TWILIGHT IS NOT GOOD FOR MAIDENS: GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND THE FAMILY IN STEPHENIE MEYER'S *TWILIGHT* SERIES

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"Dear, you should not stay so late,
Twilight is not good for maidens;
Should not loiter in the glen
In the haunts of goblin men."
—Christina Rossetti, "Goblin Market"

Although I regularly teach children's and young adult literature to undergraduate students, it took my son's babysitter to alert me to the phenomenon of Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* Saga, the now ubiquitous quartet of novels about 17-year-old Bella Swan and her vampire beau, Edward Cullen. My babysitter, who suffers from dyslexia and therefore reads quite slowly, had nonetheless made her way through texts whose lengths rival the great Victorian novels. Indeed, this young woman's passionate investment in these stories brings to mind nineteenth-century readers clamoring at the docks for the latest installments of Dickens's work, and makes her one of a large community of girls and women who have made the *Twilight* series among the best selling young adult novels of all time. Over 50 million of the books have been sold, the first two of scheduled four film adaptations have been released, and the number of self-admittedly obsessed "Team Edward" fans continues to grow. Meanwhile, Meyer, the erstwhile unknown Mormon housewife who wrote the first installment of the series after dreaming about a vampire and a young girl in a meadow, was named one of *Time* magazine's most influential people of 2008.

Studies in the Novel, volume 42, numbers 1 & 2 (Spring & Summer 2010).

The tremendous success of the novels has surprised some critics, especially those feminist media and literary critics who argue that the series perpetuates outdated and troubling gender norms. Edward, these critics claim, is frequently controlling and domineering, saving the hapless Bella time and again from danger; Bella suffers from low self-esteem and seemingly has no close friends except for Edward, his family, and Jacob, a suitor-turned-werewolf; and, at the end of the series, she foregoes college in order to marry Edward and bear, at great risk to her own life, a half-human and half-vampire child.

Elizabeth Hand is representative of feminist critics when she argues in *The Washington Post* that "there's something distinctly queasy about the male-female dynamic that emerges over the series' 2,446 pages. Edward has been frozen at the age of 17. But he was born in 1901, and he doesn't behave anything like a real teenager. He talks and acts like an obsessively controlling adult male" (7). Numerous blogs and groups such as *Feminist Mormon Housewives* and the *Facebook* group Twilightmoms have also analyzed the gender dynamics of the series, even from inside the sometimes rabid fan community. Chelsea, writing on *Feminist Mormon Housewives*, posts, "I find the message to young girls disturbing. That love is an irresistible force that precludes making any rational decisions. That it's OK (even noble) to sacrifice your personal safety if you 'really' love someone" (n.p.). Claims such as these reveal the concern that many critics and readers feel about the books' tremendous popularity and the messages that they impart to girls about romance and women's roles in sexual relationships. Do the books promote retrograde ideas about female submission to male authority? Are the books particularly troubling in the genre of young adult (YA) literature, whose readers might not yet have developed the critical apparatus of the adult reader?

The criticisms leveled against the series in the press indicate that it deserves a more in-depth discussion than it has yet received. The novels' gender ideology is ultimately and unapologetically patriarchal. However, focusing merely on Edward and Bella's romance obscures larger themes that the novels also explore, and that add to the series' appeal and cultural significance, particularly within the genre of young adult fiction. Although Edward and Bella are the center of the novel's narrative, the series is equally concerned with the contemporary American nuclear family, and a woman's role within that family. Identity, in the series, occurs within the context of group identity, particularly family. Bella's desire for eternal life as a vampire with Edward is closely connected with her longing for a stable family, which she has been denied after her parents' divorce, and which the archaic Cullen family offers. Edward becomes a father figure to Bella, and the Cullens as a group stand for the ideal family of a mythic past. Emphasizing the ultimately domestic nature of her vampire saga, and breaking from the romance, or courtship, plot, Meyer does not conclude with Bella and Edward's marriage. Rather, she continues the narrative into Bella's pregnancy and new motherhood

because, as she told a *USA Today* interviewer, "I guess there's a conditioning from fairy tales that the wedding is the end of the story, but I think most of us know that it's another kind of beginning" (Memmott). In the final book of the series, *Breaking Dawn*, Meyer allows Bella to become the kind of mother that she never had, the apotheosis of the self-sacrificial, selfless mother, who is willing to die for the good of her unborn vampire child, and the warrior-mother who successfully protects the integrity and survival of her family. Meyer thus proposes that marriage and motherhood provide women with equality that they do not possess as single women. Motherhood becomes a location not only of pleasure and satisfaction but also of power.

It has become axiomatic in analysis of YA literature that most of these texts are concerned with both the experience of adolescence and with a young person's formation of identity.[1] Adolescence is a transitional point between childhood and adulthood during which adolescents cope with the often uncomfortable transformations of their bodies and with events that typically occur for the first time during teen years, including first sexual experiences, exposure to alcohol and drugs, and the complex social world of high school. During this liminal time, most adolescents prepare to leave the home and take on the increased responsibilities and freedoms of adulthood. They may be entrusted with the use of a family car; they may encounter death for the first time; they may have to choose between employment, vocational training, and higher education. YA literature, whether realistic or fantastic, engages with these issues of identity.

