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Fairy Tales and Feminism: Why it is Okay to Like Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight*

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While Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* Saga has many problematic elements, it is not an anti-feminist text. Instead of being poisonous to young female readers, as many feminist critics suggest, the series is a space of nuanced exploration for young adults and readers of Young Adult literature. The series and characters are better examined through addressing the origins and strong literary connections the series has to the fairy tale tradition. Fairy tales, Romance literature and Children's literature all shed light on the textual awareness that the reader brings to *Twilight* and how it is utilised as an exploratory space. *Twilight* is not dangerous, as the feminist or anti-feminist slant is primarily based upon the reader. Through this paper I aim to show that feminism and the *Twilight* saga are not mutually exclusive. I will address current feminist criticism of the series, particularly in regards to the potential consequences of the series' widespread popularity. I will offer an alternative theory to the current assumptions regarding reader-response in relation to Young Adult literature¹ by using literary criticism from related literatures, such as fairy tales and romance. Then I will offer two alternate interpretations of the lead causes of criticism: Bella, Edward and their relationship.

¹ In this paper the distinction is made between "Young Adult" as a genre of literature and "young adults", who are the assumed primary readership of Young Adult novels, approximately aged between 13 and 19.

Introduction

A dark spectre is haunting the future of feminism: cold, soulless, violent, it sucks the righteous subversive bloodlust of young females and leaves pale anaemic wastrels crying out for pre-defined gender roles and subversive hetero-normative relationships. And this spectre's name, apparently, is *Twilight*.

Through this paper I aim to show that feminism and Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* saga are not mutually exclusive. I will address current feminist criticism of the series, particularly in regards to the potential consequences of the series' widespread popularity. I will offer an alternative theory to the current assumptions regarding reader-response in relation to Young Adult literature² by using literary criticism from related literatures, such as fairy tales and romance. Then I will offer two alternate interpretations of the lead causes of criticism: Bella, Edward and their relationship.

From articles in *Ms. magazine*, *Salon*, *GQ*, *Vanity Fair*, *Psychology Today*, to a host of news outlets, blogs and self-help books, people seem widely concerned with the effect that *Twilight* has on its female audience. According to these sources, young feminists, or at least young females, are under threat of brainwashing by the biggest franchise since *Harry Potter*. They are being inculcated into the promotion of abusive relationships, positive images of low self-esteem, reinforcement of the ideologically-troubled "nice girls", self-destructive behaviour, teen motherhood and rape culture all through the influence of the *Twilight* saga.

² In this paper the distinction is made between "Young Adult" as a genre of literature and "young adults", who are the assumed primary readership of Young Adult novels, approximately aged between 13 and 19.

To say that *Twilight* is popular is an understatement. According to *Publishers Weekly* (2010), the series has been licensed in nearly 50 countries and has sold 116 million copies worldwide. The worldwide gross earnings for the screen adaptations of the first three novels is over \$1.8 billion, with the 13 November 2011 release of the 4th film instalment grossing over \$138 million in the opening weekend (Box Office Mojo 2011). Not only is the *Twilight* saga very popular, it is exceptionally profitable. But is it dangerous?

According to feminist critics, the answer is overwhelmingly “Yes!” Gina R. Dalfonzo of *National Review* believes that, “Although Meyer tries to portray this pair as a modern Romeo and Juliet or Heathcliff and Catherine[...], Bella and Edward’s relationship is more like that of predator and prey” (2008). The running theme across many blogs has been that not only is the relationship between Edward and Bella which *Twilight* portrays a dangerous one, but it falls into the double standard described in Feministing co-founder Jessica Valenti’s book *He’s a Stud, She’s a Slut, and 49 Other Double Standards Every Woman Should Know*. The behaviour that is Byronically romantic when perpetrated by Edward would be considered scary and stalkerish if committed by Bella (Gassley 2009). Rachel Simmons, who leads seminars for young women entitled “Leadership for Life”, thinks that the overarching teachings of the *Twilight* saga’s second instalment *New Moon* teaches its readers that their life is not worthwhile without a guy, and it’s okay to be manipulative and suicidal in order to get his attention (2009). The thread of all these articles is that the *Twilight* saga promotes females placing males at the centre of their world, not existing for anything except as a wan shadow of the masculine existence.

It is difficult to disagree with the opinion that Bella is not a stimulating character. Her obsession with Edward, imminently dangerous physical reactions to his presence, and catatonic state upon him breaking up with her, are just a

few examples, among many, of questionable behavioural characteristics which she displays. Statements like, “You *are* my life. You’re the only thing it would hurt me to lose” (Meyer 2005, p.413), or “He was gone. [...] it was over. Love, life, meaning...over” (Meyer 2006, p.65), are obviously problematic for feminist readers. Edward’s actions are problematic for anyone, such as: following her home and watching her sleep, dragging her places against her will, dismantling her only means of transportation, isolating her from her friends and casually saying he intends to commit suicide should she ever die. That the resulting relationship would be abusive in anything approaching a realistic setting is a foregone conclusion. However, the *Twilight* saga is a Young Adult Supernatural Romance series. It is a fantasy, and one that should not be confused with reality. These feminist critics, as educated and brilliant as they are, are making some big assumptions about the role of Young Adult literature, as well as the ways in which it is read. I propose the alternative theory that just because these books may contain anti-feminist themes does not mean that the series represents a cultural battle in itself. That, in fact, Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* saga is not poisonous to young girls, but that it is a place of nuanced exploration for young adults.

Bella as Protagonist

The female narrator and protagonist Bella Swan is the main vehicle for this exploration and is, at best, a problematic character from a cultural feminist perspective. The article ‘*Twilight*’s Bella is a Feminist Nightmare’ fervently expounds that Bella Swan “has no identity of her own.” In Nuxi’s brilliantly thought-out article “Anti-Feminism: Bella Swan and the Illusion of Choice” she writes that on her own, Bella, “literally has no life, personality, aspirations, happiness, anything” (2009). Dr. Carmen Siering at *Ms.* magazine’s blog refers to her as a “puppet [...] pulled from scene to scene, rarely making a move

except at someone else's suggestion or desire" (2010). Kate Harding of *Salon* refers to her as, "spineless and infantilized," (Nov 2009) as well as a blank space, "stripped down to the core emotions an adolescent girl feels" (Dec 2009). The assumption being that Bella is a bad role model to females reading the series, one who encourages the female reader to assume Bella's role in order to experience the abusive relationship portrayed in *Twilight*.

To compare Bella's actions to those of a character of a realist novel is to remove them of their own symbolic meaning and importance. *Twilight* is not a realist novel. It belongs to what folklore studies refer to as "wondertales." While it may start in reality, it quickly progresses into the world of the fantastic, a world with a new set of rules which the audience learns along with Bella. We should assume that Edward as a vampire in a supernatural novel is very different character than Edward would be as a normal teenager in realist Young Adult fiction. The accusation that Edward creates an attractive view of abusive relationships makes assumptions about the manner in which the audience reads the novels: mainly that they lack the critical function to separate fantasy from reality. J.R.R. Tolkien contradicts this in recounting his own childhood reading:

"I had no desire to have either dreams or adventures like Alice, and the account of them merely amused me. I had very little desire to look for buried treasure or fight pirates. [...] I desired dragons with a profound desire. Of course, I in my timid body did not wish to have them in the neighbourhood." (1964, pp.39-40).

Simply having interest in the fantastic adventures of others does not indicate that the audience wants to experience those adventures for themselves, whether it be slaying a dragon or dating a vampire. Readers do not want to be Bella in real life any more than they would want to suddenly find a dragon in their school locker. Instead Bella is the means by which the audience explores a new world and people within it.

The argument that the character is a one-dimensional blank in order for the reader to project his or her own interests and feelings on to her, in order for the reader to essentially 'become Bella', sings the same tune that many feminist writers have been accusing Romance Literature of for years, that it is all escapism. For example, the assertion of *Salon's* Kate Harding that, "The whole point of Bella's existence is earning the suffocating love of supernatural hotties; [...] And yet, seemingly every girl in the country under 16—to say nothing of grown women—wishes she could be Bella" (Dec 2009). This statement assumes that not only do all Young Adult females read the series in the same way: as a desire to bury their own identity in Bella's lacklustre shell in order to participate in a relationship with Edward Cullen, essentially as a form of escapism. But the process of reader identification is much more complicated than that.

Reader Response, Young Adult Novels and Fairy Tales

Escapism is still a dirty word in discussing literature. From Romance to fairy tales, it is assumed that in order to "escape" into that other world, one must read themselves into the story. However even in literature that is seen as "escapist" the nature of reading is not so simple. As Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan (2009) explain in their exploration of romance, *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches Guide to Romance Novels*, reader response is a very personal thing. While some of their readers do use Romance Novels as a space to read themselves into the fantasy, choosing mostly books with heroines portraying their own physical qualities, many use them as a site of exploration, or, as a form of information, hovering over the characters like benevolent nosy ghosts (2009, p.66). I argue that as both a genre example of Romance novels and Young Adult novels, the *Twilight* saga is not a means by which young adult females primarily escape their lives, but by which they explore new ones and

come to deal with the problems particular to young adult life.³ They do not read themselves as Bella, but rather like a ‘benevolent nosy ghost’, following Bella through her own exploration of this new world.

Young Adult supernatural romances, and the *Twilight* saga particularly, have strong literary connections with fairy tales, in their language, their magic, their love interests, and their placement as liminal or “silly” stories for the young (and most likely female) reader. While fairy tales are often still marginalized as “Children’s Literature,” Jack Zipes reminds us that, “During the last twenty years in America many diverse groups have formed to do battle with the culture industry and government on behalf of children, including teenagers. [...] It is debatable whether we can draw clear lines between the cultural spheres of children and adults” (2001, pp.xii-xiii). In studying the Young Adult reading experience, it is useful to examine that of the fairy tale reading experience.

As Maria Tatar argues in her introduction to *Enchanted Hunters: the Power of Stories in Childhood*, the nature of fairy stories is not to place one’s self in the role of the protagonist, but rather to observe the protagonist in their thoughts and actions. We see that, “They do not read for vicarious pleasure but rather for the unmediated delight of encounters with other lives” (2009, p.18). The characters are companions on a journey through the new world that the readers encounter, rather than second-selves. The reader experiences the trials and missteps with the protagonist, not necessarily as the protagonist. Furthermore, the Young Adult reader is not passively shaped and programmed by cultural products, but as Michel de Certeau suggests, he or she invents responses

³ Often the problems dealt with in Young Adult literature are directly or indirectly related to the assumed experiences of their potential audiences: feelings of estrangement, new romantic involvements, changing bodies, sexual awakening, changing relationships with authority figures, being presented with unfamiliar and important life choices for the first time, etc.

detached from any agenda potentially put forth by the author (1984, pp.173-174). The reader actively engages and reinterprets the text according to his or her own experiences.

It is assumed that the Young Adult audience is incapable of making the distinction between fantasy and reality due to a lack of critical understanding (Piazza, 2009). However, cultural critics are forgetting that this is a distinction that children are already accustomed to making through their interactions with earlier texts like fairy tales. W.H. Auden states that, “No fairy story ever claimed to be a description of the external world and no sane child ever believed that it was” (1973, p.200). The difference between what is true and what is not arises very early in childhood communion with texts of the fantastic, and remains an important distinction to children in their growing understanding of the world around them. Long before a young person reaches the age group at which *Twilight* is aimed, thanks to texts like fairy tales, they know there is a difference between fantasy and reality. It is condescending to assume that young adults, particularly young women, cannot be trusted to understand this distinction. Children's Literature critic Natalie Babbit recognizes that the audience of Young Adult literature possess the critical faculties necessary to make this distinction between the worlds of exploration and those of reality, advising authors to, “accept the fact that they are in reality writing for adults—very young adults, no doubt but intelligent, critical, skeptical, and very quick to spot a phony” (1978, p.143). The fight to protect young adult readers is one that arguably does not need to be fought.

The language of the *Twilight* saga, much like fairy tales, is necessarily vague in order to provide multiple and varied readings of the text. The characters, the circumstances, are points of exploration. There doesn't necessarily need to be a

direct correlation between plot and reality, or characters and relationships in fiction and those in reality, for these texts to provide a safe space in which the readers can survey the complications of their shifting reality, and repercussions of choice. Below I will give two examples of different interpretations of the main characters of the *Twilight* saga: Bella Swan and Edward Cullen.

The accusation that Bella is a blank canvas as a literary character, and not just as a reading device, ignores her fairy tale origins. While Alyssa Rosenberg of *The Atlantic* accurately identifies the *Twilight* saga as a fairytale, she mistakenly identifies Bella as the heroine, a “modern-day princess” (2009). Contrary to Meyer’s pun that Bella is, “exactly [Edward’s] brand of heroin,” (2006, p.235), she is in fact the hero of the *Twilight* saga. In examining the fairy tale tradition we can see that Bella possesses the traits of fairy tale heroes rather than those typically possessed by fairy tale heroines.

According to fairy tale expert Maria Tatar, the hero characters of traditional fairy tales nearly always exude a sense of naiveté. The hero is an unworldly figure that is frequently attributed such adjectives as: simple, foolish, silly, guileless, innocent and useless. No fairy tale hero has a developed personality but is instead given signifiers of recognition (Tatar 2003). Listing traits or qualities rather than a physical description, we see the parallel in Meyer’s own description of Bella, most often referring to her clumsiness, humility and ignorance to the dangers of the supernatural world, rather than her physical characteristics. Bella’s often rash and impudent actions directly lead to resolution of conflict. Bella topples a vampire dictatorship and realizes her every hope and dream through being essentially clueless. A movement from a low social position to a higher one through marriage is something that both heroes of traditional fairy tales and heroines experience, the difference being that, “male heroes demonstrate from the start a meekness and humility that

qualify them for an ascent to wealth, the exercise of power, and happiness crowned by wedded bliss,” while their numerous, “female counterparts undergo a process of humiliation and defeat that ends with a rapid rise in social status through marriage but that also signals a loss of pride and the abdication of power,” (Tatar 2003, pp.94-95). Given this traditional pattern, it is significant that Bella’s transformation follows the path of the hero rather than the heroine of the traditional fairy tales. The main difference between heroes and heroines is that heroes make a positive progression toward acquiring skills which enable self-governance, while heroines often require a lesson in humility in order to achieve social elevation, and in doing so abdicate their freedom. As Lucy Grealy put it in referring to Hans Christian Anderson’s “The Little Mermaid”, the heroine, “gives up everything magical for an unrequited and lackluster reality” (1998, p.161), in which she is incapable of self-agency. Bella, who in her human life was particularly known for her domestic roles, escapes the fate of a lacklustre reality when she chooses life among the supernaturals. Though this issue is clearly somewhat fraught through her simultaneous entrance to both vampirism and motherhood; by marrying Edward and becoming a vampire, Bella essentially escapes her previously stereotypical domestic role of caring for both of her parents. Therefore, Bella is more or less modelled on the traditional fairy tale hero, as her eventual accession to a type of monarchy is characterized not by humiliation, but rather by her gaining qualities that enable self-governance.

Edward as a Bluebeard Figure?

If Bella is the hero then where does that leave Edward? Or better yet, if Bella is the hero, then what is Edward? Many of the articles that I have mentioned rail against Edward Cullen, the vampire and main love interest of the series, for being a controlling, condescending and borderline abusive male, being referred

to as, “one of modern fiction’s best candidates for a restraining order” (Dalfonzo 2008). Other adjectives frequently used to describe him are: manipulative, abusive, controlling, and patronizing. I propose that Edward is Mayer’s experiment with a very specific fairy tale character, one who has made the crossover into Romance and Gothic novels. Edward Cullen is a Bluebeard figure. As Maria Tatar points out, “The Bluebeard thread in the fabric of Gothic narratives offers an exceptional opportunity for elaborating on the problematic issues arising as women leave childhood behind and move toward an alliance with adult males” (2004, p.69). In the numerous incarnations of the Bluebeard story, we are initially presented with an insecure, lonely, and possibly orphaned young woman who, “After a short prologue, forms a personal or professional connection with an older man, a dark, magnetic, powerful, brooding, sardonic *Super-Male*, who treats her brusquely, derogates her, scolds her, and otherwise shows anger or contempt for her” (Russ 1973, p.667). This man typically has some great ominous Secret. The young woman strives to discover the nature of the mysterious man because, “when she unravels the mystery about him [...] she will simultaneously get to the bottom of the Secret” (Russ 1973, p.668). The Secret in this case being, from a plot perspective, Edward’s vampirism, and from a metaphorical perspective, the constrained embodiment of dangerous male sexuality.

The figure of Bluebeard is the image of the highly sexualized male. He symbolizes the violence of the sexual act, the combination of death and deflowerment. While Edward may not have the beard that, as Marina Warner illustrates, “came increasingly to define the male in priapic mode” (1995, p.242), he does possess another signifier of Bluebeard’s frightfulness: Edward’s unnaturally coloured eyes. In examining the original Bluebeard tales, the colour as much as the presence of the beard connotes Bluebeard’s frightening sexuality. Marina Warner recalls that, “By the blueness of the protagonist’s

beard, Perrault intensifies the frightfulness of his appearance: Bluebeard is represented as a man against nature, either by dyeing his hair like a luxurious Oriental, or by producing such a monstrous growth without resorting to artifice” (1995, pp.242-243). We see the *Twilight* mirror of this in the first book when Bella questions Edward whether he wears contacts, trying to ascertain the meaning of his unnatural shifting eye colour, particularly in instances when Edward displays a more than average hunger for her, as either meal or sexual mate. Just like the unnaturalness of Bluebeard's beard, Edward's eyes are representative of 'unnatural' lusts, of desire run amok. Rather than being the patriarchal figure that limits the sexual desires of the female, he is the dangerous male sexuality that must be constrained by marriage and monogamy.

Bluebeard is a figure of absolute craving to the point where physical needs, like food, become confused with physical desires, like sex. The desires for food and sex are frequently interchanged, one leading to the other. They are both described in terms of craving, hunger, need and desire to be filled. To be without either is to be empty, only the ghost of a human. Food and sex are the same fantasy, playing off the desire to be full, to be satiated physically. We see this equation between food and sex in other fairy tales, like the many renditions of “Red Riding Hood,” in which a parallel is drawn between food and bedroom activities. However, in Young Adult stories, where the correlation between food and desire exists, lovers are often dependent upon one another for sustenance. They are incapable of achieving any sense of satiation without the other.

***Twilight*, Danger and In/Equality**

The argument that this is dangerous behaviour in the *Twilight* saga, an argument which equates Edward's desire to drink Bella's blood with a desire to rape her, does raise an interesting point, and highlights the extreme power disparity in

their relationship. It is interesting to note in this that Bella's two physical/sexual assaults directly precede her entrance into the supernatural world and her decision to become a part of it. Unlike the abhorrence illustrated by Perrault's own unnamed female protagonist, the tale of Bella Swan is one of Bluebeard's wife who, upon finding the key, unlocking the door, and staring around at the grisly remains of the ominous Secret, does not think about the monster that created this, but rather how she can become the monster herself.

