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New Myths: *Twilight* and the Myths of Post-Feminism

The post-modern era of both progressive technology as well as progressive equality is oddly mixed with a strange infatuation with ancient mythology. Yet, because of the modern consciousness, the ancient myths have been deconstructed and turned on their heads to fit modern sensibilities. Dragons were once only demonic creatures of lore, whereas in modern fantasy literature they have replaced the canine as man's (no, still not woman's) best friend. Wizards and witches have followed suite; Merlin and Morgan were originally, at best, both dark and dangerous, and now Harry and Hermione are practically role models for children and teenagers. Vampires and Werewolves are among the most recent converts to the light side. Bram Stoker's Dracula, or even Anne Rice's Lestat, may have a sickening appeal to readers, but they never attempt to be something worth emulating. The newest teen heart-throb is even less realistic than a movie star: he is Edward Cullen, a sexy vampire with a conscience. Readers (or parents) justify their lust for a traditionally evil monster because he has been reformed. Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series may not be artistically mature, or even great literature, but the books have gained the following of the most impressionable and vulnerable demographic: young people. Therefore, despite the weak prose, stolen plot elements (Emily Brontë's codependent lovers are far more fascinating), and generally sappy romance, the books have necessitated the attention of older and wiser audiences. The *Twilight* series pretends to reverse another myth, that of patriarchy and the hysterical, weak woman. Bella Swan is presented as an intelligent,

independent, and thoroughly modern young woman who would make early feminists proud, at least at a glance. However, by relying on modern, essentialist stereotypes for Edward Cullen, Jacob Black, and Bella Swan, *Twilight* actually perpetuates the post-feminist myth, which is simply a disguise for the old monsters of patriarchy and sexism.

Analyzing *Twilight* through a feminist lens may seem pointless, but the influence these books have over the developing minds of young women especially should garner the attention of feminist thinkers, who also wish to influence the next generation of women. A feminist theoretical approach to any piece of literature, whether a worthy text like *Wuthering Heights* or popular fiction like *Twilight*, aims to resist the manipulation of the author and deconstruct the female/male relationships and the political and social structures in which those relationship dynamics are played out. Characterization is a major element of literature for a feminist scholar. The manner in which female and male characters are depicted, the language they use, their world views, their desires, their strengths and weakness, and their choices all reflect in some way how the work illustrates the natures and roles of women and men in society. A feminist theoretical approach to *Twilight* will be concerned with how the lead characters represent women and men. Edward and Jacob are the two most prominent, positive male characters; as protagonists (though there are endless heated debates over which of the two deserve the lead), each portray an idealized type of the modern male. Yet, Jacob loses (for all intensive purposes), therefore it is Edward and his relationship with Bella that the series ultimately affirms. As *the* protagonist, or the heroine, Bella is *Twilight*'s vision of what a modern woman should be. If these are the heroes, then these three are what young fans of the series believe they should emulate. Feminism is concerned with how these characters either support or undermine true gender equality.

The emergence of the so-called “post-feminist” view is little more than the reemergence of the same old myths with modern sensibilities. In her 2003 essay “Feminism, Ethics, and History, or What Is the "Post" in Postfeminism?” Misha Kavka regrets that of all the complicated, convoluted definitions of post-feminism the most disturbing one “belongs to that group of mostly younger women, now headed towards or in the early stages of a career, who believe that feminism has already done its work by achieving as much social equality for women in the home and workplace as one could hope or even wish for” (Kavka 32). Patriarchy and sexism were not going to give up and die off easily just because feminism finally won suffrage for women, and so they have tried a new tactic: supporting girl-power. The trite phrase “if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em,” seems to have come to its fullest fruition with post-feminism. In her book, *Enlightened Sexism*, Susan J. Douglas takes issue with the term “post-feminist” because it “suggests that somehow feminism is at the root of this when it isn’t—it’s good, old-fashioned, grade-A sexism that reinforces good, old-fashioned, grade-A patriarchy. It’s just much better disguised” (Douglas 10). What is often called feminism or strong womanhood today is little more than women trading on sex for an illusion of power. Women can vote, go to school, and get real jobs, so now they are free to *choose* to stay home with the children (because it is actually unfair to expect mothers would leave their precious babes to labour in the work force). The fact that the options are there is enough. Besides, men are sorry for how they behaved; they have become the sentimental ones, learning to “control” their sexual desires, while women are “free” to express their sexuality without Victorian standards of purity chaining them down. The result is modern phenomena such as girl bands like The Pussycat Dolls, who preach female independence while gyrating, mostly naked, across the stage in front of drooling men. The other, more subtle result of the patriarchy behind post-feminism is the woman who is free to go to

