

Twilight of the Grrrls: Stephenie Meyer's Rehash of the Feminine Mystique

ALICE CASARINI

Even in the current, post-millennial scenario, the path toward gender equality is still a long and winding road, and a disturbing amount of evidence in the daily news continues to remind us how far women have yet to walk to fight the patriarchal *Weltanschauung* that persists in most corners of the planet, be it in the form of blatant abuse, in subtler forms of discrimination, or, in particularly disheartening cases, in the resurrection of archaic chauvinistic beliefs pronounced by public figures who have had a regrettably profound influence on entire generations of young women. In the allegedly illuminated turn-of-the-millennium United States, a single pen-woman managed to wield her quill in such a determined fashion that her literary production alone represents one of the worst setbacks ever for feminism and for the victories achieved by the Suffragettes, the Women's Liberation Front, and the millions of women who stood up for gender equality over the past century. In her four-volume *Twilight* saga, forty-year-old fiction writer Stephenie Meyer devoted literally thousands of pages to the depiction of a female character who is entirely subservient to the male figures in her life. Under the cover of a whimsical, temperamental façade and the lure of paranormal romance, her alter-ego heroine Bella Swan (and her cinematic version portrayed by lackluster actress Kristen Stewart) ultimately turns out to be not just a marionette in her creator's toy theater, but also the ultimate puppet in the hands of her male pipers to whose tune she is ready to dance whenever they pull her strings.

In spite of its disarmingly coy depiction of women (or perhaps for that very reason), the *Twilight* saga is one of the most successful literary and cinematic enterprises of the past decade, comprising four books published between 2005 and 2008 and five movies that came out between 2008 and 2013, with translations into some forty languages and revenues running into the millions all over the world. The story focuses on the female protagonist Bella Swan, combining a classic coming-of-age approach with a supernatural twist, since Bella is involved in a love triangle with a vampire and a werewolf and oscillates between the two until she is finally united with her bloodsucking betrothed. Given that the novels are written by a seemingly independent woman and are narrated from Bella's own point of view, one would expect an empowered and empowering protagonist, yet Meyer goes out of her way to negate Bella's agency and to regress to an idea of femininity that not only ignores all of the recent advances toward gender equality, but actually reverts to the archetype of the damsel in distress which feminists have always fought to abolish.

Meyer quickly dismissed feminist criticism on her website, maintaining that Bella's frail persona is only due to her being human in a world populated by supernatural creatures and that the entire saga actually focuses on the girl's own choices (Meyer, "The Story"). And indeed, the juxtaposition of a single female heroine and two male protagonists may fool readers into believing that Bella is in control of her life and that her eventual union with her beloved vampire Edward Cullen is the fruit of her own agency. Nevertheless, countless instances in both the books and the movies point to a depiction of Bella's character as the ultimate victim, unable to get her act together unless a dominant male counterpart instructs her on how to proceed, or, more often than not, literally puts her back on her feet (since she is extremely accident-prone) or physically drags her to "the side-lines of the action" (Eddo-Lodge) as he fights her battles for her.

From the very start, Bella is introduced as a sort of porcelain doll whose fragile, ivory-skinned, figure needs to be saved from her own lack of coordination: in a lame and politically incorrect attempt at self-irony, she describes herself as "being so clumsy that I'm almost disabled" (Meyer, *Twilight* 118). Reni Eddo-Lodge highlights the fact that Bella's "victimhood [is] exploited and fetishized. Much of the physical interaction between Bella and her male counterparts reveals a loss of control- or rather, a willing relinquishment" (Eddo-Lodge). Bella is also inscribed in the age-old cult of domesticity: when she is not daydreaming about her boyfriends, she is doing her schoolwork, performing household chores, or cooking for her divorced father. Even though she is capable of such "manly" feats as driving a pick-up truck through the rainy woods of Washington state, Bella is all too ready to give up her autonomy and hand her life over to any male character willing to protect her: "her ability to submit to the will of others around her is astonishing. Stephenie Meyer has placed her protagonist firmly in the kitchen. A significant proportion of the series idolizes Bella as the perfect woman child-fragile, frail and weak, in need of constant watch and protection" (Eddo-Lodge).

