

Feminism and Vampires in Stephenie Meyer's *The Twilight Saga*: Bella Swan's

Ability To Make Her Own Choices

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Abstract:

Stephenie Meyer argues that Bella Swan is a feminist character because “the foundation of feminism is this: being able to choose. The core of anti-feminism is, conversely, telling a woman she can’t do something solely because she’s a woman” (Wilson 207). However, using this definition of feminism, Bella Swan still is not a feminist character because she might not be making these choices of her own free will due to her controlling, abusive, vampire boyfriend with psychic abilities. She does not actually become a feminist character under this definition until she herself becomes a vampire and gets on a level footing with Edward in terms of supernatural abilities.

As feminism enters the mainstream, more and more people try to argue that the works that they have created are in some way “feminist works.” Stephenie Meyer, the author of *The Twilight Saga*, is no exception; she argues that her book series and the main character, Bella Swan, are feminist. In her own words “the foundation of feminism is this: being able to choose. The core of anti-feminism is, conversely, telling a woman she can’t do something solely because she’s a woman” (Wilson 207). Her claim that Bella is a feminist character is based entirely on a faulty and oversimplified version of feminism, but even ignoring this, her argument still does not hold water. If, as Meyer says, feminism is the ability of a woman to make her own choices and to not be told that she cannot do something because she is a woman, Bella Swan still is not a feminist character because not only is she constantly being told what to do, she is also potentially enthralled by a vampire with explicit psychic abilities and a habit of control and manipulation.

Feminism in the United States today has a multitude of definitions, as it is a complex and ever changing ideology. Due to this complexity, it can be hard for even those who consider themselves feminist to define it. Jaime Loke articulates a rather important point about feminism: that the mainstream U.S. media has a long history of telling the story of one group of women who all agree on a simple and easy definition of feminism as if it were a singular issue (Loke 123). However, there are many people who make claims such as these without ever really defining what feminism is or what it specifically means to them. The

blurriness of the definition makes cultural conceptions of feminism rather varied and undefined, leaving open the room for different and conflicting ideas about what feminism is to arise, such as Meyer's definition that it is purely about a woman being allowed to make her own choices, regardless of what they are. For the purpose of this analysis, I will be using Meyer's own definition of feminism.

The question of whether or not Bella Swan is a feminist character who generally makes her own decisions would matter substantially less if *The Twilight Saga* were not such a cultural phenomenon which was incredibly popular with women, both young and old. Overall, Meyer's books have sold more than seventy million copies (Barnes), breaking numerous sales records across the globe (Alexander). According to the children's books buying manager at British bookstore Waterstone, Sarah Clark: "Popular doesn't even begin to describe it- *The Twilight Saga* is a phenomenon in its own right and like *Harry Potter* it has generated a global sensation that crosses several media" (Alexander). Its influence can be felt across the genre, having created a subset of vampire young adult romance that has quickly become clichéd due to the vast number of books like it that have been published just in the last decade. *The Twilight Saga*, as one of the fastest selling and most popular books of the twenty-first century, influenced the lives and thoughts of so many readers. The claim that Bella Swan is a feminist character gives these readers a false perception of what feminism is and normalizes the experiences she went through with a controlling, manipulative

partner, making it seem as if her experiences are the *ideal* relationship model with an over-romanticized view of Edward's less savory personality traits.

The Twilight Saga tells the story of Bella Swan, a teenager who moves in with her father in an unfamiliar town full of strange creatures that all seem to be interested in her. This move highlights the self-sacrificial behavior that plagues Bella throughout the series, as she does so to make her mother's life easier even though she does not want to live in Forks, Washington. It is not long before Bella is surrounded by vampires and werewolves; she starts a romantic relationship with Edward Cullen, the only single vampire in Forks, and later befriends Jacob Black, a werewolf with a massive crush on her. Her relationship with Edward leads to run-ins with several groups of dangerous vampires, putting her life in his hands multiple times over the course of the series. After about two year's worth of plot over the course of the four novels where Bella is repeatedly endangered by her proximity to these vampires and werewolves, Bella reluctantly agrees to marry Edward and becomes life-threateningly pregnant with his half-vampire baby. At the end of the series, Bella Swan has become Bella Cullen, a vampire who is no longer in danger from either her relationship with Edward Cullen or the variety of other vampires who had wanted her dead.

I. Control and Abuse in *The Twilight Saga*

Vampirism aside, Bella Swan's relationship with Edward Cullen has been critiqued since the release of the book as abusive and controlling by book

reviewers, casual readers, and scholars. Bella's relationship with Edward has to be on his terms from the very beginning. His avoidance of Bella for the first several weeks of knowing her eventually breaks down into a reluctant, mysterious friendship where he hardly gives her any actual answers to her questions. When she asks him why he is so suddenly fine with being her friend, he claims "It would be more... *prudent* for you to not be my friend... But I'm tired of trying to stay away from you" (*Twilight* 84). She had been interested in getting to know him and his secrets for weeks at this point, but only when Edward decides it is time for them to be friends do they actually start to interact. As he leaves her to figure out what his cryptic words mean, he continues to warn her about staying away from him, as if she has actually has a choice in the matter now that he has decided they are going to be friends (*Twilight* 84). Once Edward decides that he is going to be a part of Bella's life, he takes it to the extreme. After barely interacting with her outside of saving her life one time, he follows her out of town while she is shopping with her friends because he does not believe she can take care of herself (*Twilight* 174). His behavior is that of a stalker and easily a criminal offense, but because he actually does save her life in this instance, the consequences of his stalking are disregarded.

