VAMPIRES IN THE WOODS AND ON THE COUCH:
AN EXAMINATION OF STEPHENIE MEYER’S TWILIGHT SAGA

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ABSTRACT

VAMPIRES IN THE WOODS AND ON THE COUCH: AN EXAMINATION OF STEPHENIE MEYER’S TWILIGHT SAGA

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Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight Saga* is arguably one of the most profitable series in literary history. With four books in a best-selling series, film adaptations of her books, and leagues of valiant readers, Meyer has redefined young adult literature and the modern perceptions of vampire mythology. Though the novels are overwhelming popular in both written and visual form, there is little scholastic authorship about the *Twilight Saga* and the characters that are influencing young readers.

Because Meyer’s writing has had such a dramatic effect on popular culture and teen readership, a close examination of her novels is imperative. Through the use of psychoanalytic and feminist theory, I will explore the deficiencies of Meyer’s characters and their relationships. I ultimately conclude that Bella Swan, the female protagonist of the series, becomes an autonomous agent when she eventually changes from human to vampire in the fourth and final novel, *Breaking Dawn*. However, Bella’s transformation is not enough to redeem her deeply flawed decisions and personality as portrayed in the novels and circumstances previous to her metamorphosis.
DEDICATION

First and foremost, to my incredible mentor, Dr. Monica Brown, who believed in me all along and gave me the tools to articulate the passion in my heart.

To my family, who supported and loved me from the minute I came into this world. Without them, I would have never found the courage and strength to chase my dreams.

Lastly, to the friends who are my family. Thank you for being the family I needed when I was so far away from home.
Part I: A Psychoanalytic Perspective of Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight Saga*

*Introduction*

When Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* was published in 1897, a new type of literary fantastic genre was born. Vampires and their myths found life in the minds of readers and the words of writers. With each new author, vampires take on a different life force and mythology. Among the most popular vampires in popular culture are those of Anne Rice’s imagination. Rice’s *Vampire Chronicles* appealed to millions of people, thus giving literary scholars and cultural theorists a new lens through which concepts such as homoerotic desire, family relations, and Oedipal structures could be analyzed. In 2005, the vampire world was again restructured when the novel *Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer was released. As of 2009, the series, which contains four books, had sold an estimated 42 million copies worldwide (Thandian par. 3). Since the release of *New Moon* as a motion picture in theatres, the film has become the 34th highest grossing film in the United States of all time and grossed over $705 million worldwide (“All-Time” and “4 Million”). With a fan following and market value that could rival J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series, the cultural impact of Meyer’s novels is far from being over or fully realized. Despite the social relevancy and overwhelming popularity of the *Twilight Saga* both in novel and film form, there is startling little academic writing on the subject of the Cullen clan and Bella Swan.

The cultural impact of Stephenie Meyer’s is arguably the most profitable and widely-known of all recent vampire story lines: for this reason alone, the *Twilight Saga* needs to be analyzed and examined. Though there have been numerous editorials written about *Twilight, New Moon, Eclipse,* and *Breaking Dawn,* there has not been enough work done to examine the problematic relationships and experiences presented in the novels. In Meyers’ *Twilight Saga,* a new breed of vampires is found. The Cullen clan are vegetarian vampires – those who do not
drink the blood of humans. They live and interact with humans, fighting off their need for satiation for the privilege of leading “normal” lives in public while saving their souls for damnation by abstaining from human blood. And while the vampires are harmless enough – while simultaneously adding a new perspective on vampire ideologies – it is the relationships formed and maintained throughout the course of the novels that are troublesome and complex. No characters or relationships are more disturbing than the main female protagonist, the seventeen-year-old Bella, and her love affair with Edward, a vampire 92 years her senior. Beyond all the shimmer, sparkle, and allure of the vampires, werewolves, and titillating experiences, there are a number of issues that can be discussed vis-a-vis Meyer herself, religion, and gender roles. In this paper, I will work to illustrate that Bella fails as a feminist while she is human, though she does succeed as a feminist when she becomes a vampire. It is only at the end of the final volume in the series, Breaking Dawn, that Bella is redeemed, thus offering a dangerous model of victimhood to young girls. In Breaking Dawn, Bella becomes a vampire, which allows her to become an empowered subject, a feminist hero. This transformation, however, does not balance out the previous 2,000 pages of unhealthy and dangerous behavior in the series. If anything, this model is even more unhealthy because it suggests that Bella’s careless behavior does lead to empowerment, true love, and happy endings: this is an unhealthy model for young readers due to the unrealistic situations in which her actions take place. Through the lens of psychoanalytic theory, I will show that Bella is mentally unstable and that upon further investigation, her relationship with Edward is an unbalanced power dynamic far from the ideal norms of a healthy bond. For the first three and a half books, where Edward exerts all agency and control, Bella is weak, vulnerable, in constant danger, and even suicidal. In Chapter II, I will examine Bella under the lens of feminism to illustrate that while she does
possess some ideal traits of a feminist, she fails to self-actualize as a feminist within her human life. Lastly, I will illustrate that Meyer’s characterization of Bella, and her romance with Edward, ultimately gives her young readers a skewed vision of healthy love. This is particularly disturbing given the predominant teen and tween leadership.

**Background and Peripheral Critical Theory Concerning Vampires**

There are extensive works and analyses of vampire tales available for the study of vampires. Because the scholarship of the *Twilight Saga* is currently limited, peripheral studies are important to understand and provide context for this paper. Blood-sucking legends and their cultural influence are far greater than many are aware. Vampires have provided a unique metaphor and stage for cultural consumption and critical theory for decades. As Candace Benefiel writes in her article “Blood Relations: The Gothic Perversion of the Nuclear Family in Anne Rice’s Interview with the Vampire,” “The figure of the vampire, so varying and adaptable in the hands of many authors, became a liminal, transgressive figure, a stage upon whom the fears and secret desires of society could be acted”(Benefiel 262). Through novels such as Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, readers now have lens for understanding Victorian sexuality and gender roles. Because of Anne Rice’s stories of the vampires Lestat, Louis, and Claudia in *The Vampire Chronicles*, critics have a window in nuclear family structures, Oedipal complexes, and feminism. Doane and Hodges write in “Undoing Feminism: From the Preoedipal to Postfeminism in Anne Rice’s *Vampire Chronicles*” that Rice has capitalized on recent trends in feminism - its utopian hopes, its hope for liberation in mother goddesses and in returns to the preoedipal - she now shows herself to be seemingly more progressive than these feminisms. She sees beyond such ‘reductive’
exaltations of women’s difference to a new age in which androgynous beings coexist harmoniously. In this postfeminist world, imbalances of power are effaced. (Doane 434)

In this often and widely quoted article, Doane and Hodges pay homage to Rice’s ability to craft characters and experiences that illustrate the complexities of being human, while, at the same time, liberating men and women from traditional gender roles. Here, Meyer’s vampires work in direct opposition to Rice’s: where vampires once worked as a metaphor to illustrate the destructive nature of gender roles, Meyer retreats back into pre-feminist movement era of men controlling passive women. In more modern texts, vampire fiction has taken a new turn: crowds have grown tired of blood hungry beasts so in the past ten years, numerous authors have risen to the challenge. Karen Backstein writes, “In part, the modern vampire story is one about self-control, about man struggling to master his worst impulses—perhaps even his essential nature—through whatever means necessary, be it with synthetic substances (True Blood) or by finding other sources of food (Twilight)”(par. 3). With the modern vampires taking on new challenges, understanding the greatest social influence of blood-sucking legend beyond Dracula becomes an integral aspect to understanding the thirst.

Anne Rice’s novels Interview with a Vampire, The Vampire Lestat, and The Queen of the Damned are probably the most written about vampires in contemporary culture not only for their literary value, but also for their cultural significance and their liberation of gender roles. In his dissertation Gothic Feminism in Anne Rice’s The Vampire Chronicles, Victor Lana encapsulates most of the important elements, articles, and secondary criticisms about Rice. Lana explains, “Rice’s ‘gothic feminism’ provides us with characters who are not confined by gender, yet whose fate is determined by a former sexual self”(7). Because Rice’s vampires move beyond gender itself, they work to illustrate how an individual can become empowered, such as Claudia
does when she tries to kill her maker, or how power can oppress a man, just Lestat does with Louis for so many years. He further explains because of Louis and Claudia’s relationship, and Claudia’s defiance of her maker Lestat, that “What Rice really tells us is that ‘sexual difference is a dead issue.’ The only way we can survive, male and female, is to overcome our differences and transcend the gender war. Her vampires do just that…” (114). Rice’s characters offer a sexually charged and enticing environment for readers to challenge their own pre-conceived notions of sexuality and familial dynamics. Lana continues on to connect these concepts with why vampire tales entice readers to begin with: “One of the results of reading Rice’s novels is that the reader feels an intense sympathy for the vampires, maybe even a latent desire to be somewhat like them. Their existence exerts a powerful attraction because it consists of things many people secretly desire: eternal youth, power, domination over vast resources of wealth” (Lana 29). If readers can be so wholly enticed to participate in a narrative that would challenge their personal beliefs about gender roles, they can equally be enticed into an environment where their wildest desires could come true and where oppressive gender roles are disguised by fantasy. While Rice primed popular culture for films based on her works, the Sookie Stackhouse series, HBO’s “True Blood” series, and a number of other vampiric works, she also paved a way, and a thirst, for the vampires in Stephenie Meyer’s Twilight Saga.

Beyond a stage for study, these critical authors also take into account society’s fascination with the vampire genre. Readers, for centuries, have been transfixed by the idea of immortality coupled with curses. Roxana Stuart writes, “The vampire perfectly embodies the revulsion and attraction to the erotic that lies at the heart of human experience, the simultaneous longing for – and terror of – being devoured. A vampire is a symbol that confronts us with much that is hidden from the conscious mind – attitudes towards sex and death that are less than
rational” (223). Because vampire tales provide a rich context for analysis, the vampires in the stories entice readers because of their sexual nature. Robert Tracy explains in his article “Loving You All Ways: Vamps, Vampires, Necrophiles and Necrofilles in Nineteenth-Century Fiction” that “Though they do physically harm their victims, and often bring about their death, the vampires also threaten their victims’ souls….This double threat, at once physical and spiritual, is in practice presented as essentially sexual” (Tracy 33-34). For audience members, vampires offer a window into a new and creative world where a fictional setting may well be much more enticing than reality. This alluring escape from is provided by Meyer in the Twilight Saga, but is presented as an exemplary model for love and human relationships.