Throughout the saga, Bella reveals not just her inability to stand up to her male counterparts, but also her intimate pleasure in surrendering to external decisions, which she depicts as inevitable from the very start: “I didn’t know if there ever was a choice, really. I was already in too deep. Now that I knew—if I knew—I could do nothing about my frightening secret. Because when I thought of him, of his voice, his hypnotic eyes, the magnetic force of his personality, I wanted nothing more than to be with him right now” (Meyer, *Twilight* 139). As her obsession with Edward skyrockets, her willpower plummets: “His mouth was on mine then, and I couldn’t fight him. Not because he was so many thousand times stronger than me, but because my will crumbled into dust the second our lips met” (Meyer, *New Moon* 512). Her acknowledgement of her own meta-delusion and of her dependence on the constructs she herself recognizes as chimeras even betrays a certain self-satisfaction: “I was addicted to the sound of my delusions. It made things worse if I went too long without them” (Meyer, *New Moon* 352).

Meyer herself appears to be prone to puerile daydreaming as she dismisses the construction of Bella’s character as a weak girl by providing a decidedly pathetic justification on her official website:

There are those who think Bella is a wuss. There are those who think my stories are misogynistic—the damsel in distress must be rescued by strong hero. To the first accusation, I can only say that we all handle grief in our own way. Bella’s way is no less valid than any other to my mind. Detractors of her reaction don’t always take into account that I’m talking about true love here, rather than high school infatuation. I emphatically reject the second accusation. I am all about girl power—look at Alice and Jane if you doubt that. I am not anti-female, I am anti-human. (Meyer, “The Story”)

And yet Meyer’s predilection for the supernatural clearly backfires, or rather, is instrumental in the promotion of an idealized image of femininity that is simply a rehash of what Betty Friedan termed “feminine mystique” in her prominent book of the same title (1963). The feminine mystique refers to the false notion that re-emerged in post-World War II America and contended that women’s role in society is exclusively based on their housekeeping skills and on the ability to please their husbands and raise their children. The mystique represented a fabricated idea of womanhood that criticized the aberrant “masculinity” of women who aimed at having a career or at fulfilling their individual potential, thus going against their pre-ordained role, which was reasserted through a constant stream of images portraying them as homemakers and nurturers.

While constituting an ideal poster girl for the feminine mystique itself, Bella never shows a figment of what Friedan had defined as “the problem that has no name,” the all-feminine unhappiness generated by the pigeonholing process. Rather than expressing dissatisfaction with her utter dependence on male characters and yearning for something more than her role as a homemaker and a future wife and mother, Bella is happy to let her life revolve entirely around Edward and surrendering to his ability to protect her. Left on her own, as Eddo-Lodge ob-

serves, “Bella flounders helplessly, absorbing blame that isn’t hers to claim, until a male character makes a decision that she dutifully follows” (Eddo-Lodge). When Edward leaves town to save her from the perils that his own fangs might lead to, Bella ceases to function and the first-person narration is literally interrupted for several months, with actual blank pages in the book for the months from October to January (Meyer, *New Moon*, ch. 4). To give Meyer credit, this strategy does prove effective, yet its impact is undermined by Bella’s repeated attempts to cheat death by jumping off a cliff or riding a motorbike at breakneck speed, knowing that Edward will sense that she is in danger and will rush to her rescue.

The timeworn dichotomy between the impotent damsel in distress and the almighty male hero that shot back into the foreground in post-9/11 America, is cogently illustrated in Susan Faludi’s *The Terror Dream*. In a revival of a John Wayne-type machismo, America posited the resurrection of male heroism as the only hope for the possibility of recovery, implicitly blaming women’s liberation as a process that had “feminized” American men and made them incapable of resisting terrorist attacks. This process clearly evokes the fifties rhetoric of containment that aimed at pushing “blond bombshells” back into the kitchen, as illustrated in Elaine Tyler May’s *Homeward Bound* (1988). The promotion of male heroism as the ultimate response to terrorism required the construction of heroic figures to whom ordinary citizens could, legitimately, look up, as Donald Rumsfeld stated on the day after 9/11: “America will need more heroes” (qtd. in Faludi 46). *Time* magazine provided a literal interpretation of Rumsfeld’s statement with a cover story headlined “Rudy Giuliani: Tower of Strength,” presenting Person of the Year mayor Giuliani as “a mighty superhero at the edge of the observation deck of a Manhattan skyscraper, as if poised to make a Superman swoop on Metropolis” (*Time*, 31 Dec. 2001-7 Jan. 2002 issue, qtd. in Faludi 9).