Edward's aggression and controlling behavior are hidden behind a thin veil of what he claims to be "self-restraint,"- where he continuously promises that he will not hurt Bella by feeding on her as a vampire because he would rather not do so. However, the desire to hurt her is always there and he admits so himself.

Because he is a vampire who wants to drink her blood and kill her, the desire to hurt her is not something he has much control over. He is actually *more* dangerous to Bella than he is to other humans because something about the way she smells is particularly enticing to him as a vampire; Edward warns her that “It’s not only your company I crave! Never forget that I am more dangerous to you than I am to anyone else” (*Twilight* 266). Edward willingly admits that she is in great danger just by being around him and he is not sure that he can control himself, but he puts her in danger anyway because he desires her company. He claims to give her the choice, telling her that she can leave if she wants to, but because she never makes that choice, there is no way to know if he really would just let her go after she knows so much about him and his family. He had already argued with his family over whether or not it would be more prudent to just kill her and be done with the whole situation (*Twilight* 272).

After he’s forced to drink Bella’s blood to save her life by sucking another vampire’s venom out of her arm, he is boastful about his ability to stop and not actually murder her: “‘It was impossible to stop,’ he whispered. ‘Impossible. But I did.’ He looked up finally with a half smile. ‘I *must* love you” (*Twilight* 460). He fully admits that if he did not actually care about her in some way, he would have killed her because the desire was too strong to stop himself. Bella carefully and repeatedly rationalizes her feelings about his near promises of violence, coming to the conclusion that because he has not *actually* hurt her or anyone around her, he must not be dangerous: “‘He said you didn’t...hunt people. He said your family

wasn't supposed to be dangerous because you only hunted animals" (*Twilight* 186). Edward even objects to the assumption that he is safe to be around, seeming "deeply skeptical" when he hears that anyone who knew what he was called him "not dangerous" because he believes that even though he makes the choice not to eat humans, that does not mean that humans are not still endangered by being around him (*Twilight* 186).

The story of a female character endangered by a seductive monster is not a new one. Margaret Kramar compares the relationship between Edward and Bella to the story of "Little Red Riding Hood" in her essay "The Wolf in the Woods." She claims that the difference between the young girl in the folktale and Bella Swan is that "the teenaged Bella knows that she should not be talking to a wolf" (Kramar 19). Bella knows that Edward is dangerous and that any sane, rational person would make the choice to stay away from danger. However, Bella seems to lack the rational ability to make the logical choice to stay away from Edward. Even when she tries to stay away, Edward forces her to go with him. After she faints in a biology class and wants to take herself home alone, Edward grabs her and drags her to his car against her will (*Twilight* 103). "I'll just drag you back,' he threatened" (*Twilight* 103) when she even begins to look like she is considering making a run for it back to her own truck.

This sort of physical dominance over her is rather common in the books, but in addition to Edward's near constant manhandling of her, Bella's relationship with Edward is emotionally toxic, as well. His presence leads her to lie to

everyone in her life, alienate most of her friends, and focus all of her time on their relationship. At one early point in their romance, she lies about being with Edward to her father and friends so that no one will suspect him if he happens to murder her that day:

“You said it might cause trouble for you... us being together publicly,” I reminded him.

“So you’re worried about the trouble it might cause *me* – if *you* don’t come *home*?” His voice was still angry, and bitingly sarcastic.

I nodded, keeping my eyes on the road. (*Twilight* 255)

She has only known him for a few months, but she already places his reputation over her own safety. Edward also refuses to give her certain pieces of information unless she has to know them, which places her in a position where she relies on him constantly for answers. She has to get her answers from other people; Jacob has to tell her that Edward and his family are vampires and Alice has to tell her how people become vampires (*Twilight* 124, 413).

Although Edward’s violence towards Bella seems more controlling than punitive at this point, his pattern of controlling behaviors matches well with real life examples noted in Alisa Velonis’s study of violence in controlling relationships, “‘He Never Did Anything You’d Typically Think of as Abuse’: Experiences With Violence in Controlling and Non-controlling Relationships in a Non-Agency Sample of Women.” In this study, Velonis sent email surveys to women using a list serve on an academic medical campus, rather than

specifically women who had reported domestic violence, about the manipulation and control they experienced within relationships that led to physical violence: “Despite not feeling frightened for their personal safety on an ongoing basis, all of the woman with controlling partners described how their partners... reframed their perceptions of reality, isolated them from others, and occasionally dominated them physically” (Velonis 1046). Edward shows a similar pattern of control over Bella. His presence in her life forced her to isolate herself from her friends and family for *his safety*, even though it would have been safer for her to have others around, especially with the constant threat that he would “fall off the wagon” and murder her (*Twilight* 269). His supernatural levels of strength allowed him to overpower her physically almost without trying and the mere fact of his existence forced her to rethink how she perceived the world around her. Their relationship matches with Velonis’s definitions of domestic abuse in controlling partners almost too well.