Perhaps in part because most writers of YA literature are themselves adults, much YA literature has a tendency to moralize and instruct adolescents. Although the explicitness of the didactic tenor has softened in the last several decades, Peter Hollindale cautions readers to be aware of both explicit and implicit (or what he terms "covert" and "passive") ideology in children's and YA literature (12). Hollindale's concern is that children will simply internalize such "unexamined" and "shared" values without reflection (12-13).[2] For example, in agreement with Hollindale, Roberta Trites states that YA literature is an "ideological tool used to curb teenagers' libido" (85), an assertion that certainly holds true for the *Twilight* series. Even authors who explore and celebrate those examples of YA literature that offer competing voices and discourses, acknowledge that this polyphony is often bounded by the narrative frame. Robin McCallum, in her Bakhtinian analysis of YA literature, writes that "a substantial proportion of children's fiction attempts to construct and impose a unified (monologic) worldview upon readers" (17). *Twilight i*s a good example of McCallum's claims, as it concludes with a monologic representation of the virtuous family and woman.[3] In any case, when situated within the genre of YA literature, *Twilight*'s abstinence-only "agenda" is less surprising than it might be in a novel written for and marketed explicitly to adults. The series is part of a genre that is often written expressly to teach young men and women

in the confusion of identity formation how to live what the author deems a virtuous, moral, and meaningful life.

Indeed, Meyer opens the series at a transitional moment in Bella Swan's life. In the beginning of *Twilight*, she is moving to Forks, Washington to live with her father, Charlie. "Forks" is an appropriate name for her new home, as Bella is, in fact, at a crossroads, or "fork" in her life. Her mother, Renee, has decided that she would rather follow her minor-league baseball player husband, Phil, around the country than stay at home with Bella. Renee is unable to live independently or adequately mother Bella; gazing into her mother's "wild, childlike eyes," Bella wonders, "How could I leave my loving, erratic, harebrained mother to fend for herself?" (4). Bella further emphasizes the reversal of mother/daughter roles, when she observes that "I was a very different person from my mother. Someone thoughtful and cautious. The responsible one, the grownup" (*Eclipse* 450). From the opening of the series, therefore, Meyer depicts Bella as inappropriately mothered. *Twilight* is a series very much concerned with the practice of mothering, and in Renee's abdication of her role, Meyer provides room for Edward's adopted mother Esme to become an alternate mother figure, and, as I'll discuss later, offers Renee as a foil and anti-role model for Bella.

Bella's father, Charlie, is more attentive to his daughter than Renee is, and somewhat less hapless; when he puts chains on Bella's tires after a snowstorm, she thinks to herself, "I wasn't used to being taken care of" (*Twilight* 55). Never fully recovered from his divorce to Renee, Charlie has not changed the house since his ex-wife left him. The same family photographs hang on the walls, and Charlie has not learned even rudimentary cooking skills. Bella immediately takes on the domestic chores for her father, volunteering to do all the cooking and laundry, and thereby stepping into the role that her mother rejected. Though Charlie does eventually assert some paternal authority over his daughter—grounding Bella from leaving the house in *New Moon* after she flies off to Italy to save Edward—he spends most of his time working, watching television, and fishing, disengaged from his daughter. Though he and Bella love each other, he is not the benevolent but authoritative father of the traditional family, but rather like an older brother or uncle figure. Though Bella is not the prototypical orphan of the *bildungsroman*, her lack of authoritarian parents gives her the opportunity to develop her identity along her own inclinations and to cultivate her sense of self without the active (or at any rate, effective) intrusion of a mother and father. However, unlike many *bildungsromanen* that validate individual accomplishment and autonomy, Meyer's novel all but ignores individualism in favor of affiliation.

Bella's family life is crucial to her romance with Edward. On the first occasion that Bella sees her father after her transformation into a vampire, she responds to the smell of his human blood by feeling "so much more than pain. It was a hot stabbing of desire, too. Charlie smelled more delicious

than anything I'd ever imagined....But I wasn't hunting now. And this was my father" (*Breaking Dawn* 507). This bizarre moment, glanced over quickly in the novel, provides a clue to Bella's attraction to Edward. For Edward's appeal is, throughout the novel, paternal. Edward is the father that Bella never had, and just as Bella's new vampire thirst conflates her father with a sexual object of desire, so Edward is not just lover but father. Edward frequently refers to or treats Bella as a child. When he first met Bella, Edward tells her later, he considered her "an insignificant little girl" (*Twilight* 271). Later he calls her "little coward" (*Twilight* 279) and "Silly Bella" (*Twilight* 281). These infantilizing endearments are underscored by the fact that he saves the perpetually clumsy and unlucky Bella again and again.

When he rescues her, Edward uses language that is more patrimonial than romantic, though clearly, Meyer blurs the two discourses. For example, after rescuing Bella from a group of would-be rapists, he tells her to "prattle about something unimportant until I calm down" (*Twilight* 169) and then takes her to a restaurant, where he orders her to eat and drink, his voice "low, but full of authority" (*Twilight* 166). In response to his commands, Bella "sipped at [her] soda obediently" (*Twilight* 169). Meyer's diction—"prattle," "obediently"—clearly connotes a power dynamic in which Edward makes important decisions and Bella, though often grumbling and pouting, almost inevitably submits.

Moments such as these are behind the feminist concern about gender roles that the novel raises, as Edward is exaggeratedly more active and confident than the generally passive, insecure Bella. Bella's clumsiness of course, is not simply a sign of incompetence. Rather, she embodies, in her physical klutziness the adolescent girl ill at ease in her new woman's body and with her first emotions of first love and lust. Nevertheless, in the context of Edward and Bella's relationship, her gracelessness provides numerous opportunities, particularly in *Twilight*, for Meyer to demonstrate the dynamic in their relationship of perpetual rescuer and rescued.