The *Twilight* saga immediately posits Edward as the heroic savior: in one of the early scenes in both the first novel and the first movie, he rescues Bella from a rogue car with his supernatural speed and strength. The film explicitly highlights Edward’s über-masculinity: while the camera lingers on the huge indentation left in the car door by his fist, Edward squats to help Bella up, literally watching over her—an activity in which he delights throughout the saga, since he believes it is his mission to monitor her every waking and sleeping moment. As illustrated by a popular, satirical meme that circulated through social networks in 2013, Bella is more than happy to surrender to his constant watch and let him handle her like a puppeteer, feeling honored when she hears him say he watches her sleep every night: “‘You spied on me?’ But somehow I couldn’t infuse my voice with the proper outrage. I was flattered” (Meyer, *Twilight* 166). While Bella’s subservience is already fully fledged in the novels, the cinematic adaptations also suffer from Kristen Stewart’s deadpan histrionics. Her limited range of facial expressions and body language only favors the displacement of agency from her character onto others, as opposed to the much more convincing performances of other, less poker-faced young actresses such as Emma Wat-

son, who portrayed the *Harry Potter* saga's witty and versatile heroine Hermione Granger.

The effects of Stewart's lack of communicative skills and Bella's own proclivity for subjugation are emphasized by the obvious connection between vampirism and eroticism, which underpins the dominant role of the male predator and the submissive role of the female prey. Edward's perpetual youth and alluring vernal charm is counterbalanced by his mind-reading skills and by the centuries of experience he has had the opportunity to accumulate, which legitimize his conviction that he is the one "who knows best" and the natural leader in relationships. The vampire bite itself has often been compared to penetration, with fangs seen as phallic symbols and the victim's dripping blood perceived as the loss of virginity. The *Twilight* saga also perpetuates the idea of the vampire venom coursing through the blood of the female victim, suggesting the idea of both the impregnation and colonization of the woman, as Bella herself affirms:

It wasn't a rational desire. I was sure that—about two seconds after someone actually bit me and the venom started burning through my veins—I really wouldn't care anymore who had done it. So it shouldn't make a difference. It was hard to define, even to myself, why it mattered. There was just something about him being the one to make the choice—to want to keep me enough that he wouldn't just allow me to be changed, he would act to keep me. It was childish, but I liked the idea that his lips would be the last good thing I would feel. Even more embarrassingly, something I would never say aloud, I wanted his venom to poison my system. It would make me belong to him in a tangible, quantifiable way. (Meyer, *Eclipse* 288)

This idea of a pristine entity that can only come fully into being when conquered by a male predator ties in with Jessica Valenti's essay *The Purity Myth*, whose original cover bears a striking similarity to those of the *Twilight* saga, and especially to the flower against a black background on the cover of *New Moon*. *The Purity Myth* focuses on the insidious belief that a woman's primary value is sexual and that her body is a mere commodity at the disposal of men. Virginity is idolized as "a stand-in for women's morality, [suggesting] that women can't be moral actors. Instead, [they]'re defined by what [they] don't do—[their] ethics are the ethics of passivity" (Valenti 24-25). Valenti highlights the dangers of perpetuating "the notion that to be desirable, women need to be un-adults—young, naive, and impressionable" (65), "not autonomous adults, but perpetual children whose sexuality is strictly defined and owned, like that of traditional wives-in-training" (67) by wiser, stronger, more moral men. As previously illustrated, Bella is happy to let her protective fiancé take everything into his own hands and let her be turned into a vampire as soon as she comes of age, thus arresting her own youth for eternity.

The concepts of male heroism, female submission, and the virginity myth all coalesce in the climax of the relationship between Edward and Bella, which occurs in *Breaking Dawn* (2008). Edward has protected Bella from his own sexuality for three and a half books, in spite of her more than willingness to consummate

their love, for her only wish was to be with him forevermore. To comply with his role as the male figure who controls and defines his lady's sexuality, Edward blackmails Bella into marrying him and takes her on their honeymoon to a private island off the Brazilian coast, where he finally exerts his *ius primae noctis*. The movie *Breaking Dawn Part 1* (Condon 2011) visually enhances the book's depiction of their first act of sexual intercourse as the ultimate confirmation of Bella's complete submission: Edward occupies a dominant position, with the camera and lighting underlining his manly muscles, and Bella literally yields to him, as is highlighted by the soundtrack, *Sleeping At Last* "Turning Page":

Your love is my turning page
Only the sweetest words remain
Every kiss is a cursive line
Every touch is a redefining phrase
I surrender who I've been for who you are
Nothing makes me stronger than your fragile heart
If I had only felt how it feels to be yours
I would have known what I've been living for (*Sleeping At Last's*, "Turning Page," in Condon, *Breaking Dawn Part 1*)

The idea of "a redefining phrase" and the lines "I surrender who I've been for who you are" and "I would have known what I've been living for" highlight Bella's desire to belong to Edward both as a woman and as a future vampire; the verb "turning" befittingly refers both to the idea of turning the page and starting a new life and to the process through which one is "sired" and becomes a vampire, which occurs to Bella later on in the book and in the movie.

Even though the newlyweds' first night together is meant to finally express the fullness of their love, on the following morning the destructive power of Edward's aggressive lovemaking becomes fully evident in the ransacked room and Bella's extensive bruising. Not long after, she also realizes she is pregnant, yet it soon becomes evident that the hybrid creature growing in her womb is too strong for her and is literally consuming her. When the fastest pregnancy ever depicted in fiction is about to end, a couple of weeks later, once again it is Edward who decides that the only way to save Bella is to perform a Caesarean section and to turn her into a vampire as soon as her child has been delivered. With a demonstration of restraint at the sight of blood unbelievable in a vampire who had gone crazy over a paper cut in the second book (Meyer, *New Moon* 17), Edward performs the C-section himself and pulls out his blood-covered daughter. He then fruitlessly tries to bite the now unconscious Bella, but ends up having to thrust an enormous syringe filled with his own venom right into her heart, once again echoing images of penetration and colonization. After a due pause for suspense, Bella is magically brought back to life. Or rather, un-life, for she has finally been turned into a vampire.

Meyer leaves no hope for the representation of womanhood, not even in the vampire form. Bella only manages to become a vampire when Edwards decides

there is no other way to save her life, and even though he is proud of her new abilities (she is seen arm-wrestling and using mental shields), he considers them a product of his own Pygmalion skills and does not miss a chance to drive this home. Even in the bedroom, where Bella finally seems to have earned herself a dominant role, Edward ends up by literally stripping her of her power to act alone: when she protests that she still remembers how to undress, he claims that he is able to do it much better (Condon 2012).

It is interesting to recall that as far back as 1949, Simone de Beauvoir had already defined the psychology of female submissiveness in terms that might well have been referring to Bella: “She chooses to desire her enslavement so ardently that it will seem to her the expression of her liberty; she will try to rise above her situation as an inessential object by fully accepting it; through her flesh, her feelings, her behavior, she will enthrone him as supreme value and reality: she will humble herself to nothingness before him” (De Beauvoir 1953, qtd. in Eddo-Lodge).

WORKS CITED

PRIMARY TEXTS. BOOKS

Meyer, Stephenie. *Breaking Dawn*. London: Atom, 2008. Print.

---. *Eclipse*. London: Atom, 2007. Print.

---. *New Moon*. London: Atom, 2006. Print.

---. *Twilight*. London: Atom, 2005. Print.

PRIMARY TEXTS. MOVIES

Condon, Bill, dir. *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn - Part 1*. Summit Entertainment, 2011. Film.

---, dir. *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn - Part 2*. Summit Entertainment, 2012. Film.

Hardwicke, Catherine, dir. *Twilight*. Summit Entertainment, 2008. Film.

Slade, David, dir. *The Twilight Saga: Eclipse*. Summit Entertainment, 2010. Film.

Weitz, Chris, dir. *The Twilight Saga: New Moon*. Summit Entertainment, 2009. Film.

SECONDARY TEXTS

Cox, David. "Twilight: The Franchise That Ate Feminism," *Theguardian.com*. N. p., n.d. Web. 28 Mar. 2014.

De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. New York: Knopf, 1953. Print.

Eddo-Lodge, Reni. "The Anti-Feminist Character of Bella Swan, or Why the Twilight Saga Is Regressive." *Kritikos* 5.10 (2013): n. pag. *Intertheory.org*. Web. 28 Mar. 2014.

Faludi, Susan. *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America*. New York: Metropolitan, 2007. Print.

Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Norton, 1963. Print.

May, Elaine Tyler. *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*. New York: Basic, 1988. Print.

Meyer, Stephenie. "The Story Behind the Writing of *New Moon*." *StephenieMeyer.com*. Stephenie Meyer. N. d., n. pag. Web. 28 Mar. 2014.

Valenti, Jessica. *The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession with Virginity Is Hurting Young Women*. Berkeley: Seal, 2009. Print.