As noted earlier, Edward’s control does eventually manifest in his use of violence to assert physical dominance over Bella on numerous occasions. As a vampire, Edward is substantially stronger than Bella, meaning that when he chooses to exercise physical dominance over her, she has absolutely no chance to get away from him. There are a number of times where she tries to walk away from a conversation and he physically grabs her to hold her there: “I tried to turn away from him again, but he held me fast” (*Twilight* 365). As Velonis notes in her study that “One of the most common scenarios [in controlling relationships]

involved pushing or hitting a partner when he blocked an exit or grabbed their arm to prevent them from leaving” (Velonis 1045). Like those men and women, Edward’s control over her in these circumstances is entirely physical, only emphasizing and physicalizing the emotional and mental control that he normally holds over her.

Edward’s physical control over her did not stop at physically preventing her from walking away from him during tense conversations. Other cases of physical control include an attempt to kidnap her and force her to go with him to another state for her own protection:

"We have to get you away from here — far away — now." He didn't look back, his eyes on the road. The speedometer read a hundred and five miles an hour.

"Turn around! You have to take me home!" I shouted. I struggled with the stupid harness, tearing at the straps.

"Emmett," Edward said grimly.

And Emmett secured my hands in his steely grasp.

"No! Edward! No, you can't do this."

"I have to, Bella, now please be quiet."

"I won't! You have to take me back — Charlie will call the FBI! They'll be all over your family — Carlisle and Esme! They'll have to leave, to hide forever!"

"Calm down, Bella." His voice was cold. (*Twilight* 381)

Edward does not care what Bella wants in this scenario; he has to be talked down from just dragging her out of the state against her will by his vampire siblings, supposedly for her own protection. Only when Bella shares a slightly watered down version of his own plan that Alice and Emmett agree is a saner option does Edward calm down enough to ask his brother to let her go, after he had requested that Emmett physically restrain her.

When Bella becomes pregnant with a half-vampire child that threatens to kill her, Edward skips directly over persuasion to get his way and goes right for physical violence. At this point, Edward attempted to force her into an abortion she did not want. When Jacob, another male character with little respect for Bella's personal choice in the matter, asks why they did not "Hold her down and knock her out with drugs" (*Breaking Dawn* 178) because they were physically capable of doing so, Edwards admits that he had originally wanted to do exactly that. The only thing that stopped him was his sister Rosalie's intervention in the matter. Rosalie, however, was only concerned with keeping the baby for her own selfish reasons rather than actually caring about Bella's choice about her own pregnancy. She had previously expressed a complete disagreement with everything about Bella being in their lives. Since Rosalie desperately wanted a child she could not have, Bella was finally useful to her and she agreed to stop Edward's threat of violence towards Bella.

Edward's physical dominance over Bella never ends with her actually getting harmed in any physical sense, but that does not mean that he never

directly caused her harm on other occasions. Although Edward promises multiple times not to physically hurt her, their sex scene in *Breaking Dawn* leaves the human Bella covered from head to toe in giant purple bruises (*Breaking Dawn* 89). Edward's sorrow over the situation is only present for Bella to downplay it, so that she can romanticize the violence by claiming that he did not mean to do it. Rather than accepting his apology and thus accepting his definition of his sexual violence as transgressive, Bella immediately reframes his violence as an expected part of their relationship. Thus their culmination of four books worth of sexual tension is merely thinly veiled, sexualized violence given a romantic slant by Meyer, who claims that in this scene her intention was merely the "realism" of having sex with a supernaturally strong vampire: "To me, it was this really obvious situation. He is 100 times stronger than her. He's been telling her, for three books, that this is a bad idea. It would have felt really false to me if: 'Oh, whoops, there was no problem at all!'" (Cochrane). Meyer's argument that the fact that Edward is physically stronger than Bella means that she must get hurt if they have sex implies that in any relationship where one partner is physically stronger than the other, there is an expectation that the weaker partner will be physically harmed.

Edward's presence in Bella's life restricts the decisions she is capable of making because of his controlling personality. Kramar ends her essay with the acknowledgement that Bella is different from Little Red Riding Hood because she knowingly and willingly goes along with the predator in her life, she concludes

that it is difficult to tell who is the bigger threat in Bella's life: "Edward, the bloodthirsty vampire, or Bella, a prisoner of her own constrictive choices" (Kramar 26). Bella's choices are restricted by her lack of wisdom and her desire to live out a fairytale romance, according to Kramar, but there might be a more insidious reason for the restriction of her choices: the seductive, psychic abilities of her already controlling vampire boyfriend. If all of her choices are restricted Bella cannot still be said to make fully independent choices in order to be considered a feminist character because certain choices are denied from her by Edward.

II. Vampirism and Mind Control

Nearly halfway through the first book, Meyer gives the reader some insight into what sort of vampires she's writing about. Listing some common vampire myths while sitting in the car with Edward after he treats her to dinner and saves her life, Bella tries to ascertain exactly what sort of monster he is. Edward debunks the common ones: he can go out in the daytime, does not sleep in a coffin, and is not burned by the sun (*Twilight* 186). He claims that the only trait he shares with the vampires of the stories Bella knows about is the necessity of drinking blood; however, after admitting to another trait he shares with the vampires. This evasion of her questions tracks with his near constant refusal to give her answers until he feels that it is absolutely necessary for her to know them.