Meyer may have anticipated such critiques of her novel, for at one point, Edward tells Bella, "You don't have to ask my permission, Bella. I'm not your father—thank heaven for that" (*Eclipse* 230). But the reader can be forgiven for viewing Edward as Bella's father after reading repeated scenes in which Edward cares for Bella as if she were a child rather than a young adult. She is, for example, habitually carried around by Edward (and later by Jacob). Bella tells us that "Edward had scooped me up in his arms, as easily as if I weighed ten pounds instead of a hundred and ten" (*Twilight* 97) and, later, that Edward "reached out with his long arms to pick me up, gripping the tops of my arms like I was a toddler. He sat me on the bed beside him" (*Twilight* 297).

Meanwhile, the vampire carrying his beloved around like "a toddler" is almost by default described by Bella as breathtakingly perfect, Bella's "perpetual savior" (*Twilight* 166), "a Greek god" (*Twilight* 206), a "godlike creature" (*Twilight* 256), "a carving of Adonis" (*Twilight* 299), and "terrible

and glorious as a young god" (*Twilight* 343). In part, these pagan, mythological comparisons reinforce Edward's corporeality, which is cold and hard as a statue. His body is compared throughout the series to sharply sculpted stone and marble. But again, the disjunction between Edward's beauty and flawlessness and Bella's perception of herself as mediocre and average, is a wide one. The reader might empathize with Bella's lack of self-confidence, but the "godlike creature" and the "toddler" hardly provide an egalitarian pairing.

In fairness to the series and its fans, however, it is important to note that Meyer does not present Edward's character as perfect, which reviews and responses to the novels sometimes assume. In fact, especially by the third volume, *Eclipse*, Meyer occasionally faults Edward's overreactions to danger and his overbearing behavior toward Bella. Although she continues to "whimper" (132) and "cringe" (140) in the face of disagreements with her boyfriend, Bella does stand up for herself more forcefully by the third book in the series, going so far as to "scoff" (32) and "demand" (55) concessions from Edward, and Edward more and more often acknowledges his faults. When Edward keeps the truth about dangers from Bella, she concludes, "Edward's shielding arms had become restraints" (84), and convinces Edward to be more honest about risks with her in the future. After Jacob sneers at Bella—"Is [Edward] your warden now, too?" (224)—Bella does revolt against Edward's surveillance and babysitting, demanding that she be "Switzerland" in the rivalry between vampires and werewolves. In one playful scene, for instance, Bella and Edward, like any high school students before the days of instant messaging, surreptitiously pass each other notes during English class in which they work out their disagreements, to Bella's advantage.

The books do not go so far as to become narratives about self-assertion and autonomy, but Meyer does, through Bella and other characters, show Edward's shortcomings, and demonstrate that he changes in response to Bella's demands. One must concede these shadings of the series' gender ideology because, even on fan message boards heavily stacked with Edward supporters, readers vigorously debate the degree to which Edward is too controlling, and whether he is a good model for a boyfriend in today's world. Meyer's novels are more nuanced, in other words, than some reviews suggest.

Bella is not only drawn to Edward, however. She falls in love with the entire Cullen family. The Cullens' non-human, monstrous, adoptive family is, ironically, more of a family than Bella's biological human family. Headed by the patriarchal but compassionate godlike father Carlisle (who, like God, creates his own wife when he finds her dying), balanced by the affectionate and protective mother Esme, and humanized by squabbling siblings, the Cullens are the family that Bella craves. The "large wooden cross" (*Twilight* 330) hanging in their home, a reminder of Carlisle's seventeenth-century pastor father, along with earnest discussions about whether or not vampires have souls (Meyer hints that they must), suggests that the family is even, in some

way, Christian. Like Charlie, the town sheriff, Carlisle, a doctor, saves lives, but unlike Charlie, Carlisle shares with Bella a deep love for books. He is intellectual and scholarly, more like Bella than her actual father is. As Carlisle is a foil to Charlie, so Esme is a foil to Renee. While Renee chooses her new husband over her daughter, Esme defines herself primarily as a mother. Carlisle turned her into a vampire after she flung herself over a cliff, in despair over the death of her newborn child. Esme admits that "I never could get over my mothering instincts" (*Twilight* 368), and so she considers Edward her son and makes do with her adult adoptive children. Esme immediately accepts Bella into the family as another daughter. Moreover, Bella belongs with the Cullens more than she does with Charlie and Renee by dint of her values and interests. She shares their love of literature, music, domesticity, and history. In her admiring piece on *Twilight*, Caitlin Flanagan concurs, noting that "Bella is an old-fashioned heroine: bookish, smart, brave, considerate of others' emotions, and naturally competent in the domestic arts" (112).