college and choose an intellectually satisfying career, but chooses to give it up for the post-feminist man: the chivalrous male who is contrite on behalf of all men for objectifying women, and believes it is his duty to protect his female from the misogynist pigs of the world. Unfortunately for feminists, Edward, Jacob, and Bella all fall into these post-feminist stereotypical characterizations.

The guilt-ridden "vegetarian" vampire, Edward Cullen, though honestly not a bad guy, is the epitome of the old myth of patriarchy in a new, sensitive form. The switch from the vampire-as-villain to vampire-as-hero reflects the modern tendency towards nostalgia for the past. Though mythical creatures like vampires, witches, dragons, etc. were always symbols of evil in past narratives, they become redeemed and oddly venerated as being as beautiful as nymphs, unicorns, etc., simply because they are a part of that romanticized past for which technical modernity longs. Edward's appeal for modern readers is his relation to that nostalgia. As a post-feminist male, it is in his nature to literally consume people (women), but he feels guilty and remorseful for this. When Bella first discovers his secret, Edward tries to explain why his family only drinks the blood of animals: "I don't *want* to be a monster" (*Twilight* 187). His guilt is also manifested in his sexuality. It is Edward, not the woman, who desires to remain sexually pure until marriage. This is a reversal of the old patriarchal expectation that "boys will be boys," while girls are to be pure, moral influences. He refuses to grant Bella immortality (and therefore equal power) until she marries him. Edward does not want her to lose her soul, becoming like him, incapable of ageing or growing. This would seem wise on Edward's part: "a human life is not worth living, is not truly a human life, unless there is opportunity for growth and self-improvement" (Galens 117). He is originally seen as sympathetic for wanting Bella to live out human experiences like going to the prom. However, by telling Bella she is missing out on the

human experience of weakness and vulnerability, he is also preventing her from gaining the traditionally masculine traits of strength and power. Edward is also, charmingly and fortunately, highly protective of Bella. In order to ease his own guilt and anxiety for desiring to consume her, he obsesses over preventing her from getting hurt or worse. Edward believes he is "fighting fate trying to keep [Bella] alive" and that "keeping [her] safe is … a full-time occupation" (*Twilight* 191, 211). This perspective only emphasizes her helplessness, and supports the essentialist notions that men are the *natural* protectors of women.

Yet, Edward does harm Bella. On their honeymoon, though he does try to be gentle, Edward's sexual penetration of Bella leaves her bruised all over. He does feel like "a monster," but that is in line with his characterization as the guilt-ridden post-feminist male (*Breaking Dawn* 88). The scary part is that Bella feels the experience had been "wonderful and perfect," and she continually tries to seduce him into having sex again, despite the certainty that she would end up with more bruises (*Breaking Dawn* 92). This reinforces the misogynist idea that women want to be violated and dominated by men. Above and beyond Edward's super-human strength and speed, he has the individual power to read minds. So, even on an intellectual level his power is to figuratively penetrate people (women) by entering their thoughts. Bella, however, is the only person whose mind he cannot enter. He is not able to finally penetrate her mental defenses until the very end of the last book. After having already physically and violently penetrated her sexually, the series ends with Bella voluntarily lifting her defense to let him in to her mind. While he must go through penance in four books for his guilty nature, ultimately Edward still possesses, consumes, and penetrates Bella, and her identity is subsumed into his.

