unhealthy relationship. The pull that he has over her and the lure of love and forever further perpetuate her obsession, often forcing her to lie to her friends and her

father to be with Edward. This obsessive, manipulative behavior is but one characteristic of the abuse that *Twilight* perpetuates.

To understand the domestic violence that *Twilight* perpetuates, one must first understand what domestic violence is. *The Domestic Violence Sourcebook* defines domestic violence as “abuse by one person of another in an intimate relationship” (Berry 1). Intimate relationships include dating, and domestic violence does not exclude high school relationships. Domestic violence generally includes “physical violence, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, [and] stalking” (Berry 3-4), and *Twilight* perpetuates emotional abuse and stalking as normal, and physical violence as acceptable when used to protect a woman. Edward’s initial act of violence towards Bella begins well before he pair enter into an official relationship. When boys begin to ask Bella to the school dance, Edward becomes jealous, follows Bella home, observes where they keep the spare key, and enters the Swan home during the middle of the night. Wrestling between “what [he] knew was *right*, moral, ethical and what [he] wanted,” Edward watches Bella sleep after knowing her for less than a month (Meyer 303). This intensely terrifying act towards Bella sets the tone for the relationship.

The two major components of Edward and Bella’s abusive relationship are the emotional abuse and stalking. *The Domestic Violence Sourcebook* defines emotional abuse as:

...consistently doing or saying things to shame, insult, ridicule, embarrass, demean, belittle, or mentally hurt another person. This may include calling a person names such as fat, lazy, stupid bitch, silly, ugly, failure; telling someone she can’t do anything right, is worthless, is an unfit mother, is undeserving, is

unwanted. It also involves withholding money, affection, or attention.....

forbidding someone to make decisions [and] manipulation... (Berry 3).

Of these characteristics listed in Berry's book, Edward exhibits most – if not all – at one time or another in *Twilight*. Edward's ability to demean and mentally hurt Bella are two traits of an emotional abuser that he exhibits throughout *Twilight* and the companion media. After their initial meeting, Edward ignores and avoids Bella for days, going so far as to skip school so that he will not have to be near her. The result of his actions is that she becomes obsessed with Edward, and although his apprehension confuses her, she is thrilled when he begins to talk to her again. From that point, Edward uses that tactic of withholding his attention when he wants Bella to be extremely compliable. Further confusing Bella, Edward tells her that he is going to hell for being with her (Meyer 87) and speaks to her as if she is stupid and completely incapable of making her own decisions. Knowing that he is a vampire and having a twisted, obsessed sense of love for her, Bella desires to be changed and spend the rest of eternity with Edward, but he disagrees. In effect, he denies her eternity, choosing to watch her live and die as a human than to spend the rest of eternity with him. Such denial makes Bella feel that she is undeserving of Edward's love. Yet at the same time, he continually manipulates Bella into staying with him by introducing her to his welcoming family, telling her that she is the "opposite of ordinary," and seeming to genuinely care about what Bella's father, Charlie, thinks about his daughter spending time with Edward and his family (Meyer 210). The growing affection between Edward and Bella insinuates that he loves Bella, but Edward's actions say otherwise. Edward's highly manipulative actions are dangerous, not only to Bella, but to the teenage readers of *Twilight* itself.

The second component of Edward and Bella's abusive relationship is his willingness to stalk her. After not seeing him in days, Edward admits to following Bella with the goal of

keeping a “specific person alive” and she takes pleasure from it, although she should be terrified (Meyer 174). Edward, who laughs because he intimidates her; whose mood swings occur without a moments notice; who has unrestrained access to the Swan family home – specifically Bella’s bedroom – and has the ability to snap the necks of Bella and everyone she cares about without effort, refuses to leave Bella alone so that she can live her life. *The Domestic Violence*

Sourcebook defines stalking as involving:

any pattern of behavior that serves no legitimate purpose and is intended to harass, annoy, or terrorize the victim.....A stalker should be considered dangerous ifacts of vandalism or destruction have been committed; if he is unable to control his temper; if there has been physical contact between the stalker and the victim..... if threats have been made to the victim (Berry 5).