*Cultural Impact and Critical Reception*

Stephenie Meyer’s first novel, *Twilight*, was written in 2003 in a little under three months and released in 2005. Meyer has said that her inspiration for the story came from a dream “featuring seemingly real characters that she could not get out of her head” (“Meyer” par. 1). Within weeks of its release the book had received many accolades and ranked at #5 on *The New York Times* bestseller list. *Twilight* was also named an “ALA Top Ten Books for Young Adults,” was considered an Amazon.com “Best Book of the Decade...So Far”, and became a Publishers Weekly Best Book of the Year (“Meyer” par. 4). Meyer received her Bachelor’s degree in English from Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah and had not written in quite some time previous to penning *Twilight*. Though she was shy about her abilities to write, (only her sister knew she was writing the novel), she has proven her ability to be a marketable author through her numerous awards, titles, and astounding sales (“Meyer” par. 1-4).
An important element of criticism surrounding Stephenie Meyer is the fact that she is Mormon. Though her religious references will not have significant impact throughout the course of this paper, discussing her affiliation with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, LDS or Mormon, is an important aspect of her authorship. Meyer’s church membership heavily influences her characters’ actions, abstaining from drugs and refusing to engage in pre-marital sex, and how the hierarchy of the Cullen clan operates. Edwin Arnaudin, among many other authors, has studied and questioned just how Mormonism plays a role as author of the Twilight Series. In his thesis Mormon Vampires: The Twilight Saga and Religious Literacy, Arnaudin writes, “Fiction and religion have long shared a common bond. Authors have historically been influenced by their religious beliefs to the point that their writing clearly reflects a respective faith. Though certainly not limited to one particular religion, the effects of Christianity on fiction has arguably received the most critical attention with the prominent modern example of a Christian novelist being C.S. Lewis and his Chronicles of Narnia”(3). Because an author’s religious and life choices bear much weight in his or her subconscious, Arnaudin concludes, “Though it is impossible to pinpoint a specific Twilight Saga individual or group as Mormon, it is clear that core LDS values and antitheses are spread throughout the characters… every bit of her writing will adhere to the specific beliefs of her Mormon faith”(Arnaudin 93). The completeness of Arnaudin’s thesis illustrates how the complexities of the vampires, relationships, and events of the novels are intrinsically linked to the faith: “[I]t is clear that core LDS values and antitheses are spread throughout the characters…. [and] one aspect is certain: every bit of her writing will adhere to the specific beliefs of her Mormon faith.”(93). There is no doubt throughout the course of Arnaudin’s thesis that he is well read in the way of Mormonism. He quotes numerous LDS tenets correctly and offers a conversation about the religion,
discussing both the faithful parishioners’ standpoints and the views of those who see the religion as a cult. Arnaudin recognizes abstinence, information about secret or sacred details slowly revealed over time, and traditional gender roles as staples of the LDS faith and draws on his research of the faith to make connections to characters and experiences in Twilight. Arnaudin notes, “[E]ven though the main content and characters of the Twilight Saga may not seem fitting for a Mormon to write, there remains a strong overarching of LDS beliefs”(13). Meyer’s religious preferences play a large role in her writing and while they are of keen interest to many critical authors, they will only play a marginal role in this analysis. This is because there are more problematic gender roles that can be identified on a societal scale rather than focusing on a single sect of Christianity.

Though there is little written about the Twilight Saga in terms of the large body of critical work on vampirism, there are several sources and elements of critical receptions that should be noted to understand the large impact of the Cullen clan and Bella. Beginning with academic and critical reception, there are many authors who are contributing to the developing analyses of vampiric literature. The anthology Twilight and Philosophy: Vampires, Vegetarians, and The Pursuit of Immortality published in 2009 offers a concise criticism of each of the books, including feminist, religious, historical, and colonialism. The book even contains relevant information concerning the effects of such literature on young readers. Books such as Touched By a Vampire and The Twilight Gospel, both published in 2009, offer supplemental material to understanding the Twilight Saga in terms of Christian themes rather than offering a critique of the work. Though there are numerous Twilight-driven anthologies currently being prepared, there is little more that is already published and available for the critical reader.

By entering the world of blogging and fansites, one can understand just why the Twilight
*Saga* has garnered as much popularity and gross sales as previously listed. On a fan web site called “All Things Twilight,” readers can post their thoughts about the *Twilight* saga on discussion boards. One message board, titled “Edward Cullen vs. Normal Guy” lists the differences between what average men might do or say and compares those to actions the fictional character Edward Cullen might take:

If you died, a normal guy would find another. If you died, Edward would kill himself cause life without you isn't worth living. / While far apart in different places, a normal guy would say: ‘I miss you.’ While far apart in different places, Edward Cullen would say: ‘It's like you've taken half myself with you.’ / A normal guy buys you flowers and chocolates. Edward Cullen buys you a car.

This post has elicited such responses as: “I desperately need an Edward Cullen!”; “Why can't a normal guy be like Edward for once!?”; “I know…if all guys were like edward cullen i would so love my life lol i would love school for once,”; and “tear,tear i wish there was a guy like edward he would be the most wonderful, outgoing, beautiful person any one will ever ever ever know…i dont think there is another person in this world quiet like edward cullen!!!!!!!!!!![sic]”(Skywalker).

On a site called “Obsessive Edward Cullen Disorder,” fans are introduced to the world of *Twilight* by young girls proclaiming their undying love for their vampire hero. The description of the site appears states that the site is better than other sites because the authors were “were under the influence of Edward Cullen when we started it.” The authors correct themselves by saying they are “always under the influence of Edward.” The authors then go further and explain, “**NOTHING** can sum up our love for EWARD CULLEN (my husband and current lover)”[sic].

If this were not enough information about the fan site, the authors help their viewers to
understand what Obsessive Edward Cullen Disorder is:

Its an epidemic that is sweeping the nation. The numbers of those diagnosed are staggering and have substantially increased in the last year… It really is an unhealthy habit, though not much of a habit, more of a way of life. A need. A neccessity. He's right up there with water, food, shelter. Oxygen, schmooxygen, all we really need is Edward. This man (aka the most gorgeous and amazing vampire you will ever meet), pretty much gives meaning to life. If he were to actually live out of the book TWILIGHT (aka our bible), we would stalk him, and he would alredy have a restraining order against us. Oh well! That wouldn't stop our love![sic] (par. 7)

While these two cites were randomly chosen from the hundreds of Twilight sites and discussion forums available, they accurately depict what is found on most of the fan sites, which are available through Stephenie Meyer’s own website, which she personally maintains. Though the above quotations are obviously are posted by more avid fans of the series, they constitute the problematic thinking of those reading the novels, and this is where the interest for my thesis begins to emerge: young readers, and those who lack a critical eye, are idealizing an unhealthy, fictional love and failing to see that such comparisons can lead to detrimental outcomes for relationships in reality, thus the need for a feminist criticism of the novels. The type of fever Edward elicits from these young women is based on a simulacrum – there is no way any man in reality could ever live up to the expectations of these girls because there is no man like Edward: he is based on fiction and is a vampire.

Parent-based and adult-fan reception is available to provide a vast context of how critical thinking skills differ and allow for better analysis. One Twilight thread, which was created to allow a space for parents of Twilight readers to discuss the effects of the novel, solicited the
following responses, which ranged in ideas from gender roles to the influence of Meyer’s chosen faith, Mormonism, to how the authors of the posts were concerned the effect that the books were having on young readers – and after the above messages, who could blame them? An anonymous author wrote:

Girls are getting different messages completely from many places. Maybe these books are popular because girls can rest in safety of pages and be passive and not get hurt at all. Someone else can, fictionally, tell them what to do, so they don't have to make, ‘sigh, one more decision’ so they can step out of their hurricane world of being in control of their lives. They know they have to leave it, but just for a while--they can dither about without real consequence. (Berglund par. 3)

Audry Taylor writes to supplement this point when she says, “Though it is often the silent wish of the writer to influence the reader in a very specific way, the influence that is actually passed on depends entirely on the pre-existing personality and life experiences of each reader…Sometimes a writer's influence is not what they wish it to be, but the influence is there nonetheless” (Berglund par. 10). Here is the awareness that the young Internet authors lack: older writers recognize the problematic roles within the novel. But for all of the skepticism about the novels that the previous authors offered, one parent disagrees, “They are reading for the emotion. Yes, we see the dangers. But I doubt SM is going to lead Bella into these dangers in these books. I think most of our girls aren't going to jump into dangerous relationships because of TWILIGHT,” the dangers of reading such literature are apparent to more mature audiences (Berglund par. 1). This, however, begs the question: what of the young readers who do not have positive critical thinking role models in their lives? Meyers does lead Bella into danger and the love she is so desperate to have costs Bella her human life – who will be there to tell the myriads
of young girls who romanticize the vampire love into reality that such a romance cannot and should not exist? Clearly, there are adult readers aware of the complications of Edward and Bella’s relationship and not all young readers think that fiction trumps reality; however, with the vast cultural impact of *Twilight*, more critical analyses of Meyer’s works need to be conducted.

While elements many elements of the *Twilight Saga* should and need to be explored, I would like to turn to an article written by Karen Backstein called “(Un)Safe Sex: Romancing the Vampire,” which was written in 2009. Backstein provides an interesting summary and commentary, albeit far from academic or theoretically grounded, of the *Twilight Saga* and other popular vampire TV series. She makes apt observations about vampire culture, but fails to identity larger repercussions of the novels or support any of her conclusions with theoretical backing: she recognizes the allure of Edward and the Cullens and further identifies Edward as the “perfect lover.” However, Backstein does not relate Edward’s “perfection” with his unbalanced relationship with Bella and how young readers could misconstrue such a relationship. Because Backstein makes several critical observations about *Twilight* and the vampire genre, I will use her observations as an example of how a cursory reading of works such as Meyers’ can be problematic and superficial. She points out the same arguments I will, such as Edward’s fierce protectiveness of Bella, but does not examine the positive or negative implications of such a connection. Backstein’s comments echo the more popular consensus of Meyer’s novels and I will therefore use some of her observations as a beginning point for my argument.
Psychoanalytic theory paved a way for literary critics to understand characters actions and in certain cases, the intent of authors. The method by which ulterior motives and subconscious actions were studied offered literary theorists a new scope of analysis and added new depth to works that were previously misunderstood or not entirely deciphered. By deeply reading into the subtext of sexual desire, Bella’s internal monologue, and the relationship dynamics of Bella and Edward, I argue that Bella, along with other characters within *Twilight*, are ultimately doomed to fail as autonomous and independent individuals. A feminist psychoanalytic reading reveals that Bella is an unstable, inadequate protagonist. By illustrating in mental instability and inability to act as a free agent, I will then demonstrate how Bella fails to perpetuate ideal actions for an autonomous person through a feminist reading of the novels.

One of the most important elements contributing to Bella’s lack of autonomy is her inability to create a life outside of Edward. She becomes so engrossed in her relationship with the vampire, that she begins to turn all of her actions over to him. In her article “In the Twilight Zone: Everlasting Romance and the Borderline Personality,” Erin Kelley points out the negative effects of such a relationship and offers a clinical diagnosis of Bella’s actions:

The most likely possibility for the success of this dangerous affair depends on both characters’ love obsessions with one another and their addictive personalities, although Bella’s obsessive personality crosses over to that of Borderline Personality Disorder. Particularly displayed in the first two novels of the series… Bella becomes so consumed by her love for Edward that she loses what little sense of self she possessed prior to meeting him, and ultimately, by the end of the series, she loses her own human life. (70)
Kelley goes on to point out that she minimizes interactions with family and friends and desists in pursuing her own goals. She remains in a relationship that could end her life due to her “mental instability.” What is even more disturbing about this relationship is that, often, readers do not recognize the relationship as addictive; they see the relationship as ideal and Edward as perfect. Backstein illustrates this unhealthy view when she writes:

Why have female audiences of all ages so embraced the series, both on the page and on screen? .... Edward is the perfect dark, brooding, romantic hero; tormented by his past and so protective of the woman he loves that he willingly pushes her away for her own good. Only, he happens to have extra vampire powers to help him safeguard the woman better---and to make him even more compelling to viewers. (par. 9)