Jacob Black is somewhat over-zealously drawn as Edward's diametrically opposite competitor (hot/cold, passion/control, dark/light, reckless/protector), but what Meyer lacks in

subtlety she makes up for in meaning. Jacob does not get to be with Bella in the end, so in a way he loses. Though he is not a "bad guy" either, what he represents is being rejected. The constant references to Edward's protection of Bella, in contrast to Jacob's willingness to allow her to be reckless are reflective of more than his immaturity as Meyer may have merely meant. In *Eclipse*, the third book of the series, Jacob himself observes the difference between his and Edward's attitudes towards Bella: "Overprotective, isn't he? … A little trouble makes life fun. Let me guess, you're not allowed to have fun, are you?" (*Eclipse* 82). Freedom from the essentialist, patriarchal notion that women should be under the protection of a man is a part of the goal of feminism. The true reason feminism focuses on this view is that feminism aims for a world in which violence against women does not exist. The post-feminist myth has appropriated feminism's ideal of freedom from misogyny and twisted it into freedom from confining restraints on female sexuality. Post-feminism "focuses more on female empowerment than male oppression … [reclaiming] stereotypical femininity," resulting in the promiscuous-girl image of the Pussycat Dolls or Jessica Simpson's Carl's Jr. commercials (Rowe-Finkbeiner 90). These post-feminist women are supposedly the ones having fun, which is what Jacob wants for Bella. If Jacob were meant for Bella, then his point of view would be supported; as he is not meant for her, his perspective is undermined. Therefore, Bella *does* need to be protected from "fun" or independence, and this hijacked version of feminism. Jacob himself is impetuous, somewhat irrational, and immature in comparison to Edward. Though he is the one with confidence in Bella's strength, telling Edward "she's tougher than you think," (*Eclipse* 81) his confidence is misplaced until Bella becomes a vampire, because in their world of monsters she truly is as fragile as a "porcelain doll" (*New Moon* 179). The condescending manner in which the novels treat Jacob's regard for Bella reflects the condescending view of feminism from the post-feminist

stance, as if it is sweet the feminists want women to have independence, but naïve to think they are strong enough.

Bella, whose name is oddly reminiscent of Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* in which the characters sing out the obvious: "whose name means beauty," (it seems equally obvious to state that this ties her identity to her appearance rather than any inner worth), is the key to the post-feminist myth. If it were not for her, feminism could blame Edward for the patriarchy in the books, but she is acquiescent and even complacent in affirming the old sexist myths. The artwork on the first and fourth book jackets is meant to be representative of Bella, but the messages are eerie. The first depicts two hands holding out the infamous apple, linking her to the Eve tempting her Adam. On the fourth is two chess pieces: a red pawn in the background meant to be Bella in the beginning, and a white Queen in the foreground to represent her shift in the power dynamic. By the end of the series, as a vampire, her power is *essentially* opposite of Edward's. The reason he cannot puzzle her out (as all men apparently cannot decode the irrational inner-workings of women's minds) is because she shields herself from intrusive, mind-related attacks. Any vampire whose power focuses on the mind, like creating a mental sensation of physical pain or reading minds, cannot affect her. She is given the traditional female role of defending herself from corruption. Thus, Edward penetrates and Bella resists; he pursues and she plays hard-to-get.

In her modernity, Bella is the more sexually "free" of the two. Edward holds century old (he is 109 years old) values of waiting for marriage to have sex. Her modern-woman sex-drive is seen as inferior to his chivalrous self-control. Before they are married she is the one constantly trying to push physical boundaries and seduce him. Bella also gives Edward plenty of reason for wanting to protect her. She is an incurable klutz, as well as having an odd knack for attracting

life-threatening situations. According to *Twilight* then, the woman is at fault for her own weaknesses, and she necessitates the male protector; therefore the men (non-vegetarian vampires) cannot be blamed for desiring to consume and kill her. The sex scenes in the final book are violent, and disturbingly, though faintly, similar to the technique of softcore thriller movies: "sexual darkness is a generic necessity—without it, an erotic thriller could scarcely be recognized as such—sex must be poisoned somehow. Because post-feminist porn is reluctant to demonize women, the onus usually falls on men" (Andrews 60). In *Breaking Dawn*, the honeymoon is not only darkened by Bella's bruises; Edward has acted-out violently in multiple ways. He bites through the pillows, and punches holes through the heavy, wooden headboard. These actions are depicted as "good" because Edward restrains his inherent desire to bite and harm Bella. How is the erotic celebration of the violent male only barely controlling his urges not a case of the softcore thriller? The frightening aspect is that Meyer portrays Bella as unconcerned with the violence done to her.