In essence, stalkers are dangerous due to their erratic nature and the obsession with and anger towards their victims that they feel when rejected. Stalkers will often make repeated, unwanted contact with their victims, send gifts, and subject their victims to constant surveillance. Most stalkers use physical encounters to intimidate their victims, and will often assert that their actions are the expression of a deep love that they have for their victims, rather than an act of terrorism. Edward fits the characteristics of a typical stalker. For ninety years he has existed without a female companion. Both of his natural parents died from the Spanish influenza in the mid 1900s, and he has no natural siblings. All of the people that Edward associates with are as indestructible as he is and pose no threat to Edward or his way of life. In that world of isolation and indestructibility is where his terrorism lies. His initial purpose for engaging with Bella is to understand why she is irresistible to him and while his actions are not considered an annoyance to Bella, rather as a delight, they mainly benefit Edward. In his quest to understand Bella, he

spies on her, refuses to allow her to drive herself anywhere, and repeatedly visits her home in the night. Edward even enlists his adoptive siblings to aid in his surveillance of Bella, her friends, and her family – all in the name of safety for Bella and her loved ones. Edward does not consider himself a hero, but he commits acts of heroism – such as saving Bella from a potential rape or preventing her from being crushed by a car. Such acts of heroism always result from Edward stalking Bella, so while within the story it may seem heroic that Edward prevents Bella's death multiple times, when analyzed out of Meyer's contrived context of mythical beasts, his acts of heroism illustrate a threatening pattern of behavior. Edward repeatedly saves Bella, only to react towards her with waffling hostility for her frailties and repentance for exposing his true nature.

In effect, Edward's danger lies in his denial of his nature. Edward's temper is explosive, yet refined towards those he feels has wronged him or those he has chosen to protect. The relationship between Edward and Bella makes him far more dangerous because of his explosive temper and his willingness to threaten Bella's life. Edward devalues Bella by sneaking into her room every night and spying on her conversations. Displaying his impressive speed and strength as nature's perfect hunter, Edward says "as if you could run from me.....As if you could fight me off" (Meyer 264). Edward possesses an unimaginable amount of power over Bella, and uses that power to control her. Although she has loving family and friends to turn to if she wished to escape Edward's torment, Bella has no chance at a life away from Edward. As nature's perfect hunter, Edward could track Bella anywhere she went and would follow her under the pretense of protecting her from harm. Edward's subtle threats of violence – that her number was up the first time they met; that in no way could she fight him off – his warnings that she should fear his potential, his enjoyment of intimidation, and his lack of incentive to return her to her family force Bella to remain docile and submissive to him. When she does rebel against his will,

Edward reveals his “murderously angry” temper and with one roar, silences Bella’s opposition. Edward’s superhuman ability to read minds leaves Bella with no privacy outside of herself. Stalkers escalate their behavior, and the combination of Edward’s temper, his willingness to threaten Bella, his denial of his dangerous nature, his subtle emotional abuse, and his denial of Bella’s privacy are what make him truly dangerous.

Edward is an interesting character, in that despite his manipulative nature, he manages to maintain cultural norms that deny female independence in a patriarchal society. Likewise, Bella is also an interesting character, in that she conforms to the feminine norms when in the presence of any male characters. Bella Swan completely negates the role of female independence that feminism has worked decades to achieve. For its negation to be understood in context with *Twilight*, a definition must be placed with the term feminism.

Simply put, feminism is the approach to sex and gender equality that works to do away with gender inequalities and the resulting power struggle (“What Is Feminism”). Stemming from the resulting power struggle is feminist theory, whose goal is to understand how a text is shaped by its representation of the norms and values of patriarchal societies and to study the ways in which texts reinforce or undermine societal norms and values (Tyson 451). Conducive to feminism’s work and the understanding sought by feminist theory is the notion of gender roles, which differ for men and women. For men, traditional gender roles dictate that men should be family providers. Men should be the employed partner in a relationship, and they should not busy themselves with so called “women’s work.” According to Lois Tyson, “*traditional gender roles* cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive” in contrast to women, who are “emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing and submissive” (Tyson 85). Gender roles have been – and often, still are – used to give justification to inequality between men and women, and to

exclude both sexes from roles deemed gender specific by society. For example, men are not expected to desire to become teachers, nurses, or secretaries; likewise, women are not expected to desire to become doctors, lawyers, or police officers. Both cases defy societal gender norms, and those who desire to take on the roles of the opposite gender are looked at with skepticism, if not otherwise denied the positions entirely.

As such, Edward and Bella are made interesting by their use of and correspondence with traditional gender roles. Fitting with the male stereotypes, Edward is strong, aggressive, and has animalistic tendencies when hunting to provide for himself and his family. Bella, on the other hand, only succumbs to gender stereotypes when in Edward's presence. Away from Edward, Bella is smart, rational, independent, and outspoken. Her clumsiness is presented as a matter of fact, rather than a reason for a valiant rescue attempt. Able to act as an adult, in comparison with her "erratic, harebrained mother" (Meyer 4) and successfully navigate the city of Phoenix without getting lost or injured, all while maintaining her place in her high school's advanced placement program, Bella proves herself to be both street and book smart well before she moves to Forks. Yet once in Forks, her life becomes entirely about Edward and the Cullens, and she succumbs to every female stereotype. Bella becomes weak, frail, and incapable of securing her own safety and independence. She uses false seduction to obtain information from Jacob Black, a young Native American teen and the son of her father's friend, and she is willing to put herself in danger to remain the object of Edward's attention and affection (Meyer 211). At every turn, Bella negates the feminist model of a strong, fully functioning, independent woman who does not have to use her sexuality to obtain her desired results.