Psychic abilities and vampirism have been intertwined since Bram Stoker's influential and iconic horror novel *Dracula*, where Count Dracula's seductive and invasive abilities make victims of Mina Harker and Lucy Westenra, and threaten to make a victim of Jonathan Harker, as well. The first notion that Stoker's vampires have an overly seductive supernatural ability does not come from the Count himself, but from the female vampires who live with him in Castle Dracula. Jonathan Harker falls asleep in an unprotected room, where he is nearly attacked by three female vampires (Stoker 63). His reflection on the events while he writes them in his diary shows that he did not struggle against them, precisely because his emotions toward them in the moment were obviously influenced by their manipulative abilities:

There was something about them that made me uneasy, some longing and at the same time some deadly fear. I felt in my heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips. (Stoker 64)

Harker's feelings about the vampires he counters shows that from the modern beginning of vampires in literature, while they are to be feared for their physical strength and the violence that enables, their most insidious form of attack is their ability to force their victims to welcome their own victimization.

In addition to the power of emotional seduction and coercion that Dracula shares with the three female vampires, Dracula himself also has the ability to control those around him from a distance as well, although only when he has traded blood with them. He tells Mina "When my brain says 'Come!' to you, you

shall cross land or sea to do my bidding” (Stoker 288). Dracula’s control over Mina is almost unconditional, with no limits on distance or Mina’s own choice in the matter. This lack of control over her own choices would make Mina Harker a decidedly not feminist character using Meyer’s definition of freedom of choice as feminism.

a. Mind Reading

Like Dracula’s, Edward’s psychic abilities are also twofold: he can read minds, which is a major plot point, and he can manipulate those around him, which is a skill that is never fully discussed in the text but remains just in the background of most of his interactions with humans. Mind reading is a secondary supernatural character trait for Edward Cullen. It’s easily overlooked in the novels as it is both overshadowed and enveloped by the physical aspects vampire nature- drinking blood, being supernaturally strong, and supermodel beautiful. It is easy to see the mind reading as part of his vampirism, but the other vampires in the novel do not have this ability, making it a part of him specifically rather than vampires as a whole in this world. Bella learns of these abilities almost immediately upon learning that he is a vampire. However, neither of these things seems to trouble her. She merely accepts them as fact (*Twilight* 172).

One of the main reasons Bella is untroubled by the invasiveness of the mind reading is likely because Edward cannot read *her* mind, although he can read everyone else’s. Bella’s exceptionality to Edward’s mind reading is not

explained until the fourth book, when it is revealed that being emotionally closed off to those around her is merely one of her main personality traits that eventually manifests as a superpower once she actually becomes a vampire (*Breaking Dawn* 595). Edward's best guess at a reason up until that point, though, is that "your thoughts are on AM frequency and I'm only getting FM" (*Twilight* 181). Although he does not have the power to read Bella's mind, he makes do by reading the minds of those around her, much like Dracula used his psychic link with Mina to spy on the hunting party that was coming for him:

"If it be that she can, by our hypnotic trance, tell what the Count see and hear, is it not more true that he who have hypnotize her first, and who have drink of her blood and make her drink of his, should, if he will, compel her mind to disclose to him that which she know?" (Stoker 319)

This sort of psychic voyeurism is portrayed as obviously negative and predatory in *Dracula*, but harmless and even sexy in the first half of *Twilight*. In sharp contrast, the characters in *Dracula* view the mind reading as something that is absolutely to be feared and avoided.

Edward's use of mind reading to watch Bella from afar casts him in the light of a savior who watches Bella for her own good, rather than a predator who is stalking his prey. However, the intention behind the mental stalking does not make it any less of an invasion of privacy because it is done without the victim's consent. Bella is obviously upset about his listening in when Edward overhears things she would rather have kept private: " 'You weren't listening again?' I was

horror struck. All traces of my sudden good humor vanished” (*Twilight* 222).

Although she had been rather blasé about the spying in the past, when it reaches a level she is uncomfortable with, she is immediately furious about it. Even then, Edward does not seem to care that he has upset her. Rather, he’s amused at what he witnessed through the minds of her classmates: “‘You were the one who mentioned how I’d never seen you in Gym- it made me curious.’ He didn’t sound repentant, so I ignored him” (*Twilight* 222). Bella’s choice to ignore Edward rather than actually deal with the situation that upsets her is another example of her allowing him to get away with behaviors that she does not approve of.

When Edward wants to know what Bella actually thinks of him, he stoops to reading the minds of the people she’s had conversations with to see what she says. This is a more purely selfish action than the claim that he watches her for her own protection. Before he even really knows her as more than just another student at his high school, he’s already reading her friend Jessica’s mind to see what she’s said about him: “ ‘It was unquestionably a complication that I couldn’t simply read your thoughts to know what your reaction was to me. I wasn’t used to having to go to such circuitous measures, listening to your words in Jessica’s mind...’ ” (*Twilight* 271). Neither Edward nor Bella address the invasiveness of his eavesdropping. Edward does not apologize for this invasion into Bella’s life; he does not even see anything wrong with it. Bella herself is not happy about it the second time he brings it up, but she does not see it as the controlling move

that it is. She merely sees it as an irritating personality quirk that her boyfriend happens to have that she would rather not have to deal with (*Twilight* 222).

The mind reading is Edward's main psychic ability. However, with regard to his relationship with Bella, the fact that his "superpower" is mind-reading is incidental: the actual importance of the mind reading is not the ability itself, but the fact that Bella Swan is immune to it. She's special in another way that no one else in Edward's life has been thus far, besides just the uniquely appealing scent of her blood.

This exceptionality of Bella Swan is what leads to her entire relationship with Edward. If he had been able to just hear her thoughts, like everyone else's at their school, he never would have interacted with her to begin with because he would not have felt she was special. He claims that their relationship begins with him trying to treat her the same way he'd treat anyone else, but other characters have already confirmed that the Cullens don't speak to anyone else *at all*. Edward's decision to speak to Bella was based purely on his inability to read her mind. He thinks that she is a curiosity, a puzzle that he would like to solve, which leads him to break his own rules about his treatment of human beings: " 'I was eager actually, hoping to decipher some of your thoughts' "(*Twilight* 272) is exactly how he describes his first interactions with Bella.

Because Edward treats her differently than others and because he cannot read her mind, Bella believes that they are destined to be in each other's lives. She claims, "there was nothing more terrifying to me, more excruciating, than the

thought of turning away from him” (*Twilight* 248). The idea that leaving Edward would cause her an immense amount of pain is a belief that she espouses multiple times over the course of the series, mostly by using the same violent wording about the emotional pain of leaving him even though she is putting herself in physical danger by remaining around him. She believes that the emotional pain of leaving him would be worse than her physical pain and even death.

b. Psychic Manipulation

Edward is not the only character in *Twilight* with a psychic ability: his adopted brother and fellow vampire, Jasper Hale, has the ability to manipulate the emotions of those around him. According to Edward:

He [Jasper] was quite charismatic in his first life, able to influence those around him to see things his way. Now he is able to manipulate the emotions of those around him- calm down a room of angry people, for example, or excite a lethargic crowd, conversely. It’s a very subtle gift.

(*Twilight* 308)

Although Jasper is the one who is explicitly given this ability, it seems obvious that Edward has it to some extent as well. Bella even ties the two of them together in her mind, giving them both the ability to manipulate what she is feeling: “Now that I was removed from Jasper’s and Edward’s influence, I began to make up for not being terrified before” (*Twilight* 345). She attributes the same

emotional manipulation to Edward that she does to Jasper, showing that she believes that Edward has some control over her emotions against her will, making her feel things that she should not be feeling, including feeling calm when she should be afraid.

Unlike Jasper, whose powers are shown to be separate from his scarred appearance, the psychic hold that Edward has over those around him could be attributed to his inhumanly beautiful face. When Bella first sees him, she cannot look away (*Twilight* 19). After a few months of observing him from a distance and finally being able to spend time with him, Bella realizes she has “never once noticed what he was wearing- not just tonight, but ever. I just couldn’t seem to look away from his face” (*Twilight* 170). Two full pages are spent describing how gorgeous Meyer’s vampires are, in direct contrast to the physical appearances of the vampires in *Dracula*. Edward’s beauty mirrors his ability to manipulate those around him and is rather different than the hold that Dracula has over Mina, as Dracula is described as having an “aquiline” face, with arched nostrils, a domed forehead and incredibly large eyebrows (*Stoker* 42). Stoker also spends a rather large amount of time on his hands:

I could not but notice that they were rather coarse – broad, with squat fingers. Strange to say, there were hairs in the centre of the palm. The nails were long and fine, and cut to a sharp point. (*Stoker* 43)

Needless to say, Count Dracula would not have fit in well with the Cullen family of vampires who had been described as “models” more than once (*Twilight* 253,

358, 465). Dracula's own seductive abilities thus seem almost directly opposed to his physical appearance, whereas Edward's physical beauty mirrors his abilities.

While Bella is immune to Edward's mind reading, she is very obviously not immune to his manipulation of her emotions, regardless of its source, as there could be many sources for this ability. At one point in *Twilight*, Alice Cullen describes vampires as carnivorous flowers, claiming that they are meant to attract their prey in such a calculated way that it is impossible for someone to even really make a choice about not becoming a victim (*Twilight* 413). Bella herself uses the word "dazzle" to describe his effect on others, a word used over and over again to soften the connotations of Edward's manipulative behavior from manipulative to seductive. She continuously softens his transgressions, both his physical dominance over her and his emotional manipulation are treated by Bella as less of a problem than they actually might be.

She describes the manipulation to Edward in a restaurant scene where he uses his charms on the waitress almost unknowingly (*Twilight* 168). He's confused about it, asking Bella if he "dazzles her," as well. She admits that he does so often, to which he does not even react. Bella is the victim of this "dazzling" behavior on multiple occasions, usually when Edward wants something from her and pulls out his angelic behavior. The nicer he is to people, the more they want to do what he asks of them. The effect seems to be not altogether a positive one, although Bella romanticizes it quite a lot. When she's speaking about the waitress that Edward has just influenced, she claims "she's

probably hyperventilating in the kitchen right now (*Twilight* 167)” and that she is described as walking away from their table in an “unsteady” way (*Twilight* 167). Edward himself once described his hold over Bella as a state of intoxication, jokingly telling her that “friends don’t let friends drive drunk” and that she is “intoxicated by [his] very presence” (*Twilight* 284)

Although in the restaurant scene Edward appears unaware that he even has this ability, he later confirms that he is entirely aware of it and knows how to use it for his own benefit. While alone with Bella in the woods, he tells her as he’s describing his thoughts upon first meeting her, “I had to run out, to get away before *I could speak the words that would make you follow...*” (*Twilight* 270; emphasis added). The implications that he does it sometimes without his conscious knowledge means that even though he might not actually *consciously* want to manipulate Bella’s actions, he could easily be doing so anyway, which could mean their entire relationship is non-consensual. The other option in this phrasing is Edward’s lack of confidence in his ability to remain in control of his psychic powers. However, his interaction with the waitress, where he insists he wasn’t aware that he was manipulating her, makes it clear that there are at least some instances where he does this without intending to while also backing up the idea that he does not have as much control over himself as he believes. In this case, Edward’s insistence that he is a decent person then means nothing, because his mere presence in Bella’s life is controlling and manipulative without him even having to *do* anything in the way of making it so. This controlling

relationship dynamic, which is dangerous enough in a real relationship between two human beings, becomes even more dangerous when Bella's life is in danger merely by being around Edward. Even if he were not controlling, she would still be in danger due to the fact that he is a vampire, a creature who naturally wants to kill humans. The additional factor of his manipulation and control only adds to the threat on Bella's life.

Even in situations where Bella admittedly feels fearful or threatened by Edward, her negative feelings about her own safety are always soothed away by Edward without him even having to say a word. In one case, he tells her that she was doomed to die the minute she meet him, to which her reaction is:

I felt a spasm of fear at his words, and the abrupt memory of his violent black glare that first day... but the overwhelming sense of safety I felt in his presence stifled it. By the time he looked up to read my eyes, there was no trace of fear in them. (*Twilight* 175)

This is not the only time her fears of death are pushed aside nearly instantly by Edward, without him having to say a word. Something about Edward's presence negates all of her rational fears about being near him almost instantly, never really giving her much time to process how dangerous he might actually be. There are also points when Bella is around Edward where she's aware she *should* be feeling fear, but the fear never comes (*Twilight* 246). His control over her emotions stops her from actually fearing him for any extended amount of time.

Edward's ability to make those around him feel as if they desire him is directly comparable to the abilities of the female vampires in *Dracula*. However, while Stoker makes it clear that the ability is malicious and horrifying, Meyer hardly comments on its negative connotations. Edward clearly finds his effect on Bella amusing rather than troubling: "You're intoxicated by my very presence.' He was grinning that playful smirk again" (*Twilight* 284). Bella's romanticizing of the ability frames Edward as the Prince Charming that everyone in the story desires, rather than a monster who, possibly unconsciously, coerces everyone who meets him into feeling desirous towards him against their will.

III. Bella's choices

Between Edward's controlling behavior and his manipulative abilities, the idea that Bella makes any choices entirely of her own free will is unlikely. Bella's decision to move to Forks is one of her only life-changing decisions that is not manipulated by Edward in some way. Even then, this is a decision that is influenced by her parents rather than a choice she makes entirely of her own volition; her mother's new relationship makes her feel unwelcome in their home and she wants her mother to not feel held back by her presence (*Twilight* 4) After she moves to Forks, Edward is a pervasive force in her life. Meyer's insistence that Edward be so insistent in Bella's life shows that although she claims Bella makes her own choices, it is clear that Meyer believes Bella needs Edward's male voice to tell her how she should be living her life.

Even when Edward is absent, as he is in the vast majority of *New Moon*, Bella continuously imagines his voice in *New Moon* telling her what she should and should not do. When Jacob Black takes her out to ride motorcycles, she imagines she can hear Edward's voice, which is just as controlling as Edward is in person: "As I began to loosen my grip, I was shocked to be interrupted by a voice that did not belong to the boy standing next to me. 'This is reckless and childish and idiotic, Bella,' the velvet voice fumed" (*New Moon* 185). Bella is aware that this was likely merely a hallucination brought on by a rush of adrenaline, but she doesn't care and is willing to continue to risk her life to hear it again and again because Edward is physically absent and unreachable. His actual presence is not even necessary for him to continue to influence her decisions at this point in her life. However, in these cases, she is explicitly doing what she believes he would not want her to do which is a rare choice for her to make. It is generally not one Edward would even *allow* her to make, but since Edward is not actually there to stop her, she chooses to be reckless in order to continue to have him in her life.

Bella's desire to become a vampire is another strange example of her own reckless and free will overpowering Edward's conscious control over her actions. Edward expresses multiple times throughout the books that he would rather Bella remain human for a variety of reasons. However, Bella is adamant about this point; she wants to be a vampire so that she can remain with Edward forever. Although she makes this decision without his direct, explicit influence (and

actually against his advice and wishes), she would not have wanted to become a vampire if Edward's influence in her life had not been so enthralling. She desires to remain under his spell for the rest of her life, living blissfully with him and giving up a lot of other things that bring her joy. She chooses to never see her parents again, to never see her human friends again, and to not have the opportunities that her humanity gave her to interact with new people:

"So ready for this to be the end," he murmured, almost to himself, "for this to be the twilight of your life, though your life has barely started. You're ready to give up everything."

"It's not the end, it's the beginning," I disagreed under my breath. (*Twilight* 497)

Although Bella is certain she wants to become a vampire, her relative ambivalence about the consequences of becoming a vampire is shown over and over again in the *Twilight Saga*. Bella is depicted in the beginning as a person driven by rationality: she leaves her mother, whom she loves dearly, because it makes more sense for her to live with her father, who she hardly knows at this point (*Twilight 2*). Although one of Bella's defining character traits had been an emotionless rationality, she does not seem capable of applying that rationality to the negative side effects of becoming a vampire. She interprets the downsides of vampirism (the blood-drinking, the violence, the inability to control oneself at points) to be more of mild inconveniences in the lives of the Cullens rather than the demanding, restrictive, and, and they view them, demeaning realities of their

lives that they have to deal with on a daily basis (Clements 111). In *The Vampire Defanged*, Susannah Clements believes that Bella's choice to become a vampire against Edward's wishes is a prime example of Bella's free will, but it is not even remotely in character for her, as that early rational and non-emotional young woman, to give up so much for such selfish reasons without properly considering the consequences of her choices on the lives of those around her. Her self-sacrificing behavior does not correspond to this decision.

Rather than an example of free will, as Clements suggest, Bella's desire to become a vampire is just another example of Edward's control over her, taken to a level even Edward has no control over. His psychic abilities and supernatural attractiveness have gotten such a hold on her, driven her to have such strong feelings about Edward and remaining around him, that even he cannot stop her from wanting to become a vampire. At an almost unconscious level, Bella has ceded control of her own life to the idea of becoming a vampire purely to remain with Edward. Because it would be impossible to permanently remain with Edward while she is human Bella reasons that she must become a vampire before she becomes significantly older than Edward. She even has nightmares about getting older at the beginning of *New Moon*:

Only then, as I looked at the bigger picture, did I notice the huge gilt frame that enclosed my grandmother's form. Uncomprehending, I raised the hand that wasn't wrapped around Edward's waist and reached out to

touch her. She mimicked the movement exactly, mirrored it. But where our fingers should have met, there was nothing but cold glass...

With a dizzying jolt, my dream abruptly became a nightmare.

There was no Gran.

That was *me*. Me in a mirror. Me—ancient, creased, and withered.

Edward stood beside me, casting no reflection, excruciatingly lovely and forever seventeen. (*New Moon* 5)

Being with Edward is really her only goal and she sees becoming a vampire as the only real way to achieve it permanently. She's absolutely terrified that she's going to continue to grow older and die while Edward remains seventeen for the rest of their lives.

The second strongest example of Bella making a choice outside of Edward's desires for the situation happens in *Breaking Dawn*, when she goes against Edward's wishes to continue her pregnancy, but even this decision was manipulated by the child. The pregnancy is a debatable instance of Bella making her own choice because a half-vampire fetus that was living inside her influenced her decision. This particular child, Renesmee, is described after birth as being incredibly charming and manipulative: one other vampire character describes Renesmee's ability as "whatever magic this extraordinary child has bewitched us with" (*Breaking Dawn* 595). It is not a long leap to assume that the child had a similar affect on Bella during her pregnancy in order to prevent it's own death.

Bella had previously stated that she had no interest in having children; she claimed that being with Edward was more than enough and did not relate to Rosalie's dream of having a child (*Eclipse* 167). As it had been established in the series that vampires cannot have children (*Breaking Dawn* 126), she was willing to give up the ability to have a child if it meant that she could be with Edward forever; it was not even a difficult decision for her to make. However, once she is actually pregnant, she changes her tune considerably:

I'd never really understood Rosalie's pain and resentment before. I'd never imagined myself a mother, never wanted that. It had been a piece of cake to promise Edward that I didn't care about giving up children for him, because I truly didn't....

This child, Edward's child, was a whole different story.

I wanted him like I wanted air to breathe. Not a choice- a necessity.

(*Breaking Dawn* 132)

The difference here seems to be that this is not a human child; it is specifically *Edward's* half-vampire child that she does not want to give up. It is hard to imagine that Bella makes the choice to keep this child entirely on her own, when even during fetal development, this child is admittedly supernaturally influential on Bella's emotions. Even assuming that Bella did make this decision on her own, though, it means that the only major decision in the entire series that Bella Swan makes is one that directly leads to her death.

IV. Bella as a Vampire

After Bella finally gets the two things that she wanted the most, the two things that she seemed the most in control of getting (her baby and her vampire transformation), she seems to actually stop being the same Bella Swan that had existed for much of the novel. Vampirism and motherhood change her personality to a nearly unrecognizable extent. The clumsy, supposedly unremarkable, selfless individual described in the first chapter of *Twilight* has transitioned into a graceful, beautiful, and rather selfish vampire (*Breaking Dawn* 403, 409). Although the argument could be made that this is merely character development that is to be expected after four novels, Bella's change happens almost all at once: the day she becomes a vampire, her outward appearance shifts, she stops requiring constant protection from Edward, and she starts finally looking after her own self interests (such as her desire to keep her half-vampire baby, even though it threatens the lives of her entire vampire family). Bella Cullen, the vampire, and Bella Swan, the human, have very little in common.

The power imbalance that had allowed Edward to keep a strong level of control over Bella for the majority of their relationship no longer exists once she is a vampire; in fact, Bella is now more powerful than he is. She gains the explicit supernatural ability to block people from tampering with her mind in an even stronger form than when she was human, stopping him from "dazzling" her any further (*Breaking Dawn* 595). In fact, she has gained the ability to emotionally manipulate humans herself, saying that it is "entertaining to watch him flounder"

upon her first interaction with human being she does not know (*Breaking Dawn* 641). She does not seem to have any ethical problems with using this psychic seduction on human beings even though she herself was a victim of the same thing from her boyfriend for years. The fact that she now has this ability and uses it effectively on strangers almost as soon as she is turned into a vampire shows that it is an innate vampire character trait in the series that cannot actually be turned off, as she does not seem to have the intention of “dazzling” this one human being (*Breaking Dawn* 641). Bella is also physically stronger than Edward is for the first time in their relationship, so strong that she unintentionally harms some of her own friends during casual encounters (*Breaking Dawn* 599). These new supernatural abilities allow her to finally step outside of Edward’s control and make decisions on her own without having to go through him to get things done. By stepping outside of Edward’s control and by seemingly being less affected by his psychic manipulation, Bella begins to develop into a character that actually fits Meyer’s description of feminism: a woman who can make her own choices.

Bella’s new autonomy is first clearly seen in her rather risky trip to visit a strange man in order to get fake identification papers to protect her daughter without telling Edward (*Breaking Dawn* 642). For the first time, Bella begins to have storylines that actually have very little to do with Edward. This is only one example of the many secrets that she starts to keep from Edward, usually because she believes he will not agree with her decisions. She begins keeping secrets from her partner for the first time in their relationship, which is something

that Edward had been doing from the very beginning. She remarks upon this ability almost as soon as she wakes up from her transformation, immediately needing to lie to Edward about something she feels would cause him pain:

Chagrin washed through me, and I waited for the heat to burn in my cheeks and give me away. And then I remembered that I would never blush again. Maybe that would protect Edward from the truth. (*Breaking Dawn* 397)

The ability to keep secrets had not been something she had before she became a vampire, because Edward's over-protective nature had not allowed it. Now that she is more invincible than even he is, he is less careful to watch her every move. This controlling aspect of their relationship almost entirely clears up once she is no longer human, suggesting that at least part of the control was genuinely because Edward felt Bella could not be trusted to keep herself safe as a human. She'd also described his effect on her as being "mesmerized into telling the truth" (*Twilight* 170) and now that she is no longer so strongly affected by his seductive abilities, she does not feel so compelled to always tell him the truth, whether she wants to or not.

So, while Edward exhibits many of the controlling and manipulative traits that real human abusive partners do, if this were just a case of traditional domestic control and violence, it would continue to exist in their relationship after Bella becomes a vampire. However, because Bella gains a new level of independence and agency once she becomes a vampire, it is clear that there is

something else going on here. The manipulation and control stem almost entirely from the supernatural element of their story: Edward's vampirism gives him both a reason and a way to control and manipulate Bella Swan into doing what he believes is the best thing for her, regardless of her own desires. The implication that Bella could only become a feminist character in Meyer's view once she became a vampire suggests that human women require a stronger male in their life to make decisions for them until they are strong enough to make decisions on their own, after years of being protected from their own decisions.

Stephenie Meyer's argument that Bella Swan is a feminist character because she makes her own choices does not become applicable to Bella until she gets on equal footing with Edward in terms of supernatural abilities in the fourth and final book of the series. Up until that point, Bella's choices are manipulated from the day she meets Edward, whether directly by him forcing his own decisions onto her or by his supernatural abilities persuading her to change her mind. She only becomes free from his control once she becomes a vampire herself, but she is no longer the same person she was before. Her character and values have changed along with her outward appearance. With this transition, Bella's lack of control in her own life previous to this becomes incredibly clear. Using Meyer's definition of feminism, Bella Cullen, the vampire, could be considered a feminist character. She is allowed to do as she pleases, with minimal intervention from her husband, which she had not been allowed to do as

Bella Swan, the human. One thing Meyer says consistently says is that people disagree with the particular choices that Bella makes:

One of the weird things about modern feminism is that some feminists seem to be putting their own limits on women's choices. That feels backward to me. It's as if you can't choose a family on your own terms and still be considered a strong woman. How is that empowering? Are there rules about if, when, and how we love or marry and if, when, and how we have kids? (Meyer)

But the problem isn't necessarily that Bella is making the *wrong* choices with her life; the problem is whether or not she's making these choices of her own free will *at all*, which is unlikely given her circumstances.

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