So, appropriately, when Edward refuses to transform Bella into a vampire, she decides to put her immortality up to a family vote, and, after the Cullens take her side, thanks them "for wanting to keep me" (*New Moon* 535): "I looked around the room at their faces—Jasper, Alice, Emmett, Rose, Esme, Carlisle…Edward—the faces of my family" (*Eclipse* 309). Losing Edward in *New Moon*, Bella admits, "had been more than just losing the truest of true loves....It was also losing a whole future, a whole family" (398). Again, Meyer has not written solely a romance novel about Edward and Bella. She has written, instead, a romance about family and the human need for connection and community. The Cullens—and, later, the werewolf pack to which Jacob belongs—indicate that one's identity comes not just from romantic love but from one's family affiliation. Indeed, the "vegetarian" Cullens could be a Mormon family living in Provo, Utah. With their archaic names—"Strange, unpopular Names,…[t]he kinds of names grandparents had" (*Twilight* 20)—and their ancient provenance, they are a throwback to the mythic family of an imagined past. On fan sites, it is surprising how often readers post not just love letters to Edward, but to the entire Cullen clan; readers consider spunky Alice a big sister, and they chuckle at Emmett's jokes. Like Bella, they want not just Edward but the loving, occasionally discordant, family of which he is a part. In contrast to models of adolescence that envision young adulthood as a break from the family towards individuation and autonomy, Meyer posits adolescent and adult identity as being formed within the context of the family.

Part of what makes the *Twilight* series so popular and so unusual is Edward and Bella's old-fashioned courtship, in which only kisses are exchanged before the wedding. By *Eclipse*, the series becomes more explicitly about the values of abstinence before marriage. Fans on *Facebook* might gleefully comment on Bella's lustfulness, but for Edward and Meyer, marriage is the only moral arena for sexual desire. The novel's validation of abstinence has

been much-commented on. Meyer, an observant Mormon who does not watch R-rated movies, told *Time* magazine that "I do think that because I'm a very religious person, it does tend to come out somewhat in the books, although always unconsciously" ("10 Questions"). Miriam Grossman, writing for the conservative Clare Boothe Luce Policy Institute, writes approvingly of *Twilight*'s chaste romance: "a girl should be encouraged to wait until her own Edward Cullen comes along, a man who has waited for her as she has for him" (n. p.). Despite Charlie's concern that Bella will become pregnant out of wedlock, Edward is the perfect suitor for an old-fashioned father. Just as he exercises self-control over his desire to drink Bella's blood (clearly analogous to sexual desire in this and other vampire lore), he refuses to give in to Bella's persistent desire for sexual contact. Again, Meyer hearkens to the past for her model of male/female relationships.

Edward, who again was born in 1901, remains a creature of his era. He explains to Bella that "I was *that boy*, who would have—as soon as I discovered that you were what I was looking for—gotten down on one knee and endeavored to secure your hand" (*Eclipse* 277). Edward's self-consciously anachronistic diction—"endeavored to secure your hand"—indicates that he is a relic and model of Edwardian, if not Victorian, masculinity. His use of words like "virtue" and his desire to remain sexually "spotless" (*Eclipse* 454) are uncommon in popular, mainstream secular discourse about young adult sexuality today. No wonder Bella responds to Edward by imagining herself "in a long skirt and high-necked blouse with my hair piled up on my head." This "*Anne of Green Gables* flashback" (*Eclipse* 277) could, in fact, be the Mormon girl of a past century—or a girl on a polygamous compound today—rather than a girl living in the age of the internet and instant messaging.

According to the official doctrine of the LDS Church,

> In the world today, Satan has led many people to believe that sexual intimacy outside of marriage is acceptable. But in God's sight, it is a serious sin. It is an abuse of power given us to create life. The prophet Alma taught that sexual sins are more serious than any sins except murder and denying the Holy Ghost.… Some people try to convince themselves that sexual relations outside of marriage are acceptable if the partners love each other. That is not true. People who love each other would never endanger one another's happiness and safety in exchange for temporary personal pleasure. (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints)

Edward's arguments in favor of chastity are quite similar to Mormon concepts of sexuality and sin. Edward, for instance, compares the commandment against committing murder to extramarital sex, arguing that "The same principle applies," and adding, "this is the one area in which I'm just as spotless as you are. Can't I leave one rule unbroken?" (*Eclipse* 454) And, of course, his refusal to have sexual intercourse with Bella is tied to his fear of harming

her, literally endangering her life. Edward frequently points out the dangers of sexual desire: Emmett killed at least two women—"strangers he happened across" (*Twilight* 269)—to whose blood he responded strongly; Edward could easily, if he and Bella have sexual intercourse, "reach out, meaning to touch your face, and crush your skull by mistake" (*Twilight* 310). Most gruesomely, Rosalie is made a vampire after she is gang raped by her fiancé and his friends and left for dead; once she has been turned into a vampire, she exacts a bloody, methodical revenge.

What is important here is that Edward, not Bella, is the one who persists in saying no. Bella, not Edward, is shy of marriage. In fact, Meyer lets the reader savor Bella's appreciative gaze as she dwells on Edward's chiseled body. However, in light of the fierce national struggles over abstinence-only education in schools, it is not surprising that feminist critics would attack the novel's abstinence agenda. According to Christine Seifert, who labels *Twilight* "abstinence porn," "Bella is not in control of her body, as abstinence proponents would argue; instead, she is absolutely dependent on Edward's ability to save her life, her virginity, and her humanity" (25). Similarly, Sarah Seltzer writes that "even while inverting the positions, Meyer doesn't change the game. Purity is still the goal. Man, or vampires, are still dangerous and threatening while females are still breakable and fragile" (n.p.). While Seifert and Seltzer are both generally correct, they overstate the case. Premarital sex in *Twilight* is risky, life-threatening, and brutal for everyone involved, both men and women. The most obvious case of men being harmed by premarital sex is the case of Rosalie's fiancé and his friends, but Edward's brother Jasper is another example. Jasper is turned into a vampire after encountering "the three most beautiful women I had ever seen" (*Eclipse* 213), whose angelic faces and appreciation for his "lovely" smell cloud his awareness of danger. The only context in which sex is safe (and, in Edward and Bella's case, barely so) is marriage. Meyer's avowal of abstinence is not to every contemporary reader's taste, but she is clear on one point: abstinence is the model for both boys and girls. Love and lust, for both sexes, should be intertwined and should be made permanent by marriage.