When compared to other popular young adult female narrators, such as Suzanne Collins' Katniss Everdeen, the exact spectrum of Bella's frailties is revealed. In general, literature places

the narrator as the hero of the story, but to say that Bella Swan is in any way a hero is impossible. In fact, Bella Swan is the most dangerous character in the entire novel. Shortly after Bella and Edward first meet, says Eliana Dockterman, “she becomes completely dependent upon him. His love is the only thing that sustains her. Without him, she's clumsy and helpless” (Dockterman, “Teen-Heroine Smackdown”). While Edward isolates her from her loved ones and subjects her to abuse and his warped form of love, it is Bella who initially chooses to pursue a relationship with Edward, and it is Bella who decides that her life is worthless without him. Bella Swan is dangerous, not to the other characters in the novel, but to readers – specifically the readers who are too young to distinguish between love, passion, and abuse. *Twilight* displays Bella’s willingness to subject herself to emotional torture as normal, if not expected, when a woman is in love with and physically no match to a man. Bella’s characterization as a typical high school girl thrown into an unbelievable situation only adds to her danger, because such characterization makes her relatable. It is easy for young girls to idealize the impossible yet highly desirable relationship that Meyer has crafted for her characters. What Bella possesses as a protagonist, she lacks as a plausible human being. She is clumsy, hapless, and what little self defense she has mastery of, often results in self harm. What Meyer is telling women is that it is okay to be intelligent and make your own way in the world as long as you remember that you are second to a man. Not even in so called Chick Lit can women gain reprieve from the societal standards that, without question, say women are subservient to men. If women can not find progress in the escapist fantasy that literature provides, how can there be any hope for progress in the real world?

Bella is the literary incarnation of the patriarchal woman and her idealization through the novels and successive media destroys the idea of female self sufficiency. While *Twilight* seems

like a mind-numbing read, it endorses harm, both to the self and to others and presents abuse as normal when it comes from a male point of view and is accompanied by assurances of future safety. Indoctrinating young adults with such dangerous ideas is catastrophic for both male and female readers of any form of young adult literature that emphasizes these societal standards, not just *Twilight*. For men, novels that endorse violence, such as *Twilight*, teach them how to quietly abuse their significant others. For women, such novels demean independence, and teach women to accept abuse when it is subtle, disguisable, and accompanied by assurances of love, safety, and potential for a future where they are loved and cared for. Repeated association with such materials corrupts the interactions between the sexes, with men believing that women enjoy abuse, and women believing that they deserve such treatment as long as the promises of men are assumed to be safer than life without a man. At its heart, this is *Twilight*'s main flaw. As the most vulnerable character in the novel, Bella is used to shed light on the systemic indoctrination of codependency that females receive due to their perception as the weaker sex. It is through her and other characters like her that young women learn to accept the treatment they are given, and not to question the motives behind such injustices. Bella Swan is reminiscent of the ideal 20th century woman: quiet, docile, and beautiful; repeatedly presenting this antique model as the ideal for the modern woman illustrates the societal value of women. Society values women as fragile, antique dolls, to be subjected like puppets to the treatment of puppet masters and *Twilight*, one of the most popular novels of the 21st century, does nothing to negate this perception.

Stephenie Meyer gave the world a literary grenade when she wrote *Twilight*. Her novel has the power to tear apart the feminist ideal and destroy the feminist conception of an independent, fully capable woman. Through *Twilight*, young teen readers are harmlessly exposed to domestic violence and self sacrifice. It is easy to dismiss Meyer's works as meaningless

fiction, but to do so would be to deny the influence of the written word. Meyer has created a fairytale romance that appeals to readers – mainly women – of all ages, yet presents romance in an unrealistic way that endorses domestic violence and discourages female independence.

Twilight is a “postfeminist fantasy” that, like similar novels, romanticizes regressive forms of romance and sexuality – that relationships work best when men hold all of the power and women only desire to be useful to men and willingly submit to male authority. Novels such as *Twilight* place the domestic aspect of the patriarchal society as the highest achievement that women should strive for (Petersen 54). At every turn, *Twilight* destroys feminism, even in situations in which Bella seems to take charge of her own life. *Twilight* characterizes women through abuse, male dependency, and the presumed inability to successfully function on their own, thus negating the role of the modern, independent woman. It is the type of novel that damages the interactions between the sexes, and makes abuse normal. As such, by marketing *Twilight* to young adult readers, society is normalizing the effects of trauma in the preteen mind. To damage the young adult psyche is to damage the future of the human race in a way that may be unchangeable. The grenade that Meyer has penned has already exploded, and in what way it will damage the future can only be imagined.

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