Bella idealizes Edward to the point of perfection, just as some young readers and Backstein, and she places herself in situations that she knows are harmful and dangerous because she cannot see past the allure of the vampire. Even more problematic, Bella actively represses emotions and thoughts, she even states that she closed her eyes and tried very hard not to think after learning that Edward might be a vampire (Twilight 128). She does this because she is afraid that Edward being a supernatural being, vampire, might conflict with her feelings for him, not because she is fearful for her own life or well-being. Bella’s obsession is so engrossing that she will ignore her needs to support Edward. “Common sense told me to be terrified. Instead, I was relieved to finally understand. And I was filled with compassion for his suffering, even now, as he confessed his craving to take my life” (Twilight 272). However guilty Bella is of being consumed by her love for Edward, Edward himself displays flawed judgment to maintain their unhealthy love as well.
Edward himself illustrates many flaws in reasoning, but he does not lose himself or his autonomy as Bella does. Edward is able to maintain familial relationships and control over himself while Bella is not. Kelley writes, “…Edward may love and care for Bella very much, [but] he still maintains his circle of tight-knit family and friends. Edward, unlike Bella, does not give up a part of his life… Her life becomes anything, as long as Edward is involved in it” (Kelley 76). However he may love Bella and maintain control over his own life, Edward also illustrates warped control over Bella. Edward confesses to Bella that he had been watching her sleep by sleeping into her room every night for three months. He says, “I wrestled all night, while watching you sleep, with the chasm between what I knew was right, moral, ethical, and what I wanted…. as you were sleeping, you said my name. You spoke so clearly…. The feeling that course through me then was unnerving, staggering. And I knew I couldn’t ignore you any longer” (Twilight 303). Only three pages before did he tell Bella that he had recently decided not to kill her, that the scent of her blood was no longer reason to bleed her dry. For months previous to this episode, what Edward “wanted” to do was kill Bella, not just to be in love with her. Though not apparent to Bella, Edward was in complete control of her and their relationship as he actively decided, though selfish, that he would control the process and outcome of their “courtship” while he watched her sleep. Even as Edward tells Bella about what could have been a life-ending negative decision, she is not angry and he maintains control over her, emotionally and physically, as she loses more of her independence. She says, “I tried to pull back, to look in his face, but his hand locked my wrists in an unbreakable hold” (Twilight 304). Furthermore, she mirrors Edward’s flawed thinking that their love is pure when she says that she is not upset, that she only wants to comfort Edward.
In many instances in *Twilight*, Bella actively turns over agency and refuses to see that the dangers she is actually involved in. Bella escapes into the forest to ponder her realization that Edward is a vampire, but instead of providing rational solutions to the problem, she only works within the confines of Edward’s influence, never once exploring a solution that does not have him in the outcome, illustrating her quickly developing obsession with him. Bella considers how she will confront and maintain a relationship rather than acknowledging that she has the ability and choice to stay away from him. “And I knew…I had my answer. I didn’t know if there ever was a choice, really. I was already in too deep”(*Twilight* 139). She believes she is “in too deep” after two conversations and agreeing to go on one date with Edward, though they have yet to go on said date. Bella comes to the conclusion that she has no agency and that the path was laid before her, only after she actively repressed her ability to make rational decisions. Kelly demonstrates how Bella’s lack of thinking is affected by her love Edward when she writes, “One factor that could disrupt Bella’s use of logic – or the ability to remove herself from the dangerous relationship – is her twisted view of love for Edward. For BPDs [Borderline Personality Disorder], this feeling, called ‘dysfunctional regulation of emotion,’ is so strong and sometimes so overbearing that often all rational thought is completely discredited”(Kelly 70). Illustrating further flawed thinking, Bella believes that she does have agency and rational thinking abilities: “Making decisions was the painful part for me, the part I agonized over. But once the decision was made, I simply followed through – usually with relief that the choice was made”(*Twilight* 140). It would be true that Bella had made a rational decision if she would have considered a life without Edward, but because Meyer maintains that Bella is a critical decision maker based on a logical fallacy illustrates how flawed the logic of her conclusions actually are.
Long-lasting reader attachment is created in *Twilight* to characters within the novel because Meyers successful created a protagonist who readers can undoubtedly identify with. Joanna Web Johnson says that Chick lit jr. should give readers “the chance to achieve distance” from the novel in order to gain clearer pictures of themselves (148). Readers should be able to detach themselves from the work they are reading in order to gain perspective, but *Twilight* does not allow for introspection because readers are readily able to identify with the weakest parts of Bella. Backstein writes about the importance of healthy female characters as she explains the ideal characters of a strong, female protagonist: “[T]he complex qualities of the hero--his mix of sex and sensibility--is not the only reason women seem to have such an insatiable appetite for vampires today; another attraction may be the point of view these texts adopt. They are female-centered narratives that strive for audience identification with the heroine--with her strength, her extraordinary capabilities, her status as an object of desire, or a combination of all these traits’”(Backstein par. 4). Throughout the course of the novel, Bella describes herself as clumsy, uninteresting, and unattractive. Because of her many faults, Bella can relate with many types of readers. Normally, universal inclusion would be an attractive quality for a protagonist, but Bella is sucked into an unhealthy relationship that is illustrated as healthy and normal and therefore gives young female readers unrealistic expectations.

Adding to the attachment issues is the emotionally unstable stage Bella is given. For the outsider looking in, Bella’s emotional instability is a source of connection, a tie that will further identification. Inside the novel, Meyers narrates a character who is lost and looking for salvation from her dreary life. At the beginning of *Twilight*, readers are told, “Charlie wasn’t comfortable with expressing his emotions out loud. I inherited that from him”(7). This immediately primes readers to understand that emotions will be repressed and unarticulated, but since readers have a
first person narrative to relate with, they can easily find connections in her life. Readers will be able to relate with at least one or many aspects of Bella’s life.

Bella further illustrates her emotional uncertainty and unawareness later in the novel by describing the fear she feels because of Edward, or rather, knows she should feel. Bella even goes so far as to actively suppress her survival instincts to create a bond between herself and Edward. “I should be afraid – I knew I should be, but I couldn’t feel the right kind of fear”(141). Pages later, she explains, “My mind still swirled dizzily, full of images I couldn’t understand, and some I fought to repress”(195). Within this span of pages, Bella actively represses her natural inclination for self-preservation in favor of continuing a romance with a vampire, one who has told her repeatedly that he wants to drain her blood. Bella continues along this course, which later develops into her need to save Edward from his tortured state. Bella efficiently migrates from unstable to destructive as she says, “I looked down, afraid of the persuasive power of his eyes. I refused to be convinced to fear him, no matter how real the danger might be”(243). She does this because she wants to save Edward from his damned existence. Because Meyers successfully hooks readers at the beginning of the novel and Bella is an emotionally weak character, this chain of events can take place. Bella can commit to an unhealthy love that might kill her and readers are lead to believe that the need to love and save a murderer – one who kills to satiate needs – is not only healthy, but ideal.

This type of love is destructive for characters within novels and for readers who glorify fictional intimacy. James M. Dietch, Ph.D., says “neurotic individuals or non-self-actualizers seek only to compensate for basic, unfulfilled needs”(628). Bella is seeking to fill unmet emotional needs in her search for her partner and since she is the vessel for Twilight, readers are vicariously taken along. Dietch summarizes the arguments of famed psychologist Abraham
Maslow as he says, “Maslow has distinguished two types of love: (a) D-love (deficiency love; neurotic love) which is motivated by a lack of need gratification and tends to be selfish and possessive, and (b) B-love (love for the being of he other person) which tends to be unselfish, ecstatic, spontaneous, and contain a minimum of anxiety-hostility and emotional defensiveness”(628). This definition is important because Edward and Bella both exhibit many traits of D-love throughout the course of the novel. Bella states numerous times that she obsesses over Edward and Edward becomes enraged anytime another man pays attention to Bella in the least. Edward also exhibits signs of anxiety-hostility and emotional defensiveness, as he vacillates between laughter and anger, flirtation and repulsion.

Edward asserts even more control and dominance over Bella by othering her and treating her like a child. He sounds like he’s speaking to a child as he says, “Don’t you see Bella? It’s one thing for me to make myself miserable, but a wholly other thing for you to be so involved”(190). She is part of the relationship and should be involved as a partner, but he wants to maintain the power and perpetuate the relationship on his terms. Bella acknowledges that she is othered when she feels like “science experiment” after an exchange (245). He then reverts to calling Bella a child by calling her “an insignificant little girl” when he is explaining that he came back to school despite her presence (271). Later, Edward negates Bella’s sexual and sensual feelings as he says, “‘I wish,’ he whispered, ‘I wish you could feel the… complexity… the confusion… I feel. That you could understand’”(277). By continuing to keep Bella at bay and reminding Bella that the feelings she has are not as grand as his, he asserts dominance over her and makes her remain a passive female. All the while, Meyers is using the relationship to illustrate an “ideal” kind of love to readers.

In the illustration of Edward’s dominance, the sub-text of unhealthy love is made
Peripheral. However, the destructive dynamic is still apparent. Dr. Jill C. Manning has written on the subject of healthy romantic love and maintains that it encompasses “investment in the well-being of the beloved, respect, admiration, sexual desire, intimacy, commitment, exclusivity, and understanding”(140). Romantic love is also based on healthy communication about sexual needs. Manning further states, “[A]cceptance of one’s own sexuality, listening to one’s partner and being aware of a partner’s likes and dislikes, and open and honest communication” are needed to create a successful and long-lasting relationship. As can be seen in Twilight, Bella and Edward do not meet these criterion. Edward consistently tells Bella she does understand and refuses to give her answers to questions about his vampire state. Bella represses her sexual desires for the benefit of Edward. Furthermore, Edward and Bella know their “love” is dangerous, yet they refuse to act for each other’s well being.

From the moment she sees Edward, Bella develops a deep and all encompassing obsession with him, which Bella uses to justify her actions even when those actions are detrimental to her physical and emotional health. She cannot walk into the cafeteria without searching for the corner table where he sits. When he is gone for many days in a row, her spirits are crushed. When she finally does see Edward sitting at his usual place, he has so much power over her, she chooses not to eat because she feels sick (40). Edward’s capricious personality returns with him after he has been gone for many days. He decides to introduce himself; however, is still confused at the thought of Edward even speaking to her because he would have no reason to do so after his previous actions in Biology. She tells readers, “I was in disbelief that I’d just explained my dreary life to this bizarre, beautiful boy who may or may not despise me. He’d seemed engrossed our conversation, but now I could see, from the corner of my eye, that he was leaning away from me again, his hands gripping the edge of the table with unmistakable
tension”(50). Though Edward seems to now like Bella, his physical actions speak otherwise and further confuse and simultaneously seduce Bella and readers.

Adding to the distorted power dynamic is the way Bella submits to Edward’s every command. As the novel progresses, Bella loses more and more of her agency. Where she started out autonomous and able to make some decisions for herself, she allows her relationship with Edward to run her judgment. “I sat down automatically”(87). “‘Put on your seat belt,’ he commanded… I obeyed”(162). “‘I think you should eat something.’ Edward’s voice was low, but full of authority”(166). “‘Drink’ he ordered. I sipped at my soda obediently”(169). “‘Tell me,’ he finally commanded after persuasion failed…”(230). “I silently obeyed”(254). “There was no resisting the iron strength of his hands”(280). Under the guise of titillating adventures and far-fetched romance, Meyers creates a character who is slowly losing herself. The escapist and fantastic delivery of the novel conveniently hides the fact that Bella is a subject who can be acted upon by patriarchy. Bella turns over so much of her agency that she eventually becomes Edward’s prisoner. Edward knows this as he states later, “As if you could fight me off”(264). This maniacal line, delivered as flirtation, illustrates the pleasure of the mental power he has over Bella, as well as what is physically capable of doing. Edward reinforces the physical dominance he gains as Bella tells readers, “His long hands formed manacles around my wrists…”(302). And later, when she tries to pull away, his hands “locked [her] wrists in an unbreakable hold”(304). The physical and mental dominance eventually take a hold of Bella and she soon realizes she has no agency of her own.

As Bella continues to create the binary opposition between herself and Edward, she becomes more willing to repress her feelings and inherent nature. “There was really no excuse for my behavior. Obviously I knew better by now. And yet I couldn’t seem to stop from
reacting… I sighed, and my lips parted. He staggered back, breaking my grip effortlessly. ‘Damn it, Bella!...You’ll be the death of me, I swear you will!’”(363). Although Edward initiated the kiss in this scene by pinning Bella to a car, he blames her for his outburst and his inability to control his emotions. This scene has another purpose though, and that is to further entice the reader with stirring exchanges because nothing is more sensational and intriguing in this book than Bella kissing a vampire and then having that same vampire almost kill her. Christine Seifert has written on the subject of the vampire-human relationship and states, “… Edward has taken on the role of protector of Bella’s human blood and chastity, both of which, ironically, are always in peril when Edward is nearby. Bella is not in control of her body… she is absolutely dependent on Edward’s ability to protect her life, her virginity, and her humanity. She is the object of his virtue, the means of his ability to prove his self-control. In other words, Bella is a secondary player…. (par. 14)” All of the dominance, lack of agency, and sensation add up to say that Bella is not an independent female; she relies on Edward to be thought process and to give her life the excitement both she and readers need.

Very quickly into the series, the fact the Edward is becoming Bella’s source of energy and reason for living becomes very apparent. Meyer describes Edward as “impossibly perfect,” “an angel,” and numerous types of statues and works of priceless art throughout the four novels. Bella refers to herself as unattractive and uninteresting. This immediately sets both characters up for an imbalance in power in the relationship. Kelley writes, “In other words, [Edward] becomes her ‘life’ and the outside identity source for which she had been searching. This idea follows in that BPDs [Borderline Personality Disorder] often glorify another person in the early stages of a relationship and develop an insecure attachment and fear of abandonment”(Kelley 71). Even after only a few interactions with Edward, Bella is completely under his influence: “I was
completely absorbed, except for one small part of my mind that wondered what Edward was doing now, and trying to imagine what he would be saying if he were here with me” (*Twilight* 117). While it is certainly normal for people to wonder about the individual they are interested in when not in his or her presence, Bella tries to project Edward’s presence, which will become a very dangerous attribute for her actions in *New Moon*, the second novel in Meyer’s series, where Bella is without Edward’s physical presence for almost the entire novel.

In *New Moon*, Edward ends his and Bella’s relationship because he feels it is in Bella’s best interest, though, true to his form, he will not reveal to Bella his real reasons for ending the relationship until the end of the novel: he feels he is far too dangerous for her. After Edward’s departure, it appears as though Bella might die in the woods because of her inability to function without Edward. Bella, and for the greater part of the book, she spends her time in a depressive spiral and coping with her loss of Edward by substituting Jacob, the Native American werewolf. Edward tells Bella he is leaving her and that she should not follow: “I thought he was reaching for me, too. But his cold hands locked around my wrists and pinned them to my sides. He leaned down, and pressed his lips very lightly to my forehead for the briefest instant” (73). As soon as he leaves her, Bella remarks that “Love, life, meaning…[were] over” (73). She tries to run after Edward: “Finally, I tripped over something – it was black now, I had no idea what caught my foot – and I stayed down. I rolled onto my side, so that I could breathe, and curled up on the wet bracken” (73). Because of her irrational and all-consuming obsession with Edward, Bella ceases to exist without his presence. After Bella is returned home, the pages of the novel go blank, marking the months October through January had passed without any activities because of Edward’s absence. Meyer, working upon the unhealthy dynamic she began in *Twilight*, illustrates a twisted way for a supposed independent woman to live a life outside of a man. Bella
sends, “It was depressing to realize that I wasn’t the heroine anymore, that my story was over” (*New Moon* 106).

When Bella wakes from her catatonic state, she begins a thrill-seeking existence by nearly killing herself to induce images of Edward, as well as his voice, in her head. She is cognitively aware of the danger of her decisions: “I should be running from this memory as fast as I could, blocking the image of the four lounging men from my mind, protecting myself with the numbness I couldn’t function without” (*New Moon* 109). Beyond being dangerous behavior for someone who should be coping with loss instead of repressing her pain, this behavior exhibits traits of Borderline Personality Disorder: “According to Larry J. Siever, in *The Dana Guide to Brain Health*, risk-taking, self-destructive behaviors attempt to reestablish a sense of well-being for a BPD, so along this line of reasoning, perhaps Bella is simply attempting to use desperate measures to reestablish a sense of security, peace, and happiness” (Kelley 73). This sense of peace and happiness is exactly what she accomplishes through her thrill seeking behavior. “In the instant that I heard his voice, everything was very clear. Like my head had suddenly surfaced out of some dark pool. I was more aware of everything – sight, sound, the feel of the cold air that I hadn’t noticed was blowing sharply against my face…” (*New Moon* 111). Meyer rewards Bella for her unhealthy behavior by not only perpetuating the behavior without life-ending consequences, since Jacob or another member of his pack is always there to save her, but she is given a window into Edward and eventually is remunerated with his presence.

In an effort to keep hearing Edward’s “fabricated” voice, Bella procures two motorcycles for she and Jacob to fix together. To fund her mission, Bella uses money for college because she no longer sees the benefit in living a life beyond Forks, Washington since Edward is gone. Bella says, “Only a teenage boy would agree to this: deceiving both our parents while repairing
dangerous vehicles using money meant for my college education. He didn’t see anything wrong with that picture. Jacob was a gift from the gods”(*New Moon* 136). At this point, Bella has distanced herself from her remaining friends to engage in a dangerous activity with a boy who would not know better than to stop: she found a collaborator to help her live her lie. Instead of dealing with the pain of Edward leaving, Bella returns to repressing emotions and memories as she tells readers the night he left is the night she “couldn’t bear to think of consciously”(*New Moon* 152). Bella is aware of how her behavior is unacceptable, but she is so completely controlled by the thought of Edward and his presence, she cannot quit her addiction to him. After nearly knocking herself out on a rock when she is riding her motorcycle for the first time – something that surely would have caused more damage in reality because she was not wearing a helmet – Bella comments “Being reckless was paying off better than I’d thought. Forget cheating. Maybe I’d found a way to generate the hallucinations – that was much more important”(*New Moon* 185). Her hallucination actually caused Edward’s face to appear in her mind and she is therefore willing to die to see his face. Meyer’s depiction echoes Kelly’s argument that Bella is mentally unfit and exhibits dangerous behaviors for a relationship that was not ideal to begin with. Bella idealizes Edward, even in his absence, creating further stress on her mind as she further engages with her fantasy instead of dealing with reality.

The truth was that I wanted to hear his voice again like I had in the strange delusion Friday night. For that brief moment, when his voice came from some other part of me than my conscious memory, when his voice was perfect and honey smooth rather than the pale echo my memories usually produced. I was able to remember without pain. It hadn’t lasted; the pain had caught up with me, as I was sure it would for this fool’s errand. But those precious moments when I could hear him again were an irresistible lure. I had to
find some way to repeat the experience... or maybe the better word was episode. *(New Moon* 160)

Even in this passage, Meyer allows Bella to realize the negative effects of her actions, but does nothing to alter the course of her exploits. Instead, Meyer makes a statement about such behavior – that such conduct is acceptable because at the end of *New Moon*, Bella regains everything she wanted, her relationship with Edward, and she is further rewarded in *Breaking Dawn*, the final novel, by eventually becoming his wife. “Edward’s admonitions against danger are only Bella’s psychosomatic, wishful thinking hallucinations – Edward never communicates with psychically. Yet, Bella goes to great lengths just to ‘hear’ Edward’s voice”*(Kelley 75)*. Bella realizes this fact: however, she continues to act out to her and see Edward. Bella is never reprimanded for her incidents, but instead, is slowly rewarded over the course of time by Edward’s appearance and his eventual return.

Bella’s disturbing behavior only degenerates throughout the course of *New Moon* as her survival instincts completely fail her when faced with danger. Instead of feeling afraid, Bella is comforted when she is closest to death because her subconscious creates images of Edward. Upon seeing a vampire who had previously tried to kill her, Bella feels no survival instincts whatsoever. She thinks, “Yes, fear would have made more sense, but all I felt was an overwhelming satisfaction. The meadow was a magic place again. A darker magic than I’d expected, to be sure, but magic all the same. Here was the connection I’d sought. The proof, however remote, that – somewhere in the same world where I lived – he did exist”*(New Moon* 236). Bella’s compulsion to live for Edward negates any sense she would have for her own life and true to Meyer’s negative reinforcement technique, Bella is saved by Jacob and his pack.

Similarly, Bella cliff dives, claiming that she has no intention to commit suicide but such a claim
is dubious in the face of so many other incidents of self-harm, and as she is about to drown, she sees Edward’s face in her mind more clearly than she ever has: “Even as my lungs burned for more air and my legs cramped in the icy cold, I was content. I’d forgotten what real happiness felt like. Happiness. It made the whole dying thing pretty bearable” (*New Moon* 361). In the face of certain death, Meyer does not allow readers to see just how negative Bella’s decisions are. Meyer writes so that it appears that such erratic behaviors are acceptable and normal, and that such behavior should be rewarded with a relationship that is considered ideal.

Throughout *New Moon* and *Eclipse*, there are many instances where Meyer could have had rectified her illustrations of unhealthy behavior and offered commentary on how those relationships are detrimental. One of these instances, and the most important, is when Meyer makes apt observations about the dynamic of Bella and Edward through the eyes and voice of Bella’s mother: however, Bella’s mother has been established as kooky and flighty, an inadequate motherly-influence throughout the course of the three novels. When Bella and Edward visit her, Renee states that Edward is very protective of her and that Bella works in reaction, not action of her own will, to Edward: “‘The way you move – you orient yourself around him without even thinking about it. When he moves, even a little bit, you adjust your position at the same time. Like magnets… or gravity. You’re like a… satellite, or something” (*Eclipse* 68). Bella quickly convinces her mother that her observations have no ground and that she has never seen Bella so happy. While Renee’s observation is correct and she is right about the unhealthy connection, Meyer negates her voice of rationality by making Renee appear as someone who is mentally unstable and unfit to give advice, thus showing that Bella’s actions are acceptable and ideal since she inevitably gets everything she wants. Similarly, in *New Moon*, Bella recognizes the faultiness of her own mind, but instead of rectifying her unhealthy
state, Bella acts on her foolish impulses and is ultimately rewarded for her behavior by Edward returning to her at the end of the novel and being placed back into a relationship with the one being she cannot live without.

I began to suspect that I was having some kind of hallucination. Triggered, no doubt, by the memory – the déjà vu, the strange familiarity of the situation. I ran through the possibilities quickly in my head. Option one: I was crazy. That was the layman’s term for people who heard voices in their heads. Possible. Option two: My subconscious mind was giving me what it thought I wanted…. I could see no option three… (New Moon 112)

Meyer’s continued reward to Bella’s behavior exhibits a large problem for young readers: young, jilted lovers can act out to get what they want and though they put themselves in dangerous situations, most that will likely end in rape, abuse, injury, or death, they can inevitably be given what they want and be saved from death at the last moment. Because of this, Bella is a mentally unfit role model for young readers and is involved in a relationship that is far from ideal.

Throughout the course of these novels, Bella has exhibit behaviors indicative of someone with Borderline Personality Disorder, has turned over agency to a man she barely knows, loses all sense of autonomy, and is willing to sacrifice her life for a love that she believes is ideal, but is far from a successful example of healthy love. Meyer honors Bella’s efforts by returning Edward to her and allowing Bella to become a vampire in the fourth novel. The message Meyer is sending to young readers is dangerous. However, these are only the beginning of the problematic aspects of the Twilight Saga. As will be discussed in the next chapter, Bella ultimately fails as an independent agent in terms of feminism. A large part of her failure is due to her unbalanced mental state, but other issues arise because Bella is controlled by so many
sources that are not her own, sources she lets control her. Though Bella does fail as a feminist in her human form, she becomes a fierce vampire in *Breaking Dawn* and gains an incredible amount of autonomy and power. However, much to the chagrin of many readers, Bella’s model of independence is impossible to obtain since one has to be a vampire in order to achieve the desired results and therefore, human females must remain weak.
Part II: A Gothic Feminist Examination of Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight Saga*

*Introduction*

In the previous chapter, I argued that Bella ultimately failed as a feminist character because of her unhealthy obsession with Edward, suicidal tendencies, and lack of mental well-being. Bella was proven to have engaged in dangerous emotional, physical, and psychological activities for a relationship completely controlled by her male counterpart, Edward. What is most dangerous about this dynamic is the subtle ways Meyer maintains the relationship as normal, healthy, and ideal as she utilizes the span of four novels to ensnare Bella’s human existence in a patriarchy. As we leave psychoanalysis, I will now turn my attention to dealing with Bella as a feminist, or in her case, how she fails to become a free agent within her human life.

It is true that Bella exhibit many traits of an ideal feminist throughout the course of the four novels and becomes closer to an ideal feminist when she transforms into a vampire (her transformation takes place halfway through the fourth and final novel) and it is there that Bella reaches a level near self-actualization. However, Bella does not succeed in becoming autonomous in her human form because of her dependence on male influence and presence and her unhealthy addiction to Edward. Through the lens of gothic feminism, I will discuss the complex problems of Bella as a human and then as a vampire. Gothic feminism provides a more refined analysis than the broad subject of feminist and allows for the intricacies of the vampire genre itself to be discussed. Additionally, gothic feminism allows me to work more closely with the analyses of Anne Rice’s works as a support for my own observations rather than relying on sparse criticisms for the *Twilight Saga*. I will first set forth a definition of gothic feminism as it relates to vampire novels and then give a basic overview of how Meyer’s novels work within the
construct of the genre. I will then move into a more detailed analysis of how Bella fails to be a subversive character within gothic feminism as a human, and at that point, offer an analysis of how Bella succeeds as a feminist in her vampire form. Lastly, I will conclude by illustrating how the dynamic of Bella’s transformation gives young readers an unrealistic view of healthy love and how Bella’s relationship with Edward is destructive because it idealizes victimhood and shows that Bella’s behavior as human can lead to a false sense of empowerment and independence.

Gothic Feminism

Though there are many forms of feminism, including the psychoanalytic approach to feminism discussed in the previous chapter, and even definitions of gothic feminism, Rita Antoni offers a succinct and useful definition that I will utilize as my foundation of gothic feminism. In her article “A Vampiric Relation to Feminism: The Monstrous-Feminine in Whitley Strieber’s and Anne Rice’s Gothic Fiction,” Rita Antoni outlines how vampire literature can function within the realm of gothic feminism. Though Antoni is speaking directly about Anne Rice’s vampire novels, her observations about gender roles and how vampires can serve to liberate characters from those roles are apt when examining Meyer’s Twilight Saga. Antoni writes, “[T]he characteristic, which is most important from the perspective of this essay, is that there is no other, typically Gothic theme which can express gender anxiety and subversion more suitably than the terrain of vampirism, all due to its overt sexual symbolism”(par. 3). In Meyer’s novels, gender anxiety is expressed when Bella tries to gain autonomy: she is stopped from acting as a subversive agent for feminism because she does not succeed as a free agent in her human life, a life that lasts for the first three and a half novels.
In *Breaking Dawn*, the fourth and final novel in the *Twilight Saga*, Bella is given the opportunity to become a strong and autonomous female after she is transformed into a vampire. In this novel, Bella and Edward are finally married and on their wedding night, conceive a child. Because Bella refuses to terminate the pregnancy and Edward refuses to make Bella an indestructible vampire, Bella is nearly killed by her daughter in the pregnancy and delivery process. Edward, as always, saves Bella, in the last possible moments and she is transformed into a fearsome vampire. Bella relishes her strength and discovers she has the supernatural ability to shield those she loves from harm by utilizing her hidden powers in moments of great concentration. As the Cullen clan is about to be decimated by the Volturi, Bella is a key component to the clan’s salvation. However, for all her potential, Bella is ultimately resigned to be under the command of Edward is never fully redeemed from the gender roles of her human self.

Though Bella does gain much autonomy after her transformation into vampire and sexuality becomes more a predominant and discussed topic in *Breaking Dawn*, Christine Seifert maintains that there are inherent gender problems with her character. “*Breaking Dawn*’s Bella is a throwback to a 1950s housewife, except for the fact that Edward has turned her into a vampire. But this act is one of ’50s--esque female self-sacrifice: It’s precipitated by Bella’s need to let her human self die in order to save their half-vampire baby” (Seifert par. 5). Instead of a revolt against gender roles, Bella readily accepts her role as wife and mother with the benefit of becoming more independent in action in comparison to her former human self: though the transformation from human to vampire is drastic and Bella overcomes many of the limitations placed on her by Meyer, she still is not a free agent in terms of autonomy as she is living in reaction to having a child.
Furthering her claim of how gothic feminism can operate once liberation from gender roles has occurred, Antoni explains how gothic authors worked to move away from conservative values and sexual roles to illustrate how vampires worked as metaphor for increased sexual awakening and gender liberation.

[T]he vampire fiction at the turn of the century was obviously conservative; it represented a moral lesson and showed a yearning towards the stability of gender roles with the figure of the vampire as a threat to the existing order. In these narratives the conformist, subordinate women were put on pedestal whilst non-conformist women were destroyed. At the same time, hegemonic masculinity was praised and encouraged whilst any sign of alternative masculinity was ridiculed. Contemporary Gothic, on the contrary, seems to be in favor of sexual anarchy and understanding gender – as well as subjectivity – in terms of fluidity and experimentation. (Antoni par. 4)

In the *Twilight Saga*, the Cullen clan, the Volturi, and other peripheral vampires undoubtedly present a threat to normal gender roles. Powerful women, such as Rosalie and Alice, Jane, the sadistic Volturi member, and Leah, the only she-wolf of the La Push pack, are introduced throughout the novels as examples of strong female characters. Even Bella herself disrupts gender roles as she becomes, as a newborn vampire, stronger than Edward – though she is consistently reminded that her powers will not last. Meyer, though, does not experiment with her characters’ sexuality or cause them to make, in her opinion, morally unacceptable choices. “…Meyer’s ‘pet peeve about the [young adult] genre is that there seems to be an empty spot for novels where kids aren’t doing drugs and having sex,’ and, in keeping with her beliefs, she is committed to refrain from including such details, thereby helping to fill that gap”(Arnaudin 14). Ironically, and though her characters abstain from sex outside of marriage, bruising, life-
threatening sexual relationships are permissible if within the bonds of marriage, according to Meyer as is witnessed in a scene in the first section of *Breaking Dawn*. As Bella wakes from her wedding night proclivities and finds herself covered in contusions and feathers from the bedding, Edward is psychically unharmed after consummating their marriage. Perhaps if it were just Meyer’s incidental characters who were resigned to gender roles (the female being directed by the male’s wishes, desires, and attitude), the effects of her writing would not be of such great concern, but since her main character and that character’s actions are idealized and rewarded, she offers a dangerous commentary on what is healthy for romantic and sexual love for young people in relationships.

Meyer’s characters are not subversive examples of feminists in the gothic genre, sexually, or romantically. Throughout the four novels, Meyer illustrates the negative stereotype of gothic characters: that gothic characters are more often than not, conservative and resigned to exist in a male-dominated environment. Antoni writes of how these conservative relationships are perpetuated in a work such as Meyer’s:

[R]epresentations of strong women characters (and implicitly, feminism) often reach a surprisingly conservative conclusion instead of a subversive and radical one. The issue of criminalizing and demonizing independent women, who are acting in their own (and/or in their sisters’) interests and not in those of men, is still prevalent in Gothic fiction; and, as the result of male anxiety, the aim of defeating them has not disappeared from contemporary Gothic, but, on the contrary, it is a more favored than was before. (par. 5)

Demonstrated through the romantic relationships within the *Twilight Saga*, in order for Bella to be subversive, but only in her vampire form, she must be rewarded with a conservative outcome: marriage and a family. Bella *is* rewarded with such an outcome by her lasting marriage with
Edward and her daughter’s birth. Again, Meyers offers inadvertently offers commentary on the conservative nature of her vampires and their idealized rewards when she says:

…I grew up in a community where it was not the exception to be a good girl. It was sort of expected. And all of my friends were good girls too, and my boyfriends were good boys. Everybody was pretty nice. And that affects how I write my characters. There aren’t very many bad guys in my novels. Even the bad guys usually have a pretty good reason for the way they are, and some of them come around in the end. I don’t see the world as full of negatives.’ (Arnaudin 11)

Meyer’s characters and the repercussions of their decisions represent the “good” and idealistic outcomes that she wants, but she does not portray the real outcomes of her characters’ choices: that Bella’s human life had to end in order for her to be free from oppression. Here, Meyers misses one of the key components of gothic literature and the vampire genre. According to Candace Benefield, “The family group of Interview with the Vampire, as well as subsequent iterations of the vampire family, allows the reader to explore issues of alternative family structures and incestuous attraction within the family, and to play out the consequences for good or ill of these imagined scenarios”(270). Meyer keeps her characters, especially Bella, locked into conventional gender roles and familial scenarios, allowing for only happy endings. Instead of allowing for “nice” and “unkind,” “moral” and “immoral,” Meyer idealizes only one side of experience and hampers readers’ abilities to see the results of negative decisions, even those decisions her protagonists make.

Victor Lana’s doctoral dissertation provides further commentary for the concept of gender roles, female power, and how characters gain autonomy in gothic feminism. He writes, “Gothic feminist work does not necessarily have to have a powerful female character or
characters… It does not even have to be written by a woman to fall into this area… What the work must have is a sensibility about the duality of human beings; the feminine and masculine sides of the characters must be well defined” (Lana 2). For Lana, characters within themselves must exhibit both masculine and feminine traits to overcome gender roles and gain autonomy. One way of accomplishing this is through the creation of new vampires. Lana says, “All vampires are male because they exhibit the phallus – i.e., the fangs by which they create new vampires. Through the act of drinking the blood, an action mirrors an infant taking nourishment from its mother, female essence is exhibiting thus allowing all vampires to create life through phallic and yonic powers” (Lana 5). By exhibiting both male and female traits, vampire characters within gothic feminism are liberated from their traditional counterparts. In the Twilight Saga, the men in the Cullen clan exhibit traits of masculinity and femininity as they have created vampires. However, the female vampires of the clan, especially Rosalie and Esme, were acted upon to become vampires against their wills and have not created new vampires, leaving the creation to Edward and Carlisle. The ability of the men to both create and nourish elevates their status of androgyny and gender roles, but the female characters of Meyer’s novels are confined to subordinate positions. Lana again writes about the importance of Anne Rice’s work as he says, “Rice’s ‘gothic feminism’ provides us with characters who are not confined by gender, yet whose fate is determined by a former sexual self” (7). Where the men in the Twilight Saga are not confined to gender (they a create life when they create new vampires), they are permitted to retain the characteristics of male sexuality; however, the women in the novel become more confined to gender as vampires than in their human lives because they have the ability to create life with a phallus as a female, but do not partake in the act of creation. Thus males retain both male and female power while the women can neither vaginally birth their own
children or make children through the use of their fangs. Therefore, Meyer’s characters are limited in gothic feminism because they are collectively unable to overcome gender roles in the context where they should be most able to overcome those confining roles.

Gothic feminism allows for readers to see characters in conservative and subversive roles and also allows them to see how gender roles can be negative in literature when they conform to societal expectations. Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight Saga* illustrates the type of traditional gender roles feminists have been fighting for years to eradicate and what is worse is that she idealizes Bella’s irrational and dangerous decisions through her rewarding of Bella’s acts of desperation and despair.

*Human Bella and Gothic Feminism*

One of the most disconcerting issues relating to Bella as she is in her human form in the *Twilight Saga* is her obsession with Edward. From the very first moment she sees Edward, Bella is completely under his influence and control. When readers are first introduced to Bella, she appears to be independent and autonomous. Of her own volition, Bella moves from Phoenix to Forks and is immersed in her education. However, upon seeing, not meeting or speaking with, Edward, Bella’s life completely changes and she works in reaction to him, rather than her own accord. She tells readers, “He stared at me again, meeting my eyes with the strangest expression on his face – it was hostile, furious. I looked away quickly, shocked, going red again. I stumbled over a book in the walkway and had to catch myself on the edge of a table”(23). The mystery of Edward’s hostile glares is revealed much later in *Twilight* – he is trying not to kill her – but without speaking a word, Edward has psychological and physical control over Bella’s actions. The next day in school, Edward is not present, but even his absence has Bella obsessing over her
“relationship” to him. “I was relieved that I had the desk to myself, that Edward was absent. I told myself that repeatedly. But I couldn’t get rid of the nagging suspicion that I was the reason he wasn’t there. It was ridiculous, and egotistical, to think that I could affect anyone that strongly. It was impossible. And yet I couldn’t stop worrying that it was true”(31). Instead of maintaining distance from someone who appears to harbor negative feelings for her, Meyer idealizes the situation and illustrates that mysterious qualities are reasons to forget one’s self. Karen Backstein demonstrates how Edward’s actions can be misconstrued and Bella’s actions are idealized in the mind’s of readers:

[Bella’s] eye is drawn irresistibly to Edward Cullen and his four sisters and brothers, all startlingly beautiful and supremely standoffish. Bella is shocked when Edward initially reacts to her presence with pure, overt hostility. The truth will out, however, when she discovers that his coldness was just a ploy: he is so deeply drawn to her, and so scared he might harm her in the throes of passion, that he tried to resist his feelings. For Edward and his entire family are vampires – albeit vampires who wish to live peacefully with humans – and this love appears to be star-crossed. Bella and Edward's relationship grows ever more passionate, but always with Edward attempting to make Bella feel a healthy sense of fear at what he is. (par. 8).

The message Meyer conveys, and Backstein realizes, is that because love, true love, is so all-encompassing, people will send act in bizarre and mystifying manners. Similarly, Meyer gives permission to Bella to forget herself and her independent actions for the sake of “true love,” even though Edward and Bella have never spoken.

After Edward returns to school, his immediate presence has a greater influence over Bella than ever and she becomes further removed from autonomous actions. Though Bella appears to
have agency, she allows herself a minute capacity for self-rule and turns her power over to Edward: “I decided to permit myself one glance at the Cullen family’s table. If he was glaring at me, I would skip Biology, like the coward I was”(Twilight 41). Meyer allows Bella one glance while she awards Edward the ability to decide if Bella will attend class. This power structure is indicative of their relationship while Bella is in her human form, and it is even more telling of the relationship because they still have not spoken at this point in the narrative. Meyer gives Edward the power from the very beginning and the power only increases after their verbal interactions ensue. When Edward finally decides to speak to Bella, she is completely under his control and acts out of character for herself. In class, Bella is normally quiet and reserved, but when Edward asks her questions, she explains her life story and then tells readers, “I was in disbelief that I’d just explained my dreary life to this bizarre, beautiful boy who may or may not despise me”(Twilight 50). As true in most vampire narratives, the vampire controls the power in many, if not all, of the interactions with humans. Sarah Sceats writes, “[T]he vampire may undermine existing (possibly oppressive) power relations. In any case the vampire is a paradoxical figure, refreshed by orgasmic penetration, nourished without food, dependent on those whom s/he dominates”(116). While the powerful vampire is not generally problematic in terms of gender roles, as evidenced by Anne Rice’s work, the difficulties in Meyer’s works arise because the protagonist is a powerless human female being acted upon by a powerful male vampire. What is more worrisome is that the relationship is depicted as ideal in terms of being matched to a “perfect” mate. Meyer has created a relationship example that is destructive to both parties because of the unhealthy dynamic and control exhibited by Edward.

Meyer is aware of her characters’ actions as she writes that Bella is aware of Edward’s controlling behavior and influence; however, Meyer does not do anything to stop the evolving
romance. Meyer could have allowed her character to assert independence because Meyer is aware of the dynamic. But again, just as with Bella’s mother’s warnings, Meyer merely states the obvious and then keeps on her trajectory to “happily ever after.” Bella says,

I looked down at my book as soon as his eyes released me, trying to find my place.

Cowardly as ever, I shifted my hair over my right shoulder to hide my face. I couldn’t believe the rush of emotion pulsing through me – just because he’d happened to look at me for the first time in a half-dozen weeks. I couldn’t allow him to have this level of influence over me. It was pathetic. More than pathetic, it was unhealthy. (Twilight 73-74)

Though Meyer could be redeemed for allowing Bella to realize her actions are “pathetic and unhealthy,” she does more damage by keeping Bella on the path to “pathetic and unhealthy” by stating her actions are such and then rewarding Bella for those actions. Bella’s behavior becomes more alarming when, after two conversations with Edward, Bella is more than under his influence, her very moods and actions are affected by her dependence on him.

As was my routine, I glance first toward the Cullens’ table. A shiver of panic trembled in my stomach as I realized it was empty. With dwindling hope, my eyes scoured the rest of the cafeteria, hoping to find him alone, waiting for me…. but there was no sign of Edward or any of his family. Desolation hit me with crippling strength. I shambled along behind Jessica, not bothering to pretend to listen anymore. (Twilight 145)

While it might be normal for high school students to feel unease or disappointment when the object of their affections is not in school, Meyer hyperbolizes Bella’s distress by turning it into despondency and therefore taking away Bella’s agency to act of her own accord. Lorna Jowett, in her article “‘Mute and Beautiful’: The Representation of the Female in Anne Rice’s Interview with the Vampire,” writes a different view on the heterosexual relationships in Rice’s work. In
her mind, “In all the obscurity that surrounds Claudia in Louis’ narrative, only one thing about her is clear: her love for him. Thus, Claudia not only plays the role of dependent, mute, and beautiful female, she also plays the role of faithful heterosexual lover…. she is caught by the patriarchal myth of heterosexual romance”(Jowett 68). Though Jowett’s view is unique of Claudia in opposition to other critics, her analysis is apt in terms of Bella and Edward. Just as Claudia is confined to her role, Bella, from the very beginning of the novel, plays the role of faithful lover even when her and Edward’s romance is yet to be defined.

Even more disturbing than Bella’s quick dissolution of power is her continued effort to disengage her own agency and autonomy as Edward removes her abilities to act as a free agent by overshadowing and guiding her choices. When given choices, even the most minute of choices, Bella follows Edward’s every command. “Why don’t you it with me today?’ he asked, smiling. I sat down automatically…”(Twilight 87). After Bella almost passes out in her Biology class, Edward asks her if she needs to leave school. She says she does not, but he seduces the nurse into excusing Bella from her last class and he takes her home though she does protest. Bella realizes that Edward will get his way and as soon as she thinks, “[H]e’ll probably just drag me back anyway,” Edward tells her that if she tries to escape he will do just that (Twilight 104). When Edward and Bella are dining in Port Angeles, Edward maintains control over the situation even though he is not eating, an act that further subordinates Bella because she is dependent on food while he is not. “I think you should be eating something.’ Edward’s voice was low, but full of authority…. Obviously, there would be no further discussion”(166). “Drink,’ he ordered. I silently obeyed”(169). Throughout these scenes, Meyer writes Edward so that he appears to be flirtatious with a mysterious and dangerous edge. Edward seduces both Bella and the audience through his seemingly mild coquetry and curious personality, but this is why Edward’s appeal is
so dangerous to his objects: “Playfulness and liberation are raised as possibilities, but they are finally rejected for the sake of traditional patterns and cultural stereotypes. Misogyny is prevalent…” (Antoni par. 22). Because Edward appears to be mild and gentle in manner, his actions are not construed as misogynistic and therefore Bella’s actions do not appear unhealthy, but rather, normal. Though Edward is referring to dancing, he coolly tells Bella, “It’s all in the leading” (212). This turns out to be one of the most telling aspects to their relationship because it illustrates just how little power Bella maintains while she is human and how much power Edward actually has.

Throughout the course of the four novels, Meyer gives Bella the illusion of agency, thus making Bella’s actions seem powerful. In reality, other characters and even Bella herself continually undermine her agency. Meyer glorifies that small decisions Bella is “allowed” to make in order to give Bella the appearance of freedom and independence. Edward comes to Bella’s house to pick her up for school and asks if she’d like a ride. She pauses to think, before she says yes, “He was really giving me a choice…” (197). While this is true, she can refuse Edward, she is deciding one of the most insignificant decisions she can be given in the novels. Pages later, Edward removes her ability to make choices when he says, “You’d never have to make that choice” (211). Though Bella is allowed to choose if she would like a ride to school, she is not allowed to choose if she can stay with Edward – he firmly establishes his authority and control of their relationship. This type of hypocritical and flawed logic is the type of dangerous example that contributes to fans thinking Meyer has penned the perfect lover.

The seduction of Bella and readers continues in one of the most climatic scenes of the first half of the book as Edward’s independence is established as Bella’s is taken away. Edward saves Bella by pushing her to safety from the course of an out-of-control van. If this is not
enough, when taken to the hospital, Bella is annoyed that “Edward simply glided through the hospital doors under his own power”(59) while Bella was taken to the hospital against her will in the ambulance. This small reflection illustrates the point that Edward is an active agent and Bella is a passive female. When Bella confronts Edward about his methods of salvation, he angrily tells her that no one will believe her version of the story because she sounds ridiculous. He saves her life one moment, and then tells her that she is nonsensical the next.

Bella seems to have a moment of autonomy when she decides to ignore Edward, although she is very aware of his presence whenever he is around. During this time period, she describes herself as “miserable.” Furthermore, readers later learn that when she ignores Edward, Bella does not have the power. Although Edward is not actively engaging with her at school, he breaks into her bedroom every night for two months to watch her sleep. This is perhaps one of the most disturbing scenes in the novel. As he tells Bella this, she is internally flattered, instead of outraged, and he is “unrepentant” of his actions (296-97). In terms of healthy relationships, one would have to assume that this behavior is unacceptable. Everything about the relationship is on Edward’s terms. He is allowed to see her, engage in a criminal act in order to do so, but she is not allowed to interact with him in public. Bella even knew this behavior was wrong: “I couldn’t allow him to have this level of influence over me. It was pathetic. More than pathetic, it was unhealthy”(74). Herein may have been Meyers’ saving grace. If she would have allowed Bella the self-worth and ability, Bella may have escaped the relationship; instead, Bella submits to the “inevitable” and lets her obsession with Edward grow, even though there is no feasible reason for doing so. Instead of helping readers understand that Edward’s actions were intolerable and deviant, Meyers rewards Edward with Bella’s love. The thrilling act of being desired outweighs
normal reactions and therefore creates a pornographic type of titillation although no sexual acts have taken place.

Meyers uses Bella and Edward’s relationship dynamic, specifically the escapist and thrilling elements, as a distraction from the truth that Bella cannot act for herself. Meyers gives Bella the semblance of agency, but there is no agency in the following quote: “Only two options seemed practical…. [but] I knew I had my answer. I didn’t know if there was ever a choice…” (138-39). Edward himself is aware of this discrepancy as he tells Bella she has no agency and at the same time, confirms that he is stronger and in control of the relationship: “You’d never have to make the choice” referring to his ability to end the relationship if things became too dangerous and risky and simultaneously othering Bella’s youth and inexperience (211). After Edward tells Bella this, she realizes the fate of the relationship: “We would fall off one edge or the other, depending entirely upon his decision, his instincts” (248). Readers must ask themselves – why does Bella not have a choice? Every person has, or should have, agency within a relationship. For healthy love, as already discusses, this is a necessary factor for longevity and satisfaction.

Because Bella is willing to objectify Edward, she is also willing to take blame for situations that are not her fault with Edward all too willing to let her do so. “I shivered again at how close I’d come to being inadvertently responsible for her death” (270). Bella is speaking of the receptionist in the school office. All Bella did was walk into the room the first day she and Edward met. She is prepared to take responsibility for Edward’s inherent nature and independent actions although he is 108 years older than she is. Just as she would have been “responsible” for the receptionist’s death, when lying in bed with Edward she says, “I had to be good; I didn’t want to make this any harder for him than it already was” (308). Bella is Edward’s pawn because
he is willing to let her blame herself if they were to have sex or if she were to kiss him, which might make him lose control and kill her by sucking her blood. At the same time, she also must ignore the sexual urges she has and repress them for the benefit of Edward and the responsibility he gives to her at his discretion.

In the final scene of adventure in *Twilight* reaches new heights of climax. Bella is being hunted down by a non-vegetarian vampire (one who drinks human blood) and goes to be a sacrifice in order to save her mother. She leaves behind Edward and the other Cullens and tries to act on her own; however, because she has lost the ability to act for herself and has turned over her agency to Edward, Bella’s plan fails and he must save her at the last moment. Although Edward was 2,000 miles away, Bella still allows herself to become a toy for male influence. It should be noted that Bella does act heroically to save her mother, but she is ultimately thwarted by patriarchal dominance, as the male Cullens must inevitably save her. James, the bloodthirsty vampire hunting Bella, uses his privileged role as a male and gives her directions over the phone and tells her exactly what to do and say in order to escape from her protectors/“babysitters”(411) and commands, “Do not speak until I tell you to” numerous times throughout the conversation and gives her directions to her death (426-29).

When Edward and the Cullens finally reach Bella in order to save her from miserable attempt to save herself, Edward must penetrate Bella again in order to suck out the venom that James unleashed into her body by biting her (456). She has no choice in the matter as Carlisle and Edward hold her down. While the rest of the Cullens are busy dispatching James, Edward saves Bella from another man’s venom and returns her to the state he wants her in, a human with a soul who is less powerful than he. The poison is only seconds from reaching Bella’s heart by the time Edward decides he will have the strength to save her and as the last drop of venom is
removed, she loses consciousness. Although Bella wanted to become a vampire, Edward would not let her. As a vampire, she may have had the chance to be his equal, but keeping her a frail and fragile human keeps he dynamic he wants in place.

The novel would not be complete here though. While in the hospital, readers learn that Edward wants to leave Bella to lead a normal life. After tearful protests, Edward agrees to stay with Bella as long as she wishes (461). However, he previously established that he could not live without her, so he is not making a real sacrifice. This exchange is merely meant to keep readers on their toes and provide more exaggerated drama. In the final scene of the novel, Bella asks Edward to turn her into a vampire. He seems to acquiesce as he dips her and places his head near his neck. He then pulls away suddenly and says with a “sour edge to his mocking tone”, “You can’t really believe that I would give in so easily”(498). Even on the last page of the novel, emotions are titillated at the thought of Bella becoming a vampire, but Edward maintains his power by refusing to give into Bella’s agency and wishes. Again, Seifert writes, “Digging into Edward’s mind reinforces the old stereotype that underneath it all, even the best guys are calculating vampires, figuring out how to act on their masculine urges. Edward holds all the power, while Bella – and female readers – romanticizes the perfect man who doesn’t exist.” Readers are taught to expect extravagant, romantic results from unbalanced power dynamics. Because of unequal gender dynamics and thrilling romantic language and experiences, Meyers creates a message about sexual politics. Seifert summarizes when she writes, “Whether you end up doing the nasty or not doesn’t ultimately matter. When it comes to a woman’s virtue, sex, identity, or her existence itself, it’s all in the man’s hands. To be the object of desire, in abstinence porn is not really so far from being the object of desire in actual porn”(par. 12). Bella is the object of Edward’s subject. His capricious and fantastic manner creates a world where
readers can find voyeuristic and vicarious escape from the dull romantic lives they currently lead.

The illusion of autonomy lasts well into *New Moon* and *Eclipse*. Bella tries to assert power in her own life and is thwarted by Edward. “Edward didn’t understand why I object to him spending money one me – why it made me uncomfortable if he took me to an expensive restaurant in Seattle, why he wasn’t allowed to buy me a car that could reach speeds over fifty-five miles an hour…. Edward thought I was being unnecessarily difficult”(*New Moon* 13). Bella even goes onto refuse his help with her college tuition money, stating that she has her own funds to pay for college, or that she can apply for scholarships. This particular instance of illusionary autonomy lasts for the greater part of *New Moon*, especially in Edward’s absence when he cannot monetarily provide for her. What the reader will not learn until the end of the third novel, *Eclipse*, is that Bella gives into Edward’s demands to buy her a car. Readers ascertain that he has bribed people to get Bella into the ever-expensive Dartmouth and has even filled out the application for her, stating that his signature of her name is much better than she can write herself. Dartmouth was Edward’s choice for school and when Bella concedes to marry Edward, she says that he can pay for school thus negating all of the work she had previously done to assert herself. Meyer is careful not to undermine Bella’s agency right away and this is why her tactics in making Bella a subordinate female are so hazardous: the subtlety of Meyer’s writing occurs over the course of the four novels so Bella’s decisions and autonomy only rarely seem immediately threatened.

However, there are more instances in *New Moon* and *Eclipse* where Bella’s decision-making skills are immediately challenged and thwarted. Edward asserts his dominance and control right after Bella says she has control of her own actions. Though subtle in nature, Edward
is always in control: “Edward walked me to my truck as he usually did. But this time, he held the passenger door open for me. Alice must have been taking his car home so that he could keep me from making a run for it”(New Moon 14). Edward does concede to let Bella drive, but only because it is her birthday and therefore, a special occasion. Here, as in many other examples in the series, Meyer undermines Bella’s supposed autonomy only moments after establishing it. At the end of New Moon, after Edward returns, it appears as though Bella has gained a voice and autonomy again as she defies Edward’s wishes for her to become a vampire. However, Meyer, ever-quick to spoil Bella’s agency, has Bella put her wish for vampire-hood to a vote in front of the entire Cullen clan: in effect, Bella does not choose her own fate to become a vampire. Other characters are establishing her decisions and though she gets her desires met, Bella had no real say in the matter as the family could have easily voted against her. Bram Dijkstra writes in his book Evil Sisters: The Threat of Female Sexuality and the Cult of Manhood that female vampires were a very threat to man’s existence:

The early twentieth century’s ever expanding cultural documentation of the confrontation between the sexual woman and the would-be continent male, her habitual victim, was linked to a growing conviction among physicians, biologists, and other such theologians of the scientific age, that all women were, in fact, ‘real’ vampires, driven by nature to depredate the male, and hence creatures who were, even if only medical terms, dangerous to a man’s health even when they were virtuous, submissive, monogamous wives. (47)

Edward’s unwillingness to follow Bella’s wishes illustrates how Edward feels threatened by Bella. As such, Edward continues to ignore Bella’s desires and the family’s vote as he asserts dominance over her. Edward further takes agency from Bella when he decides they are going to take a trip to Florida. Bella is opposed and instead of waiting for her to decide, Edward informs
Charlie of the plan and Charlie acquiesces. Bella is outraged that Edward “interceded” on her behalf and Edward informs her that she will not be going to La Push, but to Florida. Though Bella is fuming, she takes no action for herself and goes to Florida with Edward despite her annoyance (*Eclipse* 56). Instead of locking him out of her room at night, she is so desperate for his love and attention that she lets him into her room: “I started at the shivering black glass for a long moment until it was still. Then I sighed, and opened the window as wide as it would go” so that Edward knew he had permission to enter the room (*Eclipse* 64).

The tease of agency continues in *Eclipse* as Bella wants to visit La Push for a bonfire and Bella makes observations about the state of her own independence. Edward, knowing of her plans to visit La Push because of Alice’s visions, says, “I was rather under the impression that you’d promised to ask my permission to go to some kind of werewolf soiree tonight…. You don’t have to ask my permission, Bella. I’m not your father… Perhaps you should ask Charlie, though”(*Eclipse* 230). Though Bella does not have to “ask” Edward for permission, he limits her freedom to do as she chooses by making her ask her father, even though she is eighteen years old. Bella, in this particular episode, is at a double loss of agency because Alice’s visions also impede Bella’s ability to act on her own, especially since Alice warned Edward of her decision to go. Even after Bella is allowed to go La Push, she must do so under the supervision of Edward and with a cell phone in hand so that he can drop her off and pick her up at the border of the vampire-werewolf treaty. Bella acknowledges the absurdity of the situation, but does nothing to rectify the situation or rebel against her warden. “Some of that dignity was lost when Edward insisted again on delivering me to the border line like a child being exchanged by custodial parents”(*Eclipse* 318). Though Bella is essence babysat rather than courted throughout the novel and her agency has been established to be non-existent, Meyer continues to give the illusion of
freedom as she concludes the third installment. Much like in gothic literature, Bella’s subservience is a gender issue even though there is a female author and a female narrator: “These novels question women’s need for men, pose questions about women’s subordination and raise political issues concerning women’s situation. However, woman-centeredness cannot be simply equated with feminism. The discussed works of both authors carry several traits of conservativism…” (Antoni par. 40-41). Furthering the concept of Bella’s need for Edward and her dependence on him, Bella says of her relationship, “I never had a choice. I always knew nothing would change” (Eclipse 600). Here, Bella and Meyer both acknowledge the truth of the situation, but Meyer again derails reality by leaving readers with the semblance of agency rather than actuality: “Edward, I’m ready. I’ve chosen my life – now I want to start living” (Eclipse 616). Bella does not have a choice in the matter since her agency was removed from her the first time she saw Edward, 1,500 pages previous to this statement. Bella continues to operate in the confines of male dominance and does not have the freedoms, sexual or personal, because she is always working within the requisites of Edward’s wishes.

Beyond lack of emotional, sexual, and intellectual agency, Edward continually exerts physical dominance over Bella. Meyer is careful to write the dominant behavior as Edward’s need to continually save Bella, but his behavior is possessive and abnormal. When Bella is in the hospital right after her near-death experience, she says, “I tried to sit up, and realized [Edward] was holding me against the side of his body in an iron grasp” (Twilight 57). Additionally, she notes, “There was a flurry of activity around us. I tried to get up, but Edward’s cold hand pushed my shoulder down” (Twilight 58). As other people – the flurry of activity – are able to physically command themselves, Edward is there to prevent Bella from taking control of herself even though he is not the doctor. Later in the novel, Bella is not in any real danger, but Edward is
there to capitalize on his power: “Suddenly the sidewalk disappeared from beneath me. My eyes flew open in shock. Edward had scooped me up in a his arms, as easily as if I weighed ten pounds instead of a hundred and ten”(*Twilight* 97). Bella begs to be put down, but Edward ignores her wishes and takes her to the nurse’s office. As the narrative of *Twilight* progresses and just as Bella’s independence becomes more limited, Edward asserts more physical ownership and power over Bella and the metaphors become more disturbing. “He curled me into a ball against his chest, holding me more securely than iron chains. I glared at him in alarm, but he seemed well in control, his jaw relaxed as he grinned, his eyes bright only with humor”(*Twilight* 345). “I struggled to free myself, but Edward merely readjusted me so that I was somewhat more conventionally seated on his lap”(*Twilight* 346). “‘That suits me,’ he replied, his face relaxing into a gentle smile. ‘Bring on the shackles – I’m your prisoner.’ But his long hands formed manacles around my wrists as he spoke. He laughed…”(*Twilight* 302). Bella and Meyer are fully aware of the dangers of the situation as Bella has admitted many times, but Bella does nothing to stop Edward’s dominance.

Even on a syntactical level, Bella is passive and the indirect object of many sentences. In many of her interactions with those around her, she is rarely the noun subject of the sentence. She functions as the indirect object of many of her exchanges, both with humans and supernatural creatures. “Edward wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me along…”(457). “…[H]olding me close to his side, [Edward] began to tow me swiftly forward”(459). “With ice in my heart, I watched him prepare to defend me”(*Eclipse* 1). “How were there any colleges left that he hadn’t forced me to apply to already”(*Eclipse* 19). “I trailed behind, letting Edward tow me along”(*Eclipse* 40). “I let him drag me along…”(*Eclipse* 201). “Edward pulled me to the sofa…”(*Eclipse* 203). “Edward refused to let me go for a second, dragging me along with
him…”(Eclipse 367). Bella’s inability to physically act for herself is evident throughout the course of all of the novels while she is still human. Edward, and other characters, is proven to be stronger and more autonomous than Bella could ever hope to be and his actions illustrate a sick dominance of the woman he supposedly loves. Antoni writes:

As Jack Holland puts it, what is specific about misogyny compared to other forms of hatred is the fact that within it, ‘hatred coexists with desire,’ because, as he argues, most men need women, and most women need men. There is an urge in contemporary fiction to repress the (undoubtedly existing and fierce) desire for strong women in order to eliminate the threat to male dominance. (par. 28).

Edward’s physical dominance over Bella illustrates the need to destroy a strong human to eliminate any threat Bella might pose, even if that threat is saying “No” to him. Paradoxically, when he is about to propose to Bella, asking a question she should be able to respond to of her own volition, Edward exacts physical and verbal dominance over Bella: “He grabbed my wrists and pinned them to my sides…. While I was ranting, he pulled my hands together to restrain them in just one of his, and put his other hand over my mouth”(Eclipse 443). Edward’s domination of Bella will continue until she becomes a vampire, and even then, she is pinned down as he bites and turns her. Though the dominant behaviors desist after Bella’s transformation, Bella does not necessarily assert her own independence, rather, Edward subtly acknowledges that she has become equal to his power instead of Bella reclaiming her own power.

Bella’s addiction to Edward is heightened in New Moon as Edward leaves Forks and ends his relationship with her. With Edward gone and all of her power with him, Bella looks to different men to support her and maintains housework that will inevitably serve as her entrance
into wifehood with Edward. After Edward leaves and Bella has spent many blank months in solitude (the months October – January are blank within the novel itself, signifying that she had no life or interactions outside of Edward), she immediately finds another male presence to support her. “I was nervous when we go to the house. I didn’t want to go upstairs. The warmth of Jacob’s presence was fading and, in its absence, the anxiety grew stronger. I was sure I wouldn’t get away with two peaceful nights of sleep in a row”(New Moon 150). Without the support of Jacob, Bella would have crumbled: “I felt hideously empty, and I wanted to see Jacob”(New Moon 162). Instead of allowing Bella to use the space of Edward’s absence to gain back her autonomy, and hopefully self-respect, Bella clings to another man who can reinforce her co-dependent behavior. And more than allowing distance from Edward, Meyer is really preparing Bella to be the ideal housewife in his absence. “After Edward leaves, Bella becomes even more of a model citizen, excelling further at school and adhering to curfew and cooking more often”(Arnaudin 30). Besides spending time with Jacob, Bella refines her skills as a homemaker and though she does study more, she will eventually give up on going to college because of her vampire, wifely, and motherly duties. Arnaudin also notes, “As for other duties, she takes charge of the laundry consistently cleans the house, including scrubbing the toilet is in charge of the family bookkeeping; and is generally aware when ‘a pile of things’ that she has been neglecting in terms of home maintenance accumulates”(Arnaudin 33). Bella falls into very traditional gender roles before she marries Edward, almost proving that she will be a valuable wife and with Jacob there to direct her, she is able to exist long enough for Edward to return to her. Bella says of herself, “I was like a lost moon – my planet destroyed in some cataclysmic, disaster-movie scenario of desolation – that continued, nevertheless, to circle in a tight little orbit around the empty space left behind…”(New Moon 201). Bella will not have to wait long for her planet to
return as Edward is Bella’s reward for negative behavior at the end of the second book. Throughout the first three and a half books, Bella’s behavior – emotional, mental, and physical – is defined by Edward and she does not exhibit traits of an independent female, rather a female always working in reaction to a man after being stripped of her autonomy for the sake of love at first sight.

Vampire Bella and Gothic Feminism

While Bella fails miserably at maintaining an autonomous presence in the Twilight Saga as a human, her plight is redeemed in the second half of Breaking Dawn and she becomes a vampire. From the first moment she awakes from the transformation process, Bella is physically stunning and acutely aware of her surroundings. More than one would expect from her inability to gain physical independence from Edward, Bella realizes that she is stronger than Edward and can hurt him (393). In a race with Edward, Bella realizes how powerful she is a vampire: “…I could feel it now – the raw, massive strength thrilling in my limbs. I was suddenly sure that if I wanted to tunnel under the river, to claw or beat my way straight through the bedrock, it wouldn’t take me very long…”(410). She is so strong that she is aware of Edward instead of being dragged or pulled by him. Bella says, “…I could hear Edward racing to find me. My jump had been twice as longs as his. When he reached my tree, his eyes were wide. I leaped nimbly from the branch to his die, soundlessly landing again on the balls of my feet”(412). Bella has, in only three days time, metamorphosed from weak and indirect object to formidable and noun subject of her own action sentences. Where Edward used to control their kisses, and by extension their sexual life, Bella notes, “My lips no longer shaped themselves around his; they held their own”(426). Realizing the reality of her strength, Bella tells readers, “I whipped back up onto my
feet, pulling [Edward] with me”(427). Where Edward used to pull Bella, Bella exacts dominance and control of a situation. However impressive they might be, Bella’s physical accomplishments pale in comparison to the mental autonomy she exhibits as a vampire.

Human Bella allowed others to make decisions for her and control her actions and mental state. Not so as a vampire. Newborn vampires are the most dangerous because they are volatile, unpredictable, stronger than other vampires, and have an insatiable thirst for human blood. Bella’s greatest fear previous to her transformation was causing injury or death to other humans. As such, she prepared by asking about the transformation process and willing herself to be disciplined as a newborn. Her abilities to abstain from human blood and control her emotions were underestimated by everyone in the Cullen clan. Jasper remarks of her amazing feat, “‘I’ve never seen a newborn do that – stop an emotion in its tracks that way. You were upset, but when you saw our concern, you reined it in, regained power over yourself. I was prepared to help, but you didn’t need it’(Breaking Dawn 404). Bella even maintains control over her own emotions by speaking to herself: “Keep it under control, I thought to myself. I had to watch my temper. Just like I was a young werewolf rather than a vampire”(420). Instead of repressing emotions as she previously had, Bella is able to control her thoughts for the benefit of herself and those around her. “I deliberately redirected my thoughts in order to control my emotions”(456). “Do not lose your temper, do not lose your temper, I chanted to myself. And then I was proud of myself for keeping my head”(491). Because of her incredible and impressive strength and willpower, Bella is able to be around humans the same day she wakes up from her transformation, whereas Jasper, who had been a vampire for decades, was unable to be as comfortable as Bella. Bella says, “I watched [Charlie] drive away; it wasn’t until I heard his tires hit the freeway that I realized I’d done it. I’d actually made it through the whole day without hurting Charlie. All by myself. I must
have a superpower”(517). Bella’s determination is an asset to the Cullen family and herself as they learn the powerful Volturi vampires are coming to destroy the clan.

In preparation for the battle with The Volturi, Bella learns to fight and use her power, which is not her ability to avoid killing humans; she is a “shield” or someone who can mentally block the powers of other vampires. Before she learns the extent of her abilities, she reverts to her human characteristics of relying on others for protection and doubting herself. “Though I was glad to have [Renesme] in my arms, it made me feel useless. It reminded me that in a fight with mature vampires, I was no more than an easy target”(581). However, these concerns are for naught when Bella understands just how powerful she is. Bella relies on raw emotion to utilize her power: “Abruptly, I was furious. Beyond furious, I was murderously enraged. My hopeless despair vanished entirely. A faint reddish grow highlighted the dark figures in front of me, and all I wanted in that moment was the chance to sink my teeth into them, to rip them apart”(683). Bella’s anger proves to be a most valuable advantage as she is able to protect almost twenty other vampires from danger.

There was no recoil to the elastic fabric now; in that instant of raw force, I saw that the backlash I’d felt before was of my own making – I had been clinging to that invisible part of me in self-defense, subconsciously unwilling to let it go. Now I set it free, and my shield exploded a good fifty yards out from me effortlessly, taking only a fraction of my concentration. I cold feel it flex like just another muscle, obedient to my will. (690)

In this particular context, Bella becomes a gothic feminist. She is able to protect her family and their very existence depends on her abilities. Bella knows that she will be the first to die because her powers are the reasons the other can fairly fight. As Victor Lana notes, “To examine [Rice’s] books in light of ‘gothic feminism,’ we must look carefully at Rice’s female characters. In each
novel, they are a source of power and infatuation. The female vampires basically determine the fate of the male vampires. In *Interview with the Vampire*, it is the girl vampire Claudia who causes trouble for the male vampires…”(60). As a vampire, Bella is fierce and a free agent with lives dependent on her. She learns how to be an autonomous, independent, and gains powers that challenge the oldest and strongest vampires. As a vampire, Bella Cullen is undoubtedly a gothic feminist.

However, this ending is riddled with complications because Bella’s outcome is unrealistic and she spends 400 pages of the series as a gothic feminist and the previous 1,900 floundering for identity and autonomy. In essence, Bella is involved in an unhealthy relationship, tries to commit suicide via stunts of adrenaline to hear her beloved’s voice, and is ultimately rewarded for being an object. Lana writes, “What Rice really tells us is that ‘sexual difference is a dead issue.’ The only way we can survive, male and female, is to overcome our differences and transcend the gender war. Her vampires do just that…”(114). Meyer’s vampires also do just that, but it is her humans that cause problems for the rest. Bella’s character cannot be redeemed in the short span of 400 pages because Meyer established such a weak and depraved character at the outset of the novel. Perhaps the reason Meyer’s vampires are so seductive is for the same reason as Anne Rice’s: “One of the results of reading Rice’s novels is that the reader feels an intense sympathy for the vampires, maybe even a latent desire to be somewhat like them. Their existence exerts a latent desire to be somewhat like them. Their existence exerts a powerful attraction because it consists of things many people secretly desire…”(Lana 29). The Cullen family are powerfully attractive and Bella wants nothing more to than to be one of them because they provide an escape from her bleak reality. Unfortunately for young readers, this model is dangerous because there is no way they can gain autonomy or reward for their behavior as Bella
has. For Bella to become a gothic feminist, she had to die and this offers no solution to the macabre existence many readers identify with in their own lives.
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