

FROM BUFFY TO BELLA: FEMINISM, GENDER ROLES, AND ROLE MODELS IN  
POPULAR CULTURE

by

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(Under the Direction of Jennifer Smith)

ABSTRACT

Even the earliest feminist critics expressed concern about the tendency of popular entertainment to reinforce negative gender stereotypes on impressionable young women. This paper examines the role of media in the construction of gender in today's society through a comparative textual analysis of two similar yet different series targeted to young girls—*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The Twilight Saga*. Using feminist theory as a critical framework, this paper identifies a series of shared feminist themes that are prevalent within both narratives, and then analyzes the representation of gender roles inherent within these themes. These representations are further considered within the historical context of the feminist movement to determine whether feminism is currently experiencing a regression or progression in popular culture. This paper is informed by canon feminist literature, as well as recent academic discussion of *Buffy* and *Twilight*.

INDEX WORDS: Feminism, Postfeminism, Media, Pop Culture, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The Twilight Saga*, Patriarchy, Gender, Sexuality

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*“But the absence of him is everywhere I look. It's like a huge hole has been punched through my chest. But In a way, I'm glad. The pain is the only reminder that he was real.”*

—Bella Swan, *The Twilight Saga: New Moon* (2009, Summit Entertainment)

*The Twilight Saga: New Moon*, an angst-filled drama based upon a book about a teenage girl who falls in love with a vampire, broke box office records as the biggest midnight screening and opening day in history upon its release date on November 20, 2009. It also happened to be the first midnight premiere of a blockbuster film I ever attended. A friend of mine and I had recently begun reading the *Twilight* books to see what all the hype was about. We found them to be a guilty pleasure, filled with vapid characters, absurd plot lines, and ridiculous dialogue we loved to hate. When *New Moon*, the second in *The Twilight Saga* film series hit theaters, we decided to join the throngs of black-clad, adolescent female fans attending the much-anticipated premiere. If the movie was anything like the book, we figured we were in for a good laugh.

The movie was bad, but worse than that, it was boring. As I zoned out of the glacially moving plot, I found myself studying the people around me. Not only was the theater filled with the high school girls I expected to see, but there were plenty of women my age and older as well. I vividly recall one woman old enough to be a grandmother bragging that she had seen the first film forty times. As morbidly fascinated as I was with this “cougar”-like obsession, what really caught my attention was the younger



demographic in the audience. Middle and elementary school girls were watching with wide-eyed wonder as Bella Swan fell into a deep depression after being abandoned by her vampire boyfriend, Edward Cullen. At age twenty-three, I had no problem recognizing the antifeminist messages that abound in this film for what they were, but was it reasonable to expect these children to understand that it is not okay to inflict harm upon yourself or give up on life completely at the age of 18 because you are grieving for a lost love, when *Twilight* plays that sort of behavior off as romantic? In writing about the popularity of the Spice Girls, Susan Douglas argues that when adolescent girls flock to something, “they are telling us plenty about how they experience the transition to womanhood in a society in which boys are still very much on top” (1999, p. 45). So what does it say then about our society, a supposedly feminist society, that women of all ages are obsessing over a series like *Twilight*? Are we taking a step backward in our cultural evolution by so ardently supporting a series that glamorizes this sort of negative imagery to impressionable young girls?

The following paper is a comparative textual analysis of two iconic series targeted to young girls that are representative of two decades of feminism: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997) and *Twilight* (2005). Using qualitative data gathered from a feminist reading of the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (*Buffy*) and *The Twilight Saga* (*Twilight*) series of films, this analysis examines the following research questions from a critical-cultural perspective:

- RQ1: What feminist themes are encoded into *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The Twilight Saga*?
- RQ2: How is gender represented through these feminist themes?
- RQ3: Based upon a feminist reading of these texts, is feminism currently experiencing a regression or progression in popular culture?

The purpose of this paper is to use the similarities between *Buffy* and *Twilight* to facilitate a discussion of their differences and to show how these differences are reflective of the current state of feminism in popular culture. The ultimate goal of this analysis is to look beyond whether *Buffy* and *Twilight* are “feminist” or “antifeminist” pieces of literature to determine what their immense popularity says about the culture in which they were created.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Media Studies and Gender

Even the earliest feminist critics expressed concern about the tendency of popular entertainment to reinforce negative gender stereotypes on impressionable young women. In her foundational 1792 book *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Mary Wollstonecraft expressed concern about “the social and cultural damage caused by the miseducation of young girls, by their addiction to the reading of sentimental romances, and by the misogynistic images of women perpetuated in, for instance, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*” (Gilbert and Gubar, 2007, p. 41). More recently, Bell Hooks called attention to the “millions of women who spend millions of hard-earned dollars to read material that reinforces sexist role patterns and romanticizes violence against women” (1984, p. 125). In the 1970s, a movement of feminist film critics arose that applied Wollstonecraft’s concerns about the popular literature of her time to an analysis of the popular cinema (and later television) of theirs (Stam, 2000, p. 170). These critics and theorists recognized that “women in movies reflected, perpetuated, and in some respects offered innovations on the roles of women in society” (Haskell, 1974, p. 12). Teresa de Lauretis (1989) took these observations a step further to argue that gender is not a natural construct, but rather a product of various social technologies, including cinema.