Bella does, of course, cede to Edward's wishes to get married. And it is in the final book of the series, *Breaking Dawn*, that the gender politics of the books become particularly entangled. On the one hand, this novel is the most explicitly ideological of the four; its anti-abortion politics come right from the Republican platform. On the other hand, in the final book, Edward and Bella finally reach a sort of equality in their relationship through marriage and parenthood, which gives Bella an authority and power that she lacked in previous volumes. The novel turns, surprisingly, from courtship to marriage. Seifert writes that Bella becomes "a traditional—and boring—teenaged mom" and that she and Edward are revealed to be "tepid and unenlightened people" (24). I do not disagree with Seifert's final assessment of Edward and Bella.

Like many critics, I find neither protagonist particularly engaging or complex. However, Bella is at her least "boring" once she becomes a mother. While she is not the heroine that I would choose as a model for my female students—marriage and motherhood at age nineteen and the curtailing of her education are irresponsible advice for today's girls—the book demands a detailed analysis of how Meyer depicts motherhood as a means of personal fulfillment and, more generally, underscores the series' persistent theme that identity comes from affiliation rather than individual accomplishment.

First, and most obviously, the novel is unashamedly anti-abortion and pro-natalist. Even Edward and Bella's honeymoon location, Isle Esme, is named after the mother of the family, which implicitly links sexual activity to procreation. After Bella and Edward have sex, Bella is left, in one of the series' most disturbing plot developments, blissfully covered with enormous bruises. This violent sex leaves her pregnant, and the pregnancy throws a barrier between Edward and Bella that seems, at first, more serious than the vampire/human divide. Fearful for Bella's life, Edward immediately wants to terminate the pregnancy: "We're going to get that thing out before it can hurt any part of you. Don't be scared. I *won't* let it hurt you" (*Breaking Dawn* 133). But to Bella, the fetus is already personalized as her baby and she is horrified at Edward's suggestion that she have an abortion: "He didn't care about the baby at all," she realizes, "He wanted to *hurt* him" (*Breaking Dawn* 133). In the novel's most undisguised political claim, Bella tells the reader, "I wanted [my baby] like I wanted air to breathe. Not a choice—a necessity" (*Breaking Dawn* 132). Bella's use of anti-abortion language here—"Not a choice"—could come directly from an anti-abortion bumper sticker. Meyer gives these ideas additional authoritative weight by putting them in the mouth of the heroine and narrator-focalizer. The claims in favor of abortion, on the other hand, most consistently belong to the unreliable narrator, Jacob. The ideology of *Breaking Dawn* here is heavy-handed and unconcealed.

What is particularly significant in terms of Meyer's representation of pregnancy and abortion is that she explicitly makes Bella's pregnancy life-threatening. Bella's dangerous pregnancy links her to the archetypal female hero of the *Twilight* series, the "Third Wife" of Quileute chieftain Taha Aki, who, in Quileute history, stabbed herself in order to distract a vampire with her sacrificial blood and save her family. Bella is fascinated by the martyrdom of the third wife:

> I was trying to imagine the face of the unnamed woman who had saved the entire tribe, the third wife. Just a human woman, with no special gifts or powers. Physically weaker and slower than any of the monsters in the story. But she had been the key, the solution. She'd saved her husband, her young sons, her tribe. I wish they'd remembered her name. (*Eclipse* 260)

Bella behaves as the third wife by saving her family at the climax of *Breaking Dawn*, but she also acts as the third wife in her pregnancy by risking her life in order to save "our baby" (*Breaking Dawn* 371). Unequivocally, the good mother in Meyer's novels is willing to sacrifice herself for her family. That the baby in this case is not yet born makes Bella's potential self-sacrifice seem, within the value structure of the series, all the more noble. Meyer gives Bella the moral authority to stand up and thwart Edward's desire for an abortion. Female power in the series is linked not to aggression (the excessively violent Victoria, for instance, is brutally beheaded and torn to pieces by Edward) but rather to self-sacrifice and the defense of others. Meyer twice gives Bella's decision to continue her pregnancy religious overtones: once when Bella tells Jacob, "this is all going somewhere good, hard to see as it is now. I guess you could call it *faith*" (*Breaking Dawn* 190) and once when Jacob says, of Bella, "The girl was a classic martyr.... She could have lived back when she could have gotten herself fed to some lions for a good cause" (*Breaking Dawn* 187). Of course, Bella is, literally, "fed" to her voracious fetus and, later, Edward. Her "faith," however, sustains her.

Breaking Dawn was released in 2008, one year after the release of *Eclipse* in 2007. Meyer wrote the novel after the groundbreaking 2007 Supreme Court decision Gonzales v. Carhart and Gonzales v. Planned Parenthood, which upheld the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act of 2003. The most contentious aspect of that decision was that the 2007 decision does not include an exception for the health of the mother. Bella's pregnancy in *Breaking Dawn* dramatizes a woman who resists what is essentially a late-term abortion (since Resmenee grows at an accelerated pace) that risks destroying her life. The pregnancy saps Bella's strength, breaks her ribs, and leads to the rupture of the placenta and projectile vomiting of blood. Yet, despite the risks, Meyer proves Bella correct. Bella doesn't "kill [her] baby" (*Breaking Dawn* 195) and is justified when she gives birth to a half-human, half-vampire baby with a full set of teeth. "I'd been right all along," Bella muses. "She was worth the fight" (*Breaking Dawn* 447).