Bella continuously desires to reach a level of equality with Edward in their relationship. As she says at the end of the first book: "I'll be the first to admit that I have no experience with relationships," I said. "But it seems logical...a man and a 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*. [...] I can't always be Lois Lane," I insisted. "I want to be Superman, too" (Meyer 2005, pp.412-413). The happy ending of the *Twilight* saga does not see Bella subdued or continuing to indulge Edward's possessive whims. Neither does Edward surrender his own self-governance or forgo his vampire nature. Rather, through Bella's transformation and the revelation of her own unique supernatural powers, equality is finally achieved. Bella's driving goal through the series is to become a vampire so that she may finally match Edward in strength and resilience, so that she can protect him as he protects her. As a human and a vampire, the power dynamics within their relationship are startling in their inequality. Edward holds all of the power because of what he is rather than who he is. Equality does not come from one person temporarily abdicating power to another, but from both parties being on equal footing. Since Bella and Edward's relationship operates in the realm of the fantastic, she must acquire traits of the fantastic in order to control her own destiny. We understand Bella's desire to become a vampire as Maria Tatar explains, "Although it is never explicitly stated that he becomes smart and strong in the end, most fairy tales

imply that their heroes have acquired the attributes of royalty right along with the office of king" (2003, p.95). Meyer famously highlights the initial disparity between their two positions in the meadow scene in the first book in the series:

*"And so the lion fell in love with the lamb..." he murmured.
I looked away, hiding my eyes as I thrilled to the word.*

"What a stupid lamb," I sighed.

"What a sick, masochistic lion." (Meyer 2005, p.240)

As Bella continues to demand equality within the relationship by her continual requests to become a vampire, we understand Angela Carter's assertion in *The Bloody Chamber* that, "The tiger will never lie down with the lamb; he acknowledges no pact that is not reciprocal. The lamb must learn to run with the tigers" (1979, p.71). Edward's attempts at becoming more human in order to be with Bella are both futile and ultimately insulting. As vampires, Bella and Edward shatter the gender divide defined by unequal power distribution, where the female is protected and the male is the protector, and are able to live as equals. It is only as equals that they can each be full and complete as people. In Bella and Edward's relationship through the first 3 books of the series they must bury pieces of themselves in order to save the other from harm. Bella should not have to be passively still when they kiss, or restrained in her affections for Edward because he fears being too excited. Conversely Edward should not have to be constantly conscious of his own strength and her relative fragility when they touch, or the call of her blood to his vampiric thirst. As he says to Bella:

"I have to mind my actions every moment that we're together so that I don't hurt you. I could kill you quite easily, Bella, simply by accident. [...] If I was too hasty...if for one second I wasn't paying enough attention, I could reach out, meaning to touch your face, and crush your skull by mistake. You don't realize how incredibly breakable you

are. I can never, never afford to lose any kind of control when I'm with you." (Meyer 2005, p.271)

But after her transformation, Bella is amazed to find, "He was all new, a different person as our bodies tangled gracefully into one on the sand-pale floor. No caution, no restraint. No fear—especially not that. We could love together—both active participants now. Finally equals" (Meyer 2008, p.446). They are able to exist in harmony as rulers of their own destiny.

Conclusion

Every reader brings their own experience to the story. We do not read these stories in a vacuum, and neither do the young adults whom the critics are so afraid of these stories influencing. To tell these young adults how to read a novel is to stifle their own exploration of these issues. The Edward character may be Bluebeard, or he may represent the choice of whether to pursue an Arts degree: something achingly attractive, but brutal. The choice to become a vampire may be what college you go to, and how much sweat, pain and misery you put into achieving that dream. A vampire-human hybrid baby may be a question of what worthwhile contribution you make to your community. It is best to approach Young Adult literature not as condescending or censorious, but a realm of infinite possibilities. Angela Carter famously advises writers, "to leave the reader to construct her own fiction for herself [...]. Reading is just as creative an activity as writing and most intellectual development depends upon new readings of old texts. I am all for putting new wine into old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode" (1983, p.69). We have to stop assuming that enjoying *Twilight* can't also make the bottle of hetero-normativity explode. More importantly, we have to stop assuming that young adults are incapable of already knowing how to be young feminists.

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