Today’s critical scholars still agree that it is necessary to understand how media represent gender because “constructions of femininity and masculinity are part of a

dominant ideology” (Hermes, 2007, p. 191), but many warn that the context is continually changing and “that the codes that confer meaning onto the signs of femininity are culturally and historically specific and will never be unambiguous or consistent” (van Zoonan, 1994, p. 149). Likewise, researchers within cultural studies stress the importance of studying media from within a “larger cultural and historical context” (Stam, 2000, p. 223). Perhaps then, from a critical and cultural perspective, one way to better understand the impact of today’s media upon the social construction of gender is through an analysis of two similar yet different series that are both “culturally and historically important” at this time: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The Twilight Saga*.

### ***Buffy the Vampire Slayer***

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is an American television series that aired from March 1997 until May 2003. The series narrative follows Buffy Summers, the latest in a long line of “Slayers,” young women chosen by fate to battle against vampires, demons, and other forces of darkness. Writer-director Joss Whedon claims to have created *Buffy* to invert the Hollywood formula of “the little blonde girl who goes into a dark alley and gets killed in every horror movie” (Billson, 2005, p. 24). Tired of this stereotype, Whedon wanted “to subvert that idea and create someone who was a hero” (Billson, 2005, p. 25). During its original seven-season run, *Buffy* averaged between four and six million viewers and reviews were positive. The series has etched a seemingly permanent place for itself in American pop culture through syndication and hundreds of tie-in products, including novels, comic books, action figures, and video games. It continues to receive attention in online fandom and parody, and it has even influenced the direction of other television shows and films.

### ***The Twilight Saga***

*Twilight* is a series of four vampire-themed fantasy-romance novels published between 2005 and 2008. The books have been adapted into a series of films collectively known as *The Twilight Saga*, and the final installment of a two-part adaptation of the fourth book is set for release in November 2012. The story arc follows Isabella “Bella” Swan, a teenage girl who moves to Forks, Washington, and falls in love with a vampire named Edward Cullen. Author Stephenie Meyer says the idea for the first novel, *Twilight* (2005), came to her in a vivid dream about a human girl and a vampire who was in love with her though he thirsted for her blood. On her website, Meyer explains that her books are centered on the themes of choice and free will, particularly Bella’s choice to live life on her own terms, which she believes to be the “foundation of feminism” (www.stepheniemeyer.com). In response to whether Bella is an “antifeminist heroine,” Meyer argues that antifeminism lies in “telling a woman she can’t do something solely because she’s a woman—taking any choice away from her specifically because of her gender” (www.stepheniemeyer.com).

Since the release of the first novel, the *Twilight* series has garnered immense popularity and commercial success. The novels have sold over 100 million copies worldwide and have been translated into at least 38 different languages (*Publishers Weekly*, 2010). The films have thus far grossed over \$2 billion in worldwide receipts (boxofficemojo.com). Dubbed by media as “The *Twilight* Phenomenon,” this series has given rise to a rabid fandom and a wide variety of collectable merchandise, including T-shirts, posters, and action figures.

## From Buffy to Bella

Both *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The Twilight Saga* have attracted a great deal of recent interest in academia. *Buffy*, in particular, has become a popular subject within feminist television criticism and gender studies. As Lorna Jowett notes in the introduction to her book *Sex and the Slayer: A Gender Studies Primer for the "Buffy" Fan*, "Joss Whedon's self-conscious presentation of his *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as a role-reversing, feminist-inflected show has made it ripe for gender criticism" (2005, p. 7). Carol Stabile argues that feminist critics are drawn to *Buffy* because it is the only television show that has ever proven truly "revolutionary in terms of challenging masculinist fantasies of protection" (2009, p. 89). According to Whedon, this perception is exactly what he intended for the show: "The very first mission statement of the show was the joy of female power: having it, using it, sharing it" (Gottlieb, 2002).

Despite the overwhelming popularity of *Twilight*, both the books and the films have received mixed reviews. Some of the most outspoken critics of the series have been feminist scholars who vehemently accuse Meyer of sexism in her portrayal of female characters, most notably through Bella Swan's obsessive behavior relating to Edward Cullen and the emphasis on his romantic hero status. According to Anna Silver, feminist scholars in both literature and media studies denounce *Twilight* because "the series perpetuates outdated and troubling gender norms" (2010, p. 130). Meyer dismisses such accusations, however, arguing just because Bella "doesn't do kung fu and she cooks for her father doesn't make her worthy of that criticism" (Valby, 2009).

When you look beneath their respective "superhero" and "damsel in distress" personas, Buffy Summers and Bella Swan actually have a great deal in common. Both

are teenage girls who fall in love with a mysterious and brooding vampire. Both must balance a secret life of supernatural danger and intrigue with the normal complexities of high school and young adulthood, and both can tell us a great deal about the impact of the media upon gender construction in today's society. The text of both series is richly layered with feminist messages, both positive and negative, for the audience of young women for whom these two supernatural protagonists have ultimately become role models. The similarities, as well as the differences, between the representations of gender presented in these texts make "from Buffy to Bella" the perfect conceptual framework for a study of feminism in today's popular culture.

### **Feminism: Regression or Progression?**

To fully understand the implications of the feminist messages encoded into *Buffy* and *Twilight*, we must consider the historical placement of each series within the feminist movement. While "second-wave" feminism in the 1960s and 1970s focused on political equality, as did the civil rights movement, the gay rights movement, the antiwar movement, and other political upheavals of the time, Sarah Banet-Weiser argues that "third-wave" feminism of the late 1980s and 1990s was more concerned with individualism and the general perception of gender in popular culture (2004, p. 334). It was against this cultural backdrop that an underground punk rock movement known as "Riot Grrrl" began addressing feminist issues such as rape, domestic abuse, sexuality, patriarchy, and female empowerment through their music and the Internet (Zobl, 2004, p. 445). The popularity of Riot Grrrl and other more mainstream media endeavors inspired children's television network Nickelodeon to begin a concentrated effort to market the trendy new rhetoric of "Girl Power" through a series of new programs that featured self-

confident, assertive, and intelligent young girls as the lead characters, beginning in 1991 with their hit series *Clarissa Explains It All* (Banet-Weiser, 2004, p. 333). With its emphasis on female empowerment, *Buffy* is clearly a product of this third-wave girl power movement. It is possible the same preteen girls who watched *Clarissa* and other similar children's programs in the early 1990s grew into the high school girls who watched *Buffy* when it premiered in 1997, making them the first generation of American girls socialized to expect a strong feminist presence in media.

Although it hit theaters barely a decade later, *Twilight* is the product of a very different sort of cultural climate. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, there has been a great deal of confusion among scholars about the state of the feminist movement in the U.S. (Lotz, 2001, p. 105). Some scholars believe we are still in the third wave of feminism, continuing the emphasis on gaining equality in popular culture rather than in the workplace or home (p. 106). Others contend that third-wave feminism, and perhaps even "feminism" itself, fizzled out in the late 1990s. We have since transitioned into a state of "post-feminism," which is viewed as a conservative backlash against the radical political and social gains made by women during the second wave (McRobbie, 2004, p. 255). Another school of thought is that we are indeed in a state of post-feminism, but that the term deserves a more positive connotation than described above. These scholars view "postfeminism" as a subset of third-wave feminism, which focuses more on the right to individual choice than collective social or political change (Lotz, 2001, p. 106). Anita Harris notes that current research on today's generation of young women indicates that they tend to "distance themselves from big 'f' feminism, although they do espouse notions of equality and choice" (2010, p. 475). This sort of ambivalence is reflected in



*Twilight*, which emphasizes the ideal of “choice” while seeming to disregard other foundational tenants of second or third-wave feminism.

The questions posed in this paper are not so much about defining the state of the feminist movement in our society—i.e. “third-wave” or “postfeminist”—but of whether we are currently experiencing a regression or progression of feminism in popular culture.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### **A Textual Analysis Approach**

To answer the research questions posed in this paper, a textual analysis was conducted of a series of shared feminist themes that are addressed in both *Buffy* and *Twilight* to determine how gender roles are represented in the two series and what potential messages these representations may convey to the young girls who make up their primary target audiences. The goal of a textual analysis is to look beneath the surface (denotative) meanings of words or actions within a narrative to examine the more implicit (connotative) social meanings. From a textual analysis approach, culture is viewed as a narrative process in which particular “texts” or “cultural artifacts” consciously or unconsciously link themselves to larger stories at play in society ([http://culturalpolitics.net/popular\\_culture/textual\\_analysis](http://culturalpolitics.net/popular_culture/textual_analysis)). For the purposes of this paper, the “texts” or “cultural artifacts” being analyzed are *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The Twilight Saga*, while the “larger story at play in society” is the state of feminism in popular media.

Carolina Acosta-Alzuru and Peggy Kreshel cite Stuart Hall (1975) in explaining that the method of textual analysis involves “three distinctive stages: (a) a ‘long preliminary soak’ in the text, which allows the analyst to focus on particular issues while preserving the ‘the big picture,’ (b) a close reading of the chosen text and preliminary identification of the discursive strategies and themes, and (c) interpretation of the

findings within the larger framework of the study” (2002, p. 147). The texts analyzed for this study are the seven seasons of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the four completed *Twilight Saga* films. Passages from the *Breaking Dawn* novel (2008) are quoted in lieu of the final film, which is not scheduled for theatrical release until November 2012. Thus far, the films have closely followed the plot of the novels, so it is likely this trend will continue with the final installment of the series.

### **Format**

Although Jane Feuer argues that film and television are not comparable from a critical standpoint because the episodic and serial nature of the television format “works against logical notions of causality and closure” inherent in a film (1986, p. 612), it is important to keep in mind that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is a completed series with a carefully crafted story arc that gives viewers an understanding of causality and a sense of closure similar to that of a film. