

# Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* Series and the 'Post(-)ing' of Feminism

Sophie Spieler  
Dresden, Germany

**Abstract:** Immensely popular with a largely female readership, Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series and its male hero Edward Cullen have become literary and cultural phenomena to be reckoned with. However, critical readers—especially in the blogosphere—have observed that in terms of gender and sexuality, all is not well in Forks, Washington. This essay seeks to find out if the series indeed “[s]inks [i]ts [t]eeth into [f]eminism,” as one commentator put it (Sax). In recent years, the death of feminism has been proclaimed repeatedly in academia as well as in popular culture. The reasons for the demise of the ‘f-word’ demise vary according to the standpoint of the obituary’s author: The feminist experiment was either successful enough to render itself obsolete or, by choosing ‘unnatural’ and subversive goals, stripped itself of its right to exist. Regardless of the particulars of feminism’s passing—was it murder, suicide, or death of old age?—critics and commentators seem to agree that we now live in a ‘postfeminist’ age. Against the backdrop of Meyer’s novels, I discuss the contested process of ‘post(-)ing’ feminism and its various theoretical and cultural implications. Focusing on the construction of masculinities and femininities, I relate the novels to issues in contemporary feminism such as alterity, agency, and domesticity.

“Representation in the fictional world signifies societal existence; absence means symbolic annihilation”

Gerbner and Gross 182

In 1965, Barbie became an astronaut. In 1973, she saved lives as a surgeon. In 1989, she entered the US Army, and in 1992, she became a presidential candidate. If Barbie has yet to become a feminist, it might seem, at first glance, that this is because she has no need to. Feminism, so the argument goes, is an anachronism in the allegedly gender-blind cultural and political landscape of the twenty-first century.

Hence, it is not surprising that the death of feminism has been discussed in academia as well as in popular culture, as Mary Hawkesworth describes in “The Semiotics of Premature Burial” (962). Various causes of death are cited to account for the movement’s extinction: Some argue that basic goals have been achieved and the rest will sort itself out, some claim that feminism’s demands were unhealthy and harmful to begin with, while others simply point out that the time for political activism of any kind has passed. Regardless of the particulars of feminism’s passing—was it murder, suicide, or death of old age?—critics and commentators seem to agree that we now live in a ‘postfeminist’ age (965). Apart from political debates (or the lack thereof), the current state of feminist discourse is both influenced by and reflected in literature and film. According to *Washington Post* author Leonard Sax, a narrative such as Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series “[s]inks [i]ts [t]eeth into [f]eminism” and thus contributes to the gradual disappearance of the movement. This essay seeks to examine the precise nature of the relationship of the narrative and its two main protagonists, Edward and Bella, to contemporary ‘postfeminist’ discourse.

The first part of this essay discusses the alleged ‘death’ of the movement and explores the process of ‘post-ing’ feminism. In doing so, I examine three concepts that have come to replace the notion of 1970s ‘second-wave feminism’: neoliberal feminism, new traditionalism, and third-wave feminism. My discussion shows that while there are certain strands of post-feminist thought that undermine basic ideas of the feminist movement, the movement itself is neither dead nor dying—quite the contrary: Engaged in theoretical debates as well as political activism, third-wave feminism continues to challenge not only sexist discrimination in general but also the discriminatory assumptions made by second-wave feminism about the universality of ‘woman’ as a subject position.

Locating Meyer’s *Twilight* series within this ‘postfeminist’ landscape, the second part offers a critical reading of the novels. After briefly examining the basic gender structure by exploring the construction of masculinity and femininity as exemplified by the narrative’s two main protagonists, I relate the novels to central issues in contemporary feminist thought: alterity, domesticity, and agency. My reading demonstrates that the narrative’s construction of masculinity and femininity is largely determined by traditional conceptions of gender based on the duality of binary oppositions. Furthermore, the novels present Edward as the hegemonic male and Bella as the marginalized Other relegated to the periphery of the power dynamic due to her status as a woman and a human. As my discussion of the Cullen family as well as of Bella herself shows, the separation of spheres and the equation of femininity with domesticity—part of the binary structure of traditional conceptions of gender in patriarchal societies—also figure prominently in the *Twilight* series. I conclude my

analysis of Meyer's novels with an interrogation of Bella's agency, arguing that one of the fundamental shortcomings of the narrative is that it pretends to feature a female protagonist in possession of genuine agency, whereas a closer reading reveals the far more complex and troubling nature of Bella's decisions.

### FEMINISM IS DEAD—LONG LIVE FEMINISM

Hawkesworth explores a phenomenon that has troubled and perplexed many feminist critics, thinkers, and activists, namely "the recurrent pronouncement of feminism's death" (962). In recent years, commentators in the media as well as (feminist) scholars have declared the feminist movement dead on the somewhat shaky grounds of an allegedly indifferent, apolitical, and unsupportive female youth that has lost awareness of discrimination and, consequently, is no longer interested in the feminist cause (cf. Aronson). Susan Faludi identifies a pattern to explain the notion of a dying or dead women's movement, linking it to perceived or actual moments of success: "Whenever women have taken a step or two forward in challenging social and economic inequities, the media have made haste to declare feminism dead" ("Postfeminism" 1646).

While some argue that the feminist experiment has been successful in achieving gender equality and is no longer needed, others deny the validity of feminist demands altogether and, by referring to an alleged 'feminist fallacy,' strip the movement of its right to exist. In this context, Misha Kavka invokes the notion of death as transformation and argues that the movement has undergone a process of fragmentation: (Second-wave) feminism died only to be reborn into various "conservative, performative, poststructuralist, or transnational versions" (32). As Hawkesworth points out, however, these types of obituary have in common that they produce "no corpse, no proof of demise, just vague hints of self-inflicted wounds and natural causes" (983). Thereby, they suggest that the cause of death lies within feminism itself, that it is somehow linked to inherent flaws in the movement, that—to stretch the metaphor yet a little further—there is no suspicion of foul play.

While intergenerational debates and arguments have undoubtedly contributed to feminism's gradual fragmentation and the slowing-down of activism, internal dissension is not the only reason for the current death theme in feminist discourse and certainly not the most important one. Thus, while it is doubtlessly interesting to trace what Susan Fraiman describes as the intergenerational "structure of antagonism—of trashing, countertrashing, and metatrashing" (527), I want to focus on the external forces and developments that have helped to create the myth of a 'postfeminist' age. In order to do so, it is necessary to take a closer look at the process of 'post(-)ing'

feminism as well as to examine the concepts and terms that have come to replace (second-wave) feminism: neoliberal feminism, new traditionalism, and third-wave feminism.

## **THE POST(-)ING OF FEMINISM**

In feminist scholarship, the term ‘postfeminism’ is overwhelmingly met with a healthy dose of skepticism, as indicated by the trend to “barricade [it] in inverted commas” (Abbot 51). Faludi finds the term “bewildering, and for good reason” (“Postfeminism” 1647), while Gamble points out that many feminist critics “circle around the neologism warily, unable to decide whether it represents a con trick engineered by the media or a valid movement” (“Postfeminism” 36). Even though ‘postfeminism’ is widely used in academic scholarship and gaining currency in popular culture, its definition (if there is one) and its implications remain largely uncertain.<sup>1</sup>

The difficulties surrounding the term can be tied to the seemingly innocent prefix ‘post,’ which in its indeterminacy comprises several connotations and therefore encourages a multiplicity of possible interpretations. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the prefix ‘post’ denotes temporality in the sense of “occurring or existing afterwards, subsequent, later” but does not specifically indicate rejection. However, with regard to feminism, the ‘post-ing’ is a phenomenon fraught with complication because it does imply just that—the death of feminism mentioned above. Bearing in mind that there can never be a single, unified definition of the term ‘postfeminism,’ I will nevertheless distinguish two main directions in the interpretation of the concept that indeed turn ‘postfeminism’ into “a term of approbation and of opprobrium,” as Kavka so aptly puts it (29).

---

1 In general, the term ‘post(-)feminism’ has been more widely adopted in academia than in popular culture, even though it is almost routinely applied to pop-cultural narratives such as *Sex and the City* or *Bridget Jones* (cf. Thornham 77). However, it is starting to gain currency in newspapers as well as other media. The website of *The New York Times* features 186 hits for the term ‘postfeminism’ in the last twelve months, among them a description of an outfit worn by Lady Gaga as a “post-feminist interpretation of a chastity belt” (Wilson) and a reference to “our postfeminist times” in a discussion of the situation of present-day women as compared to women of the Renaissance (Browning). Furthermore, Kavka describes a New Zealand bumper sticker that says, “I’LL BE A POSTFEMINIST IN A POSTPATRIARCHY” (29).

### Historical Break or Theoretical Shift? Post-Feminism and Postfeminism

On the one hand, analogous to sociocultural phenomena such as postmodernism and intellectual movements like poststructuralism, the term 'postfeminism' can be interpreted as a shift in feminist thinking. Within this context, the prefix 'post' suggests kinship, signifying both revision and continuity. While 'postfeminist' thinkers still advocate the goals and ideals of second-wave feminism, they have a different understanding of the construction of identity. Given the diversity of womanhood, it is seen as problematic, if not impossible, to continue conceiving of feminism as a movement based on a unified subjectivity. Due to its poststructuralist and antiessentialist roots, the 'postfeminist' way of thinking, therefore, indicates the fundamental aporia of postulating 'women' in general, based on biological sex, as its subject. Critics have noted, however, that by 'post(-)ing' feminism into yet another theoretical movement, one runs the risk of severing its ties to the 'real' world of women's political and social situations (cf. Gamble 42). This echoes the discussion revolving around the renaming of women's studies programs into gender studies programs, which can likewise be interpreted as a depoliticization of the subject matter. Hawkesworth, on the other hand, suggests a completely contradictory reading and points out that "[w]ithin the narrative frame of evolutionary extinction, postfeminism is a marker of time as well as space, implying a temporal sequence in which feminism has been transcended, occluded, overcome" (969). Read in this manner, the term implies that "feminism is gone, departed, dead" (969).

In *An Introduction to Sociology: Feminist Perspectives*, Pamela Abbott, Claire Wallace, and Melissa Tyler suggest differentiating the term's two opposite meanings by hyphenating the version that indicates a historical break rather than a theoretical shift (51-55). To avoid confusion and unnecessary complication of an already complicated issue, I will, therefore, use the term 'post-feminism' to describe the notion of feminism as a thing of the past and 'postfeminism' as a label for the postmodern shift in feminist thought.

### The Backlash: Neoliberal Feminism and New Traditionalism

The notion of the twenty-first century as a post-feminist age is criticized by scholars and activists alike as being part of a comprehensive backlash, a conservative counterassault on feminism. In *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*, Faludi explores this phenomenon in detail, citing examples from movies and television, health care and the beauty industry, politics, fashion, and psychology. "The backlash is at once sophisticated and banal," she argues, "deceptively 'progressive' and proudly backward. It deploys both the 'new' findings of 'scientific research' and the dime-store

moralism of yesteryear; it turns into media sound bites both the glib pronouncements of pop-psych trend-watchers and the frenzied rhetoric of New Right preachers” (10). Accordingly, the backlash is the logical consequence of the ambiguous reasoning behind the alleged death of feminism: The “deceptively ‘progressive’” version assumes that feminism has reached its goals and has thus become obsolete. The “proudly backward” version, on the other hand, triumphantly cites cautionary tales of overworked career women plagued by loneliness, health problems, and substance abuse, while it simultaneously resurrecting the housewife-mother of the 1950s as the epitome of ‘natural’ femininity.

In their discussion of chick lit criticism, Pamela Butler and Jigna Desai call the “deceptively ‘progressive’” (Faludi, *Backlash* 10) version ‘neoliberal feminism’ a helpful term that mirrors “the multiple contemporary feminist discourses that reflect this shift from liberal concern with state-ensured rights to a neoliberal politics understood through the notion of ‘choice’” (Butler and Desai 8). Neoliberal feminism is characterized by three basic convictions: individualism, consumerism, and choice. As one of its main assumptions is that the feminist battle was fought and won, thereby successfully turning gender equality from an ideal into a reality, neoliberal feminism denies any need for collectivism or group mentality. Furthermore, since the ‘f-word’ is associated with leg hair, burning bras, and the endless rants of man-haters, neoliberal feminists reject the idea of feminist groups and consciousness-raising activities. Referring to Carol Hanisch’s much-quoted phrase “[t]he [p]ersonal [i]s [p]olitical,” the neoliberal position can be summed up as follows: The political is good as long as it is founded on the principles of individualism and the free market, and the personal is just that: personal.

Neoliberal feminism is also closely linked to the notion of (American) exceptionalism by claiming that because there is little or no ‘official’ discrimination left, it is now each woman’s individual responsibility to strive for greatness. In a post-feminist age, the argument goes, the sky is a woman’s limit. If you do not succeed—well, it must be your own fault. Examples of highly successful women are cited, fraught with the vaguely accusing undertone of ‘If they could do it, why couldn’t you?’ However, these cases serve only to mask the ongoing inequality and do little to raise awareness of the precise nature of women’s roles in the United States. To name but one example: While it is certainly great that a woman almost received the nomination of a major party for the US presidency, this does not change the fact that in 2011, only 16.8 percent of the seats in the House of Representatives were held by women (“United States”).

Focusing on the consumerist aspect of the concept, Amber E. Kinser defines neoliberal feminism as “resistance + consumption” (144):

If she buys the teabags made just for women, or decides she will not do office hours because she deserves a massage after all, or decides not to have her pap smear, or buys the black instead of the pink nail polish, or buys the pink just to say she is not afraid of femininity, or buys the L'Oreal because she is worth it, or pays extra for clothes at the alternative store because it allows her to be herself and annoy her coworkers at the same time, these are all styles of resistance to something or another, each of which makes sense and/or a statement in a given context. My point is neither to critique the usefulness of these choices nor to minimize their impact on personal transformation. My point is to clarify that *these acts do not equal feminism*, yet often enough function as substitutes for feminist movement. (144; my emphasis)

Even though there are certain consumerist practices, such as shopping at a feminist bookstore, that can be considered feminist acts, feminism, as a political movement and a school of critical thought, is not about buying things. Neoliberal feminism, however, suggests just that. Spending money on oneself is not an expression of feminist identity or awareness; it is an expression of consumerist mentality. Yet, TV shows, magazines, and self-help books manage to sell the idea that the consumption of the right goods has somehow turned into the summit of feminist self-expression. The reasoning behind this is fueled by the notion of choice: Because women have been officially liberated from the shackles of patriarchal oppression, they are now free to make their own choices when it comes to career, family, and sexuality.

With regard to sexual liberation, for instance, the underlying assumption is that women are finally free to become 'empowered' sex objects. Instead of being disadvantaged due to objectification, they can now profit from and gain power by using and marketing their bodies. Critics such as Rosalind Gill, however, have cautioned that this kind of sexual subjectification, while seemingly liberating, "has turned out to be objectification in new and even more pernicious guise" (105). More often than not, the question whether women have the agency necessary to make these choices is conveniently overlooked in neoliberal feminist discourse.

Furthermore, a closer look at neoliberal post-feminist narratives—*Bridget Jones*, *Ally McBeal*, *Sex and the City*, to name just a few—reveals that surprisingly little has changed. Bridget, Ally, and Carrie might be financially independent and more or less able to 'pamper' themselves by buying the perfect bath salts. Ultimately, however, their main objective in life is the same as that of Disney princesses and 1950s housewives-to-be: to find, secure, and keep the perfect husband.

The critique of post-feminism's "proudly backward" mentality (Faludi, *Backlash* 10) is echoed by Stephanie Genz when she points out that "[w]hile for the last century women had struggled to uncover and challenge the subjugation inherent in their

domestic subject positions, now it appeared that they were keen to re-embrace the title of housewife and re-experience the joys of a ‘new femininity’” (57). Elspeth Probyn, a feminist media critic, calls this trend “[n]ew [t]raditionalism,” a concept again tied to the notion of choice. In this scenario, the heroine is not independent, neither financially nor otherwise, but she is so by choice. Now that feminism has liberated women from the confines of patriarchy, they can freely choose to reenter them: No woman can be forced to have a career, earn her own money, or have some semblance of a life independent of her role as wife and mother. As I will discuss in more detail in the second half of this paper, Meyer’s *Twilight* series is situated in this category of post-feminist thought. While the concept of new traditionalism is much more overtly antifeminist than neoliberal feminism, both versions utilize feminism as a justification: New traditionalism and neoliberal feminism both claim to be facilitated by feminism while, at the same time, they covertly and overtly undermine it. As Ann Braithwaite puts it, in post-feminist discourses, “feminism is ‘written in’ precisely so it can be ‘written out’; it is included and excluded, acknowledged and paid tribute to, and accepted and refuted, all at the same time” (25). The discussion of the post-feminist concepts of neoliberal feminism and new traditionalism has drawn a rather pessimistic picture of the current state of feminism.

### **Third-Wave Feminism**

As a brief look at the academic and (pop-)cultural landscape shows, however, another strand of feminist thought with a rather different agenda has emerged simultaneously: third-wave feminism. Even though they receive fairly little attention from the press, countless feminist projects and organizations have surfaced in recent years, as Hawkesworth explains:

Feminist NGOs have proliferated, creating a vibrant feminist civil society. Web sites such as “Electrapages” and “Euronet” provide information about tens of thousands of organizations around the globe created by and for women that seek to develop women’s political agendas, conduct gender audits and gender impact analyses of government policies, build progressive coalitions among women, deepen the meaning of democracy and democratization, deliver much-needed services to women, and pressure public and private sectors to include more women and respond better to women’s concerns. (962)

The academic environment likewise shows feminist activity: Several essay collections and anthologies published throughout the 1990s and 2000s prove that feminism has neither died nor exhausted itself in pink-nailed post-feminist discourse. Younger

feminists are distancing themselves from post-feminist politics and discourse and participate in a 'third wave' of feminism, a term that reflects the twin imperatives of tradition and rebellion with regard to their foremothers (Gamble, "Postfeminism" 43). The term aptly describes the phenomenon: By conjuring up the wave metaphor yet again, it suggests that while the social and political context has changed since the 1970s, the movement nevertheless sees itself in continuity with the past and acknowledges its indebtedness to the first and second waves. Responding to several third-wave texts, Fraiman revises her former opinion that 1990s feminism has become apolitical, uncritical, and lazy:

Finally, they make me realize that feminism today is not on the couch after all but on the new-stands [sic] and spilling out of public spaces like concert halls, campuses, and SPRGRL conventions. With no illusions about a common language and no cheesy songs, *Third Wave Agenda* usefully directs our attention away from mother-daughter tensions and back to sisterly ties. Those writers in *Generations* longing for feminist community need look no farther. (543)

The mother/daughter image is another metaphor often employed to describe the relationship between older and younger feminists. Both wave and familial imagery leave room for honor and rebellion, criticism and appraisal, loyalty and emancipation.

One of the fundamental differences between second-wave and third-wave feminism is that the latter is grounded in an approach far more antiessentialist and poststructuralist in its nature and that it acknowledges the fragmentation of society and womanhood. Emphasizing and embracing the multiplicity of identity formation in the twenty-first century, third-wave feminists theorize the ambiguous, contradictory, and hybrid processes of identity formation, all the while working toward establishing common ground for the various emerging voices. A crucial part of this struggle is to address the continuing lack of representation of nonwhite and non-middle-class women within feminist discourse, which is one of the most important points of criticism the third wave levels against the second. However, the dialogue between 'mothers' and 'daughters' is not always productive, as many of the intergenerational debates lack focus and meaning (cf. Fraiman 526). Failing to address the substantive common ground shared by both generations, many commentators appear to "prefer instead to fetishize the structures of rivalry, indebtedness, desire, and inequality, relegating feminists to either side of a generational rift" that appears too steep to cross (Fraiman 528). And yet, because it is willing to embrace principles that are spurned by the media and decried as obsolete by popular culture and at the same time dares to challenge aspects of second-wave feminism that might be anachronistic or misguided, third-wave feminism seems to be the one movement that can be described as postfeminist rather than post-feminist. Having discussed the development of the

feminist movement and the implications of the ‘post(-)ing’ of feminism on a theoretical level, I will now read Meyer’s *Twilight* series as an example of the troubling tendencies of post-feminism and examine the narrative’s construction of masculinity and femininity as well as its connection with the concepts of alterity, domesticity, and agency.

### THE LION AND THE LAMB: MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY IN THE *TWILIGHT* SERIES

Meyer’s first novel, *Twilight*, was published in 2005 and immediately became a bestseller. Introducing the protagonist, Bella Swan, and her love interest, the vampire Edward Cullen, as well as the dominant themes of the series—the difficulties surrounding a human-vampire relationship, the importance of values, the dangers of temptation—the novel was followed by *New Moon* (2006), *Eclipse* (2007), and *Breaking Dawn* (2008).<sup>2</sup> Toward the end of *Twilight*, after both Edward’s vampirism and the protagonists’ feelings for each other are out in the open, Edward describes his relationship with Bella using a biblical reference: “And so the lion fell in love with the lamb . . .” (*TW* 274).<sup>3</sup> The passage he is referring to describes the peace and tranquility of the Messiah’s kingdom: Predator and prey are living together in harmony. In the context of Bella and Edward’s relationship, however, the lion/lamb analogy alludes to the fundamental imbalance of power existing between the two of them: As a male vampire, Edward clearly occupies a position of power with regard to the human, female Bella. As my discussion of masculinity and femininity will demonstrate, it is no coincidence that the narrative not only associates humanity but also femininity with the helpless, gentle lamb, while masculinity is symbolized by the ferocious and strong lion.

This essay understands masculinity and femininity as sets of socially and culturally constructed roles and meanings prescribed for men and women in any given society at a given time. Michael Kimmel refers to gender “as an ever-changing fluid assemblage of meanings and behaviors” (504), arguing that the concept of masculinity needs to be pluralized due to its chameleonic nature. Varying across cultures, over time, within any given society, and during the course of an individual’s life, masculinities and femininities have to be understood as plural, relational, historical, intersectional, and

---

2 Henceforth, the following abbreviations will be used for quotations: *Twilight*: *TW*, *New Moon*: *NM*, *Breaking Dawn*: *BD*.

3 The Bible passage he is referring to is Isa. 11.6: “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.”

situational concepts (504). At first glance, this appears to be an exceedingly vague definition. There is one feature of masculinities, however, that has remained fairly constant throughout the centuries: In patriarchal societies, masculinity is not only a source of identity but also a source of power. Whitehead and Barrett discuss three different manifestations of masculine power: power as “brute force” in the form of physical violence, as relational and positional power, and as discursive power lying in the masculinized discourse that legitimizes male supremacy (16).

Power is also a dominant theme in vampire narratives. Despite a great degree of variation, the vampire myth rests on certain fundamental assumptions about power. As supernatural beings, vampires have power(s) over humans: They are stronger, faster, possess special skills, and hold psychological power over their prey. At the same time, however, human blood exerts power over vampires, who often cannot control themselves when confronted with it. Furthermore, vampire narratives are stories of gaining power over death as well as testimonies to the power of death. The discourse of power in the *Twilight* series and other vampire narratives is informed not only by the power relations rooted in gender difference but also by the dynamics of humanity versus vampirism. The commingling of gender, sexuality, and humanity/vampirism thus fundamentally shapes the (im)balance of power between Edward and Bella.

In “(Un)safe Sex: Romancing the Vampire,” Karen Backstein points out that while *Dracula* served as a cautionary tale for Victorian women, warning them about the consequences of inappropriate sexual conduct, Edward Cullen belongs to a different category of vampire. “Specifically designed to be irresistible to humans,” she argues, Edward “has transformed into an alluring combination of danger and sensitivity, a handsome romantic hero haunted by his lust for blood” (38). While *Dracula* remains an elusive, mesmerizing, and dangerous phantom driven by animalistic desires and a hunger for blood, Edward is a tragic hero involuntarily thrown into his vampiric existence and struggling to lead a respectable life in spite of his predatory impulses.

The novels, narrated by Bella as a first-person narrator, offer three main channels through which the reader experiences Edward. First, he comes to life in Bella’s lengthy descriptions of his outward appearance and his many talents: Edward is extraordinarily skilled in everything he does, from parallel parking to composing his own music. In *Twilight*, Bella offers detailed praise of Edward’s handsomeness, his sense of fashion, his smell, his graceful movements, and his beautiful voice: His face is “absurdly handsome” (27), “dazzling” (43), and “fiercely beautiful” (220); his voice is “like velvet” (27), “melting honey” (102), and “irresistible” (166); his eyes are “smoldering” (213), “hypnotic” (139), and “gloriously intense” (84). Bella perceives Edward as a “godlike creature” (256) and states that “[t]here was nothing about him that could be improved upon” (241).

Second, Bella goes even further in emphasizing Edward's perfection by repeatedly juxtaposing the way she sees him with her own self-perception. Perhaps not surprisingly, the contrast could not be starker: Bella finds herself boring, plain, untalented, clumsy, and unattractive; in short, hopelessly inadequate in the face of Edward's overwhelming perfection: "Of course he wasn't interested in me, I thought angrily, my eyes stinging [...]. I wasn't *interesting*. And he was. Interesting . . . and brilliant . . . and mysterious . . . and perfect . . . and beautiful . . . and possibly able to lift full-sized vans with one hand" (*TW* 79). She recounts:

He turned then, with a mocking smile, and I stifled a gasp. His white shirt was sleeveless, and he wore it unbuttoned, so that the smooth white skin of his throat flowed uninterrupted over the marble contours of his chest, his perfect musculature no longer merely hinted at behind concealing clothes. *He was too perfect, I realized with a piercing stab of despair. There was no way this godlike creature could be meant for me.* (*TW* 256; my emphasis)

Third, the reader gains a sense of Edward's character by witnessing his actions and behavior, most notably in the way he communicates with Bella. Two distinct modes of interaction dominate the narrative: Edward is either patronizing and domineering, or he does not take Bella seriously and makes fun of her. Willingly accepting his parental-paternal authority, Bella becomes an accomplice in her own infantilization. Several scenes indicate that she is obedient not only because she recognizes the validity of his demands but also because she is afraid of him; she fears the anger and disappointment that would inevitably follow in case she disobeys: "His voice was still angry, and biting sarcasm. [...] I could feel the waves of infuriated disapproval rolling off of him, and I could think of nothing to say. [...] I parked on the narrow shoulder and stepped out, afraid because he was angry with me" (*TW* 255). However, Edward's mood often changes instantly: He switches from authoritative anger to amused ridicule within seconds, "enunciating every syllable, as if he were talking to someone mentally handicapped" (*TW* 83, cf. 97). Owing to his unpredictability, Bella grows increasingly insecure and tries to locate the reasons for his behavior within herself.

The power structure between the characters is clearly defined along gendered terms. Not only does Edward consciously assume the role of the patriarch—commanding (*TW* 162) and ordering (163) her around, his voice "full of authority" (166)—but Bella acts as an accomplice in establishing and maintaining his omnipotence. A concept aptly describing Edward's disposition and behavior is 'hegemonic masculinity,' defined by Donald Levy as "the hierarchical interaction between multiple masculinities [that] explains how some men make it appear normal and necessary that they dominate most women and other men" (253). Edward conforms to most, if not all, aspects Eric Anderson associates with twenty-first-

century American hegemonic masculinity: He is white and heterosexual; he is in excellent physical shape; he is self-confident, authoritative, and commanding; he is courageous, chivalric, as well as gentlemanly; and, perhaps most importantly, he is in control of himself and his surroundings (24).

Since one of the defining aspects of the construction of masculinity is its relationality, it is not surprising that the discussion of Edward's masculine identity has already pointed toward several features characterizing Bella's femininity: her insecurity, her submissiveness, her willingness to surrender herself to Edward's masculine authority, among others. What is perhaps most troubling about her character, however, is the lack thereof. Bella does not tell us very much about herself, arguably because she is too busy talking about Edward. During the course of their relationship, she isolates herself from her high school friends; she does not communicate with her parents in great depth; she lacks interests, hobbies, or skills unrelated to Edward. To quote Gertrude Stein's famous words: "There is no there there" (298). It comes as no surprise, then, that Bella falls into a deep depression after Edward leaves her, feeling that "[i]f I stopped looking for him, it was over. Love, life, meaning . . . over" (NM 73). Immersed in "waves of pain" (84), she then spends months moping and reminiscing, utterly unable to find any kind of purpose in life now that her lover is gone. She finally gets better when she starts spending time with Jacob, her soon-to-be werewolf friend. The reason for their renewed friendship is that Jacob helps Bella to fix an old motorcycle, which she then uses to put herself in mortal danger, inducing hallucinations of Edward patronizingly cautioning her to stop risking her life. Even after months of separation, his power over her still holds.

One might be tempted to read Meyer's lead female character as a 'typical' teenage girl in love: Everything regarding Edward is a matter of life and death, life is not worth living if he is not in it, everything else—school, parents, friends, hobbies—is irrelevant. The author herself justifies Bella's decision to marry at a very young age by claiming that she knew it was exactly what she wanted: "For Bella, it was what she really wanted for her life, and it wasn't a phase she was going to grow out of. So I don't have issues with her choice. She's a strong person who goes after what she wants with persistence and determination" ("Frequently Asked Questions").