Ironically, Bella is an intelligent student who apparently shares her author's love for *Romeo and Juliet* and *Wuthering Heights*, (Stephanie Meyer was an English-major), and she acts independent and modern, as opposed to her classmate Jessica, a simpering, jealous, boy-crazy, silly girl. However, once Bella meets Edward she is obsessed. Her entire existence depends upon him for protection and meaning. When the two visit Bella's mother in Florida, her supposedly "erratic, hare-brained" (*Twilight* 4) mother observantly remarks to Bella: "you orient yourself around him without even thinking about it. When he moves, even a little bit you adjust your position at the same time. Like magnets … or gravity. You're like a satellite, or something" (*Eclipse* 68). Bella's whole world, and self, is oriented around the male Edward. It is not Edward who orients himself around her; he is not the satellite. Though he has gone to

college, she will not and she actually refuses to go because all she needs is him. This is patriarchy's goal, at the heart of much of post-feminism. The term post-feminism is "applied to young women, who are thought to benefit from the women's movement through expanded access to employment and education and new family arrangements but at the same time do not push for further political change" (Aronson 904). The attitude of contentment with the achievements of second-wave feminism fosters complacency with remaining inequalities. Bella is content that she has the option to get an education, but complacent in giving-up equality for her man.

As a married couple Bella and Edward conform to his family pattern. Though Edward, as the male, is "capable of freeing himself from the biological conditions that created his tyranny over women and children, he has little reason to want to give this tyranny up" (Firestone 67). In the Cullen family the patriarchal head of the house is the career man (Edward's father, Carlisle, is a doctor), and the women, especially Esme and Rosalie, are obsessed with missing-out on being mothers. As Janice Doane and Devon Hodges write in their essay on Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles*, "Undoing Feminism: From the Preoedipal to Postfeminism in Anne Rice's Vampire Chronicles," now is the "time to investigate the relation between the feminist project to develop and emancipatory maternal rhetoric and conservative, postfeminist narratives of mass culture" (Doane 422). The relation between vampire mythology and motherhood is complicated to say the least. Edward's adoptive mother, Esme, had tried to commit suicide as a human because her baby died. That is how Carlisle found and "saved" her. She and Rosalie both feel incomplete through their lack of biological children. Therefore, Bella's child becomes the redemption for all the women, and they can fulfill their role through this baby. Immortality and a sort of equality is finally achieved when Edward makes Bella a vampire, but that does not

happen until she fulfills those ancient, sacred duties of becoming wife and mother. It is during the childbirth that would have killed her that Edward saves her life and raises her up to be roughly on par with himself.

Edward may be a reformed myth, but he still somehow epitomizes traditional views of masculinity, and there is a disturbing, violent sexuality underlying his relationship with Bella. Bella may be a modern girl, but she still throws away all the opportunities for a normal, full *human* existence to conform to him. Once all the villains are defeated, thanks to Bella's angelic ability to defend her family by enveloping them in her protective sphere, and thanks to Edward's ability to use his masculine mind, they do live happily ever after, in a very traditional, patriarchal existence. But, the patriarchy and essentialist sexism are wrapped up in the sentimental myth of post-feminism. This is one of many romantic novels by a woman, about a woman, and for women, and yet "nothing could be further from the aims of feminism than these fantasies based on the sexual … submission which so frequently characterize these novels" (Coward 378). How shocked would those early feminists be to discover that instead of recognizing the monsters for what they are, modern women nostalgically yearn for them?

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