In order to gain the reader's sympathy with Bella's decision, Meyer makes two important narrative and rhetorical moves. First, she chooses Rosalie, the least likeable Cullen, as Bella's primary ally in maintaining the pregnancy. Rosalie is selfishly uninterested in Bella's safety, concerned only with the possibility that she will have an infant to care for. Edward tells Jacob that "Rosalie's always there, feeding [Bella's] insanity—encouraging her. Protecting her. No, protecting it. Bella's life means nothing to her" (*Breaking Dawn* 181). Later, Jacob observes, "The baby, the baby. Like that was all that mattered. Bella's life was a minor detail to [Rosalie]—easy to blow off" (*Breaking Dawn* 303). "Totally egotistical and indifferent" (*Breaking Dawn* 303), Rosalie is the least sympathetic figure in the battle over Bella's pregnancy, initially making the pregnancy-at-all-costs idea unpalatable. She is a parody of the pro-life fanatic

who does not care if the mother lives or dies. Rather than Rosalie, Edward is the sympathetic character in these chapters. Meyer accentuates Edward's fear and agony at his wife's suffering, "his broken helplessness" and "half-crazed" (*Breaking Dawn* 176) eyes. Thus, when Edward comes to share Bella's awe for the pregnancy and to love their unborn child, his conversion theoretically takes the reader along with him. If Edward, who wanted Bella to terminate, now accepts the pregnancy, then that perspective must be the correct one.

Meyer's second rhetorical move, to personify the fetus, enables Edward's change of heart. Suddenly, Edward can "hear" Renesmee's thoughts and immediately afterwards begins to refer to the fetus as "him" rather than "it" (*Breaking Dawn* 326), mistaking the child for a boy. With his head on his wife's belly like any expectant father, Edward whispers, "He loves you….He absolutely *adores* you" (*Breaking Dawn* 327). Now, Jacob observes, "they were together, the two of them bent over the budding, invisible monster with their eyes lit up like a happy family" (*Breaking Dawn* 328). Meyer grants the fetus consciousness and emotion; she fictionalizes the key anti-abortion argument that personhood occurs before birth. And, because the initially wary Edward comes around to this position, Meyer prods the reader to come to that conclusion, as well. Edward and Bella become the compassionate, "good cop" to Rosalie's "bad cop," making Meyer's extreme anti-abortion politics far more palatable.

Of course, any discussion of when life begins is on the surface absurd in a discussion of vampires, none of whom is really "alive" in a human sense; however, Meyer's diction is so clearly drawn from contemporary rhetoric about abortion that one would have to be obtuse not to draw those symbolic connections. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints officially condemns abortion as a sin, but does permit it, after counseling and prayer, in certain cases, including rape, incest, lethal fetal deformity, and when the mother's life and health are at risk. Meyer's position in the novel is well within Mormon orthodoxy.

After giving birth, Bella is immediately turned into a vampire by Edward. Doing so in one sense saves her life, since she would have died during the dangerous birth, but of course, she gives up her humanity. Because her transformation into a vampire is so closely connected with becoming a mother, Bella's vampirism is as closely tied, symbolically, to motherhood as it is to her love for Edward. Once Bella becomes a vampire, Meyer repeatedly emphasizes that Bella and Edward are equals: sexually, in physical strength, as hunters, and in their psychic gifts. Only within marriage and motherhood, Meyer suggests, can women find true equality with men and, more largely, truly become themselves.

In the *Twilight* series, marriage and motherhood are the apotheosis of a woman's life. In *Twilight,* Bella tells Edward, "a man and woman have to be somewhat equal…as in, one of them can't always be swooping in and saving

the other one. They have to save each other *equally*" (*Twilight* 474). Bella's wish comes true after she is transformed into a vampire and becomes incredibly powerful, graceful, and beautiful. When Edward and Bella share their first vampire kiss, "My lips no longer shaped themselves around his; they held their own" (*Breaking Dawn* 426). "We could love together," Bella concludes, "both active participants now. Finally equal" (*Breaking Dawn* 482).

These moments, so evocative of the proposal and conclusion in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, posit an ideal equality in marriage and, because Bella is a mother, also suggest that motherhood gives women an authority in marriage that the unmarried, childless girl does not enjoy. The inequality in their relationship dissipates when that relationship is made permanent. One could argue, of course, that Bella must conform to Edward's existence and die to her own before they become equal, but Edward himself became a vampire without being given the choice; Bella, on the other hand, makes the choice herself. And when she says, of being a vampire, "I had found my true place in the world, the place I fit, the place I shined" (*Breaking Dawn* 524), she is speaking as much allegorically about motherhood as she is about being a vampire. In fact, the two are so closely interconnected as to be indistinguishable.

Meyer's implication, in *Breaking Dawn*, is that self is found in community, particularly in marriage and parenthood (whether biological or adoptive), but also in family and group, such as the werewolf pack. Each of the Cullen vampires has both a family unit and a "partner" to whom he or she is primarily devoted. The werewolves belong to a pack, in which they can read each other's thoughts, and also "imprint" romantically and unchangeably onto another individual. Only in the context of a relationship, Meyer indicates, can self and identity be forged. The self does not exist in isolation, but in attachment. Throughout the series, Bella has longed for family and affiliation and she finds her sense of identity not through individual achievement (going to college, for instance) but through a relationship.

Bella now becomes the mother that she never had, willing to do anything to protect her child. Despite the ecstatic vampire sex that Edward and Bella enthusiastically engage in, the mother/daughter bond comes close to overshadowing Edward and Bella's romantic love in *Breaking Dawn*. Renesmee is "the one thing I simply had to save" (570), Bella concludes. When the Volturi, ancient vampire royalty from Italy, come to destroy Renesmee and the Cullens, Bella saves her family and the other vampires who come to their aid through her special talent as a shield:

> The shield blew out from me in a bubble of sheer energy. . . . It pulsed like a living thing. . . . I could feel it flex like just another muscle, obedient to my will. I pushed it, shaped it to a long, pointed oval. Everything underneath the flexible iron shield was suddenly a part of me—I could feel the life force of everything it covered like points of bright heat. (690)

Bella's "purely defensive" (596) power in this novel is emblematic of motherhood. Just as she protects her child from harm, she can, through her womb-like shield, protect all those around her from harm.

Motherhood is more than a particular biological relationship in *Breaking Dawn*; it is a whole mode of being. The mother is she whose "life force" protects the vulnerable, protects others from evil. This idea of the mother has much in common with Victorian ideas about femininity and women's domestic power, in which the middle-class woman is guardian of the home, shielding her family from the pollution and immorality of the public sphere. But Bella's new power also brings to mind 1980s "difference" or "cultural" feminists such as Carol Gilligan and Sara Ruddick, whose theories of female development examine female identity within relationship and the practice of motherhood. Gilligan, for instance, writes,

> because women's sense of integrity appears to be entwined with an ethic of care, so that to see themselves as women is to see themselves in a relationship of connection, the major transitions in women's lives would seem to involve changes in the understanding and activities of care. Certainly the shift from childhood to adulthood witnesses a major redefinition of care. When the distinction between helping and pleasing frees the activity of taking care from the wish for approval by others, the ethic of responsibility can become a self-chosen anchor of personal integrity and strength. (171)[4]

Gilligan's argument that girls and women ground their "personal integrity and strength" in an ethic of attachment and care dovetails nicely with Meyer's depiction of Bella's maturation and increased strength (physical and emotional) within the context of marriage and motherhood. Bella's transition to adulthood occurs within a relationship, when she finds new abilities to care for and help others.

Bella is powerful enough to disarm the novels' other very powerful female, Jane, whose gift causes others to feel overwhelming pain. Interestingly, Jane is described as "slim and androgynous," like "a young boy" (*New Moon* 456). "Little Jane" (*New Moon* 474), as she is often called, is small, her voice "like a baby's cooing" (*New Moon* 464). Bella is the only character in the series who, even as a human, can resist Jane's power to inflict agonizing pain, and she does so because she is in control of her own mind. During the finale, Bella rebuffs Jane's attack by wrapping her shield around her allies. Here, the mature woman, the mother, is proved to be more powerful than the androgynous, sexless little girl whose only power is negative rather than positive. Once again, relationship and affiliation—the Cullens are a family, not a coven—triumph over attempts by the Volturi to divide and conquer.

Perhaps the best way to understand the gender dynamics of the *Twilight* series is to look back at classic nineteenth-century romances, specifically Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, and Emily Brontë's

Wuthering Heights, all of which have left traces in Meyer's work.[5] Edward claims to like Mr. Darcy, and his initially hostile demeanor towards Bella is an exaggerated version of Darcy's arrogant response to Elizabeth Bennett at the Netherfield Ball. Bella and Edward are tamed, domesticated versions of Heathcliff and Cathy. Though Edward concludes that Heathcliff and Cathy are "ghastly people who ruin each other's lives" (*Eclipse* 28), he nonetheless sympathizes with Heathcliff's great passion for Cathy, while Bella admires Cathy's famous speech to Heathcliff that "If all else perished, and he remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger" (qtd. in *Eclipse* 611). Edward's total emotional dependence on Bella is reminiscent of the great passions of Heathcliff and Edward's namesake Edward Rochester. "You are the most important thing to me now," Edward assures Bella, "The most important thing to me ever" (*Twilight* 273). In *New Moon*, he tells her, "Bella, I can't live in a world where you don't exist" (*New Moon* 509). And, while singing her to sleep, Edward says, "You are the only one who has ever touched my heart. It will always be yours. Sleep, my only love" (*Eclipse* 195). Any of these statements could be drawn from the Brontës' visions of love, or from their inspirations in Byron and Shelley.

Where *Twilight* differs, again, is that Meyer's plot extends beyond "Reader, I married him." Elizabeth's and Jane's histories end at marriage, while Bella's develops in significant ways. And while the *Twilight* series is not the equal of those nineteenth-century works in prose style, narrative, or characterization, it does draw from the same springs of longing, and evidently fills similar desires in readers for romantic love, passion, and even social climbing.

Of course, none of this analysis ultimately explains why *Twilight* is so popular, or why girls all over the world are pledging on fan sites that they will love Edward Cullen forever, and that he has ruined them for merely mortal human boys. Neither does it explain the phenomenon of equally obsessed married women who fantasize about Edward and sport "Twilight" bumper stickers on their cars. My own reading of blogs and discussion groups suggests that girls find Edward's aforementioned devotion to and adoration of Bella the most attractive aspect of his personality. One poster on Facebook writes, in the simultaneously comical and poignant lingo of instant messaging, that "i loved it because every word that was written made me feel like im in another world a *fantasy* where love is the most powerful thing and nothing can eva break u up it made me feel like there is no1 what could stop them from loving each other and no matter Wat happens they will always b together" (emphasis added).[6]

The word "fantasy" is key in any discussion of readers' responses to *Twilight*. Since the nineteenth century, fantasy has been a popular mode of children's and YA literature, and is particularly well represented in children's literature theory and criticism. Allison Waller writes that fantastic realism, the eruption of supernatural events in a realistic framework in YA literature, "offers

its readers new and interesting ways of becoming and being adolescents" (xiii). She claims that

> the models or frameworks we use to understand adolescence—including developmentalism, identity formation, social agency and subjectivity within cultural space—can also be found symbolically represented in the common tropes of teenage fantastic realism and its sister genres. In these books, incredibly, supernatural and magical elements invade the adolescent's everyday and diurnal world, elements such as metamorphosis, haunting, doppelgangers, invisibility. (1)

Or, of course, vampires and werewolves. Not only does fantastic realism like *Twilight* or the Harry Potter series allow adolescents to lose themselves in adventurous situations and idealized characters, but it also represents, in dramatic and exaggerated fashion, the conflicts in their own lives. It is not difficult to perceive, in the tormented werewolf Jacob, the adolescent who feels out of control in his or her rapidly changing body.[7] Bella's drawn-out decision about whether or not to become a vampire stands for any adolescent crisis writ large. Girls might not have to ponder whether or not to give up their mortal existences, but they frequently have to make decisions about who they are and what they are willing to do: with which social group will I ally myself in the cafeteria? is this behavior acceptable or too risky? to what extent must I change my sense of self in order to date this person? Bella's identity crisis is one to which many teenage girls can relate. The restoration of her identity at the end of the novel as vampire wife and mother provides an image of security and safety that evidently appeals to numerous readers today.

Of course, the word "fantasy" also connotes, in its popular use, something that is "not true," that is opposed to real, lived existence. The *Facebook* poster whom I quoted above probably uses the word in the sense of an idealized existence, thereby placing some distance between her own expectations in life and Bella Swan's experiences. It is easy to assume that readers unreflectingly accept the perspectives, or ideologies, of a text's primary focalizer. John Stephens rightly notes that "Because readers are willing to surrender themselves to the flow of the discourse, especially by focusing attention on story or content, they are susceptible to the implicit power of point of view" (80). However, some critics have disputed an automatic and unproblematic identification between reader and focalizer, arguing that readers, including young readers, navigate and evaluate ideologies far more actively.[8] According to Charles Sarland, "The research evidence…uncovers a complex picture of the young seeking ways to take control over their own lives, and using the fiction that they enjoy as one element in that negotiation of cultural meaning and value" (44).

While posters on *mormonmentality.org* cite Edward's qualities of honor, loyalty and compassion as traits that set him apart from predominant cultural

models of masculinity, these same readers also criticize his controlling and stalker-like behavior. Informal discussion of the series with my undergraduate students reveals the same kind of give and take in girls' readings. Many of the girls to whom I have spoken and who post on fan sites, for instance, have expressed a good deal of frustration with Bella's catatonic response to Edward's absence in *New Moon*, and with her lack of a community of friends. While it is certainly appropriate and important, then, to identify and critique aspects of Meyer's work from a feminist perspective, it is also essential that critics not create an imaginary, wholly passive reader of *Twilight*.

Ultimately, a reader's response is personal, preconceptions about romance included. As a breast cancer survivor, I found myself, as I read, wistfully longing for the possibility of my husband and I living forever in bodies that, unlike human bodies, do not age and sicken with disease. There is no doubt that Meyer's work speaks to women, and that her novels open a window into the minds and emotions of millions of girls, representing through her tale of vampires, werewolves, and teenagers, something of the lives and wishes of girls today. Ultimately, any feminist critic hopes that female readers are canny enough to allow themselves to swoon into Meyer's fantasy of everlasting passion and devotion and, at the same time, become heroes in their own lives.

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NOTES

[1] See, for example, Hollindale, Hunt, McCallum, Trites, and Waller. A discussion of definitions of adolescence is beyond the scope of this essay, but each of these books discusses the history of and different interpretations of the concept. For the purposes of this essay, I define adolescence as roughly ages fourteen through twenty, though any understanding of adolescence depends upon cultural and historical context.

[2] Hollindale's essay is still one of the most frequently cited on ideology in children's literature, and provides an excellent paradigm for discussing the ideology of the *Twilight* series.

[3] Bakhtinian readings of children's and YA literature include, in addition to McCallum, Nikolaevna's foundational work.

[4] My use of Gilligan is not meant to suggest that Gilligan or Ruddick would find Meyer's books empowering or useful for girls.

[5] Stephenie Meyer has an *Amazon.com* list of her favorite books, which includes *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre*.

[6] I am not including a more detailed citation for this quotation because the writer uses her actual name in the post and appears to be under age eighteen. The quotation comes from a *Facebook* fan group.

[7] Heldreth has pointed out the similarities between the transformation into a werewolf and the changes of puberty, including "growth spurts, hair, and awakened carnal appetites" (qtd. in Waller 49).

[8] See Sarland for a good bibliography of critics who have discussed narrative focalization and ideology.

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