While it is certainly true that from the very beginning of the story, Bella articulates her desire to be with Edward very explicitly and persistently, this does not mean one cannot or should not challenge her decisions. The question remains to what extent Bella's lack of experience influences her conception of love and her plans for the future. Barely out of puberty, most seventeen-year-olds want things that they forget about a few years later or make decisions that they later regret. This is why, in a scene in the film adaptation of *Eclipse*, Bella's friend Jessica Stanley stresses the freedom and

impermanence of the decisions made and paths chosen following high school graduation in her valedictorian speech:

This isn't the time to make hard and fast decisions, this is the time to make mistakes. Take the wrong train and get stuck somewhere. Fall in love. A lot. Major in philosophy because there's no way to make a career out of that. Change your mind. And change it again, because nothing's permanent. So make as many mistakes as you can. (*The Twilight Saga: Eclipse*)

Bella's decision to let Edward turn her into a vampire, along with all its implications, is of course nothing if not permanent and irreversible.

The depiction of the phenomenon of unconditional teenage love is in itself nothing new. The issue with the *Twilight* series is not that it depicts Bella's love for and desire to be with Edward but that the text sanctions, and even praises, obsessive behavior and the dramatic steps taken by Bella on the grounds that Edward is Bella's 'true love.' The narrative thus does not encourage the reader to call Bella's decisions into question but rather to accept them as a necessary corollary of a relationship that appears to be sanctioned by fate. Moreover, throughout the novels, the fact is stressed repeatedly that it is Bella's decision and that Edward initially opposes her plans (NM 37, 541). As Bella complains in the beginning of *New Moon*: "Edward was dead set against any future that changed me. Any future that made me like him—that made me immortal, too" (NM 10). The enormity of Bella's decision to become a vampire is alleviated by emphasizing that it is indeed her decision—the decision of "a strong person who goes after what she wants with persistence and determination," as Meyer puts it ("Frequently Asked Questions").

Contrary to Meyer's assessment, however, Bella Swan is not a strong, independent heroine. For the most part of the narrative, she figures as damsel in distress extraordinaire. Clumsy, fragile, insecure, she willingly throws herself into the arms of her overprotective vampire lover/husband and leaves the heroism to him: "I wanted nothing more than to be alone with my perpetual savior" (TW 166). As Carmen D. Siering argues, "it seems that in Meyer's view, the world is too dangerous for Bella to navigate on her own; she needs a man—in fact a supernatural man—to protect her" (51). As a quick glance at the blogosphere and the few scholarly articles on the *Twilight* series reveals, a number of critical readers find it disturbing that the lead female character of a twenty-first-century novel series so closely fits into the scheme of the nineteenth-century "Cult of True Womanhood" (cf. Welter) that even Eliza Lynn Linton, one of its most outspoken proponents, would have been satisfied. However, what is even more disconcerting is the popularity Bella enjoys despite—or because—of it.

## THE *TWILIGHT* SERIES AND ISSUES IN (CONTEMPORARY) FEMINISM

### Alterity

In order to make sense of our otherwise fluid and chaotic surroundings, we channel our impressions and experiences into binaries or polar opposites. While this process is helpful in terms of simplifying the complex and contradictory world we live in, it can also be harmful because it is by definition reductive and thus potentially discriminatory. This is especially important in terms of gender stereotypes, which are traditionally constructed as binaries—men are strong, women are weak; men are rational, women are emotional; and so on. The roots of this binary conception of sex and gender lie in a fundamental shift in thinking occurring in the course of the eighteenth century. In *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Thomas Laqueur describes this process as the shift from an estates-based one-sex model to a two-sex model that focuses on differences rather than similarities and postulates the determinative power of biology.

As the most important means of structuring our experiences and locating ourselves within societal patterns, language plays a major part in the construction of gender. Gendered language, as Whitehead and Barrett explain, “not only informs concepts of masculinity [and femininity], it is a tool through which to perform, label, and interpret our gender identities” (11). In heteronormative and sexist societies, language can serve as an indicator of patriarchal dominance because the masculine is set as the linguistic norm, whereas the female merely functions as the imperfect derivative. As language plays a central role in shaping and maintaining what is considered ‘natural’—that is, ‘male’—behavior, it is not surprising that this linguistic imbalance is reflected in a tangible social and political imbalance. By continually juxtaposing herself and her behavior with the unreachable perfection that Edward symbolizes for her, Bella herself reinforces the societal norm: She is positioning herself as the Other. In her groundbreaking work *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir describes the process of othering, which she sees as one of the main tools in keeping patriarchy in place: “[Woman] determines and differentiates herself in relation to man, and he does not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other” (6).

Within the framework of the narrative, Bella is indeed staged as “the inessential in front of the essential.” To her, Edward is the norm she can never even hope to reach; the standard he sets is tantamount to perfection. He is the one who controls their story and makes the important decisions (*TW* 86). Evidenced by the catatonic state she enters after he leaves her at the beginning of *New Moon* (73), Bella is utterly dependent

on him—ironically enough, however, he also depends on her. Even though the masculine subject position is de facto clearly the empowered one, it cannot exist without the feminine. In best poststructuralist manner, there can be no center without the margins, and thus there can be no Edward without Bella to provide the framework necessary for the enactment of his masculinity. As Whitehead and Barrett point out, the process of othering plays an essential role in the creation and maintenance of hegemonic masculinities: “In order to define hegemonic masculinity as strong, wilful, controlling, determined and competent, it is necessary to see femininity as fragile, incompetent, angelic, precious” (22). Because our minds need the pattern of binary oppositions to structure and interpret our surroundings, there can be no self without an Other.

Another term for this phenomenon is ‘alterity,’ which describes the position of “the marginal or peripheral who do not have access to the centres of power” (“Alterity” 150). Feminist theorists have argued that within the confines of patriarchy, alterity is assigned to the female experience, homogenizing it and relating it to the margins. Subjugated to the male norm, femaleness and femininity are signified as the Other in order to legitimize, justify, and maintain patriarchal power and oppression (150). The center(s) of power “represent a point of origin in which meaning is fixed and validated as the determining norm” (150). The *Twilight* universe, however, is not only shaped by traditional patriarchy, as my discussion of domesticity will demonstrate, but also by the fact that vampires and vampirism form one of the predominant centers of power. Bella’s position in the power dynamic is thus weakened not only by her femaleness but also by her humanity, since those excluded from the center “are categorised as irrelevant to normative conventions and designated ‘other’” (“Alterity” 150).

Throughout the novels, humanity is coded as an undesirable and deficient mode of being; humans are portrayed as creatures of lack. Bella describes herself as “fragilely human” (*BD* 22), “human and weak” (*BD* 374), “stupid and slow and human” (*NM* 448). She contrasts her human deficiency with Edward’s superior existence as a vampire, describing him as “not . . . human. He was something more” (*TW* 138): “The contrast between the two of us was painful. He looked like a god. I looked very average, even for a human, almost shamefully plain” (*NM* 65). Her own transformation is likewise rendered in explicitly evaluative terms: Reflecting on the before-and-after, she contrasts her two faces, “hideous human and glorious immortal” (*BD* 469), and explains how she “traded in [her] warm, breakable, pheromone-riddled body for something beautiful, strong” (*BD* 22), as the “dimming shadows and limiting weakness of humanity” were finally taken off her eyes (*BD* 390). Edward, too, repeatedly alludes to Bella’s humanity as a reason for various shortcomings—her bad

memory (*NM* 71), her weakness (*BD* 111), her hormones (*BD* 103). In this way, Bella's status as the Other is further enhanced by her humanity. Constantly in the company of vampires, her human inadequacy is fused together with her femininity, and her exponentiated otherness constructs her as Edward's twofold binary opposite.

### Domesticity

The term 'patriarchy,' originally referring to the rule of a dominant elder male within a traditional kinship structure, was broadened in Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, published in 1970, to mean the institutionalized oppression of all women by all men (Thornham 31). Systemic oppression aside, most women experience the first contact with patriarchal power within the realm of family life and domesticity. In the beginning, the *Twilight* series presents two unconventional family settings: Bella spends her childhood years and large parts of her adolescence with her loving but erratic single mother and then moves in with her caring but taciturn single father. In both cases, her parents are portrayed as affectionate but not especially mature or self-sufficient. In fact, in both scenarios a reversal of roles takes place, and Bella assumes the position of caretaker rather than child—her mother even describes her as “[m]y little middle-aged child” (*BD* 18).

After meeting Edward, Bella decides to leave her own unconventional family structures in order to become part of the Cullen family, which centers on Carlisle Cullen as a stereotypical patriarch. Carlisle is not only the one who, quite literally, created the family by turning the others into vampires; he also developed the “vegetarian” (*TW* 188) Cullen lifestyle that the others obediently follow (*TW* 269). As Sara Buttsworth points out, his position as leader of the family is further established by his exercising the necessary self-control better than the others, to the point of him being able to work as a surgeon without being tempted by the close contact with human blood (54). Given Carlisle's position as 'head' of the household, it is not surprising that his wife Esme is staged as the 'heart' of the family, the stereotypical mother. Loving, caring, and emotional rather than rational, she is positively oozing maternal affection (*TW* 327). According to Edward, her special personality trait is the “ability to love passionately” (*TW* 307). While Carlisle's job as a doctor is described as a “calling” that requires tremendous efforts in terms of controlling his impulses—it took him “two centuries of torturous effort to perfect his self-control” (*TW* 339-40)—Esme spends her time “dabbl[ing]” in architecture and the restoration of old buildings (Buttsworth 61). The Cullens represent a reiteration of conventional gender roles: The husband has a career, a vocation even, while the wife has a fun hobby to keep her busy. Incidentally, Esme's activities are related to the realm of domesticity and privacy, thus

further establishing her as the homemaker, while Carlisle holds a position placing him squarely into the realm of public life (Buttsworth 61).

The notion of domesticity is also crucial in the construction of Bella's femininity. The *Twilight* series can be read as a product of new traditionalism in its portrayal of a young woman who embraces the conventional feminine role: Bella cooks and cleans for her father; she sacrifices everything in order to be with Edward—on his terms; she gives up her chance of going to college for a life as Edward's wife and mother of his child. In terms of the gender dynamic, this can be explained by recurring to Edward's hegemonic masculinity. As Whitehead and Barrett point out, "the categories of woman and man are simultaneously self-sustaining inasmuch as without one, the other could not exist" (13). For Edward to be able to successfully occupy the position of the hegemonic male, Bella needs to embody the traditional notion of femininity, a concept developed in the nineteenth century:

By the middle of the nineteenth century in America, a cluster of ideas on the nature of women and their appropriate role was firmly planted in the popular mind of many Americans. These ideas make up what historians have called the "cult of true womanhood" or the "cult of domesticity." [...] The ideal American woman was described as submissive, morally pure, and pious. She found power and happiness at home in the role of wife and mother, and judged herself as well as other women according to these qualities. (MacHaffie 159)

While Bella cannot be described as pious, she is certainly submissive and conforms to other nineteenth-century stereotypes described by Barbara J. MacHaffie: Just like the 'true woman,' she is affectionate rather than distanced, emotional rather than rational, compassionate, sensitive, and capable of enormous self-sacrifice (cf. 160). Bearing in mind that against all reason, Bella literally sacrifices her own life in order to be with Edward, the similarities between her and the nineteenth-century ideal are obvious.

Part of the process of othering the feminine is the so-called separation of spheres by positioning husband and wife as the 'gentleman' and the 'angel in the house,' respectively. The 'true woman' is responsible for the domestic realm, governing the home and the kitchen, and thereby serves as man's contrastive Other: She is "private where he is public," she is "passive where he is active," she is "innocent where he is worldly," she is weak where he is strong ("Angel in the House" 152). Feminists have, of course, spent decades, if not centuries, fighting this separation—to let women have a career and participate in public life as well as to allow men to play a bigger role within the family. And yet, as my discussion of the concept of 'backlash' and the notion of a new traditionalism has shown, there is still a surprising number of proponents of a sex-based separation of roles and responsibilities. The *Twilight* series caters to this notion in several ways. As mentioned above, the Cullens represent the traditional

distribution of gender roles, coded as positive and desirable by Bella's wish to join their family. However, from the very beginning of the story, Bella likewise assumes the role of the 'Angel in the House' with regard to her father Charlie: "Last night I'd discovered that Charlie couldn't cook much besides fried eggs and bacon. So I requested that I be assigned kitchen detail for the duration of my stay" (*TW* 31). The first two novels frequently mention her cooking dinner, cleaning the house, and doing laundry, while Charlie, in all his paternal entitlement, watches baseball and drinks beer (*TW* 141, 295). If the transition from dutiful daughter to dutiful wife and mother after her marriage with Edward thus does not come as a surprise, neither does her decision to give up on her education.

Interestingly, however, Bella does not conform to the imperatives of the 'Cult of True Womanhood' in terms of sexuality. While the ideal Victorian woman was essentially supposed to renounce any kind of sexuality, Bella certainly feels physically drawn to Edward. In this respect, she resembles a different male phantasm: the 'New Woman,' whose allegedly rampant and insatiable sexuality had to be controlled and channeled correctly (for reproductive purposes only) by her husband. Siering concludes that "while *Twilight* is presented as a love story, scratch the surface and you will find an allegorical tale about the dangers of unregulated female sexuality" (51).

Even though Edward is not devoid of physical impulses either, he is ultimately shown to be successful in controlling his vampiric thirst for blood as well as his human sexual urges. (Self-)control, as mentioned before, is a vital part of hegemonic masculinity. Whenever they are close to becoming physically intimate, it is Bella who initiates the contact and Edward who has to keep both his and her impulses in check. Asserting himself in the face of overwhelming passions, Edward more than lives up to masculine standards of self-control (*TW* 301, for instance). This might lead readers to believe that in the novels, the ultimate feminist fantasy is enacted: A young woman is free to openly acknowledge her sexual desire without being pushed or coerced by her boyfriend. However, a closer analysis of the characters' roles and behavior quickly reveals this to be a fallacy, as Sarah Seltzer explains:

*Twilight's* sexual flowchart is the inversion of abstinence-only/purity ball culture, where girls are told that they must guard themselves against rabid boys, and that they must reign in both their own and their suitors' impulses. But even while inverting the positions, Meyer doesn't change the game. Purity is still the goal. Men, or vampires, are still dangerous and threatening while females are still breakable and fragile. Intercourse still has the potential of resulting in "death," just as it once relegated women to a social death. The only difference is the controls are handed over from the teenage girl to the guy—who happens, in this case, to be totally responsible and upright. ("*Twilight*": Sexual Longing")

Instead of portraying a female character who is not ashamed of her sexuality but embraces it openly, Meyer caters to the well-known patriarchal myth of the irrational, unrestrained, insatiable woman who has to be controlled by the incorruptible man who is, of course, in complete control of himself and his surroundings:

Then he took my face in his hands almost roughly, and kissed me in earnest, his unyielding lips moving against mine. There really was no excuse for my behavior. Obviously I knew better by now. And yet I couldn't seem to stop from reacting exactly as I had the first time. Instead of keeping safely motionless, my arms reached up to twine tightly around his neck, and I was suddenly welded to his stone figure. I sighed, and my lips parted. He staggered back, breaking my grip effortlessly. "Damn it, Bella!" he broke off, gasping. "You'll be the death of me, I swear you will." (*TW* 363)

Rather than fulfilling the adequate sexual role assigned to women, namely "keeping safely motionless," Bella 'gives in' to her sexual impulses. Her transgressive behavior is immediately criticized by Edward, who scolds her for trying to break the rules he set up to control their physical intimacy.

## **Agency**

In response to several critics that voice their discontent with regard to the un-feminist nature of the series's lead female character, Meyer argues on her website that her novels do promote female agency because the story revolves around the choices Bella makes. According to Meyer, "the foundation of feminism is this: being able to choose" ("Frequently Asked Questions"). The problem with this scenario, however, is that Meyer confuses 'choices' with 'decisions.' While the narrative certainly does portray Bella making her own decisions—indeed often against the will of her male counterparts—this does not necessarily turn her into a 'feminist' character. In order for decisions to become choices, the individual needs to have genuine agency and valid alternatives to choose from.

In the following, I will examine Bella's situation in this context. In "Identity and Social Theory," Ann Branaman defines agency as "the ability of an individual to take an action or have a thought that is not determined by his or her social context or biography" (146). This is, of course, a utopian notion, since no individual can convincingly claim to be utterly uninfluenced by her surroundings and personal history. While no one is completely free of the social structures they live in and the cultural discourses that shape these structures, agency depends to a great degree on awareness. The more aware an individual is of her situation and the forces that influence her, the

closer she will get to achieving agency; that is, she will be able to make choices that might be influenced, but not determined, by her social context or biography. Furthermore, this is a process that cannot, or only with great difficulty, be achieved by the individual alone; it is a process that needs to be fueled by social interaction and the mutual exchange of thoughts and experiences.

According to Christine M. Korsgaard, an individual's agency is directly linked to her practical identities, which "include such things as roles and relationships, citizenship, memberships in ethnic or religious groups, causes, vocations, professions, and offices" (20). Korsgaard's core argument is that each practical identity comes with a set of rules, and once we accept a practical identity as a description under which we value ourselves, we "find it worthwhile to do certain acts for the sake of certain ends, and impossible, even unthinkable, to do others" (20). In the beginning of the story, Bella has several practical identities: She is a daughter, a student, a friend, and soon becomes Edward's girlfriend. In the course of the narrative, however, she discards her identities one by one until the status of girlfriend is the only identity valuable to her.

Of course, she still is a daughter, a student, and a friend; however, as Korsgaard argues, "reasoned or arbitrary, chosen or merely the product of circumstance, [our practical identities] remain contingent in this sense: whether you treat them as a source of reasons and obligations is up to you" (23). "[S]ince I'd come to Forks, it really seemed like my life was *about* him" (*TW* 251), Bella reflects, and her initial resolve to not "allow him to have this level of influence over me," because it is "pathetic" and "unhealthy" (*TW* 74), quickly weakens. Bella decides to live exclusively according to the rules provided by her identity as Edward's girlfriend and consequently breaks the rules of her other identities as student, daughter, and friend. Her decision to take such a dramatic step is influenced first and foremost by the fundamental incompatibility of the identity she values most and the others. By stripping herself of all but one practical identity, however, there is but a single source of identity left for Bella: Her role as Edward's girlfriend and later wife. Stripped of all valid alternatives to choose from, her decisions cannot be called choices. A well-rounded person cannot model her life on just one practical identity; it would result in compulsive and obsessive behavior—as exemplified by Bella's sole fixation on Edward. Not only is she inexperienced in dealing with romantic relationships, but her judgment is also clouded by her infatuation with Edward. In addition, Bella does not accept friends or parents to guide and support her in her decision-making process. Her awareness of her situation and of the possible consequences of her decisions is thus severely limited, which is why one has to disagree with Meyer's assertion that Bella is a feminist character because of the 'choices' she makes.

## CONCLUSION

The focus of this essay was twofold: To determine whether feminism has indeed been prematurely buried and to locate Meyer's *Twilight* series within an allegedly post-feminist context. By examining the discourse of the death of feminism and exploring the concepts that have taken its place, the first part asked if the twenty-first century can be referred to as a post-feminist age. My discussion of the 'post(-)ing' of feminism indicates that while we do indeed live in a 'postfeminist' age in the sense of a theoretical shift allowing for the diversity of women's experience, there can be no talk of a dying or dead feminism.

However, as my reading of the *Twilight* series's two main protagonists has shown, the novels do little to undermine and much to perpetuate sexist gender stereotypes. Not only does Edward conform to the stereotypes of conventional masculinity with regard to appearance, character, and behavior, but the relationship between the supernaturally strong vampire and his humanly weak girlfriend is based on a fundamental imbalance of power which explicitly reinforces the binary strong man/weak woman. In terms of the post(-)feminist landscape, Forks, Washington, can therefore be interpreted as the center of new traditionalism. "[P]roudly backward" in attitude (Faludi, *Backlash* 10), new traditionalist narratives such as the *Twilight* novels cite feminist achievements in order to justify decidedly un-feminist positions.

What are the consequences of the hype surrounding the *Twilight* series? Are all those avid young readers going to throw themselves into abusive relationships with pale, old-fashioned men who enjoy secretly watching them sleep? Seltzer does not seem too worried and predicts that "*Twilight's* unfortunate gender roles will join abstinence-only on the trash heap of history" ("That's What?"). Until then, texts like *Twilight* can be used to fuel the discussion about gender roles, feminism, and sexism. Due to the series's immense popularity, this discussion may even reach teenagers as well as older readers and raise awareness of the oppression and discrimination women continue to face.

As my discussion of select issues in feminist thought in relation to the *Twilight* series has shown, the novels have enormous potential to stimulate discussions about the role of women in the twenty-first century. Many questions that are central to feminism can be asked with regard to Bella's story, and many of her decisions can serve as a starting point for a discussion of the problems women and men face in contemporary society: What could Bella have done differently? How can we conceptualize domesticity in a way that is not as decidedly un-feminist as it is in the novels but without falling into the trap of constructing the housewife as the feminist's Other? What does 'sexual liberation' mean for women in the twenty-first century? How

do we differentiate between affection and abuse? Meyer urges readers to not take her work seriously in terms of its influence on young women:

I never meant for her fictional choices to be a model for anyone else's real life choices. She is a character in a story, nothing more or less. On top of that, this is not even realistic fiction, it's a fantasy with vampires and werewolves, so no one *could* ever make her exact choices. [...] Also, she's in a situation that none of us has ever been in, because she lives in a fantasy world. ("Frequently Asked Questions")

Meyer's evasiveness does not do justice to the issue at hand. Of course no one assumes that she meant her novels to be advice manuals or conduct books, but she cannot convincingly deny the fact that cultural discourses, including the *Twilight* series, have an immense influence on those exposed to them. The criticism leveled at the narrative is not directed at the particulars of vampires and werewolves but at the undercurrents of sexism that inform the story and work independently of the supernatural context of the setting. However, instead of blindly trashing or ignoring the *Twilight* mania, I would suggest dealing with it in a constructive manner—acknowledging its appeal while at the same time reading critically between the lines.

## WORKS CITED

- Abbott, Pamela, Claire Wallace, and Melissa Tyler. *An Introduction to Sociology: Feminist Perspectives*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge, 2005. Print.
- Ally McBeal*. Fox. 8 Sep. 1997-20 May 2002. Television.
- "Alterity." Gamble, *Routledge* 150.
- Anderson, Eric. *In the Game: Gay Athletes and the Cult of Masculinity*. Albany: State U of New York P, 2005. Print.
- "Angel in the House." Gamble, *Routledge* 152.
- Aronson, Pamela. "Feminists or 'Postfeminists'? Young Women's Attitude Toward Feminism and Gender Relations." *Gender and Society* 17.6 (2003): 903-22. Print.
- Backstein, Karen. "(Un)safe Sex: Romancing the Vampire." *Cineaste* 35.1 (2009): 38-41. Print.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. London: Vintage, 2010. Print.
- The Bible*. Introd. and notes by Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998. Print. Authorized King James Vers.

- Braithwaite, Ann. "Politics and/of Backlash." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 5.5 (2004): 18-33. Print.
- Branaman, Ann. "Identity and Social Theory." *The Routledge Companion to Social Theory*. Ed. Anthony Elliott. London: Routledge, 2010. 135-55. Print.
- Browning, Dominique. "Real Housewife of the Renaissance." *New York Times*. New York Times, 25 Nov. 2011. Web. 23 Jan. 2012.
- Buschman, Joan K., and Silvio Lenart. "I Am Not A Feminist, but . . .?": College Women, Feminism, and Negative Experiences." *Political Psychology* 17.1 (1996): 59-75. Print.
- Butler, Pamela, and Jigna Desai. "Manolos, Marriage, and Mantras: Chick-Lit Criticism and Transnational Feminism." *Meridians* 8.2 (2008): 1-31. Print.
- Buttsworth, Sara. "CinderBella: *Twilight*, Fairy Tales, and the Twenty-First-Century American Dream." *Twilight and History*. Ed. Nancy R. Reagin. Hoboken: Wiley, 2010. 47-69. Print.
- Faludi, Susan. *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*. New York: Three Rivers, 1991. Print.
- . "Postfeminism." *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Women: Global Woman's Issues and Knowledge*. Ed. Cheri Kramarae and Dale Spender. Vol. 3. London: Routledge, 2000. 1646-48. Print.
- Fielding, Helen. *Bridget Jones's Diary*. London: Picador, 1996. Print.
- Fraiman, Susan. "Feminism Today: Mothers, Daughters, Emerging Sisters." *American Literary History* 11.3 (1999): 525-44. Print.
- Gamble, Sarah, ed. "Postfeminism." Gamble, *Routledge* 36-45.
- . *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*. London: Routledge, 2001. Print.
- Genz, Stephanie. *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2009. Print.
- Gerbner, George, and Larry Gross. "Living with Television: The Violence Profile." *Journal of Communication* 26.2 (1976): 172-99. Print.
- Gill, Rosalind. "From Sexual Objectification to Sexual Subjectification: The Resexualisation of Women's Bodies in the Media." *Feminist Media Studies* 3.1 (2003): 100-06. Print.
- Hanisch, Carol. "The Personal Is Political: The Women's Liberation Movement Classic with a New Explanatory Introduction." *Carol Hanisch of the Women's Liberation Movement*. Carol Hanisch, 2009. Web. 7 Dec. 2011.
- Hawkesworth, Mary. "The Semiotics of Premature Burial: Feminism in a Postfeminist Age." *Signs* 29.4 (2004): 961-85. Print.
- Kavka, Misha. "Feminism, Ethics, and History, or What Is the 'Post' in Postfeminism?" *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 21.1 (2002): 29-44. Print.

## Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* Series and the 'Post(-)ing' of Feminism

- Kimmel, Michael. "Masculinities." *Men and Masculinities: A Social, Cultural, and Historical Encyclopedia*. Ed. Michael Kimmel and Amy Aronson. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004. 503-07. Print.
- Kinser, Amber E. "Negotiating Spaces for/through Third-Wave Feminism." *NWSA Journal* 16.3 (2004): 124-53. Print.
- Korsgaard, Christine M. *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. Print.
- Laqueur, Thomas. *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990. Print.
- Levy, Donald. "Hegemonic Masculinity." *International Encyclopedia of Men and Masculinities*. Ed. Michael Flood et al. London: Routledge, 2007. 253-54. Print.
- MacHaffie, Barbara J. *Her Story: Women in Christian Tradition*. 2nd ed. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006. Print.
- Meyer, Stephenie. *Breaking Dawn*. New York: Little, 2008. Print.
- . *Eclipse*. New York: Little, 2007. Print.
- . "Frequently Asked Questions: *Breaking Dawn*." *StephenieMeyer.com: The Official Website of Stephenie Meyer*. N.p., n.d. Web. 24 Jan. 2012.
- . *New Moon*. New York: Little, 2006. Print.
- . *Twilight*. New York: Little, 2005. Print.
- Millet, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1970. Print.
- "post-, prefix." *OED Online*. Oxford UP, Dec. 2006. Web. 7 Dec. 2011.
- Probyn, Elspeth. "New Traditionalism and Post-Feminism: TV Does the Home." *Screen* 31.2 (1990): 147-59. Print.
- Sanders, Valerie. "First Wave Feminism." Gamble, *Routledge* 15-24.
- Sax, Leonard. "*Twilight* Sinks Its Teeth into Feminism." *Washington Post*. Washington Post, 17 Aug. 2008. Web. 24 Jan. 2012.
- Seltzer, Sarah. "That's What Vampires Are For: Fangs, Sex and Society." *Huffington Post*. HuffingtonPost.com, 26 Nov. 2008. Web. 23 Jan. 2012.
- . "'*Twilight*': Sexual Longing in an Abstinence-Only World." *Huffington Post*. HuffingtonPost.com, 9 Aug. 2008. Web. 23 Jan. 2012.
- Sex and the City*. HBO. 6 June 1998-22 Feb. 2004. Television.
- Siering, Carmen D. "Talking Back to *Twilight*." *Ms. Magazine* Spring 2009: 51-52. Print.
- Stein, Gertrude. *Everybody's Autobiography*. 1937. Cambridge: Exact, 1993. Print.
- Thornham, Sue. *Feminist Theory and Cultural Studies: Stories of Unsettled Relations*. London: Bloomsbury, 2001. Print.
- The Twilight Saga: Eclipse*. Dir. David Slade. Summit, 2010. Film.

## Sophie Spieler

“United States of America: House of Representatives.” *Inter-Parliamentary Union*. Inter-Parliamentary Union, 23 Sep. 2011. Web. 24 Jan. 2012.

Welter, Barbara. “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860.” *American Quarterly* 18.2 (1966): 151-74. Print.

Whitehead, Stephen M., and Frank J. Barrett. “The Sociology of Masculinity.” *The Masculinities Reader*. Ed. Whitehead and Barrett. Malden: Polity, 2001. 1-26. Print.

Wilson, Eric. “No Poker Faces at Star-Struck Fashion Awards.” *New York Times*. New York Times, 7 June 2011. Web. 23 Jan. 2012.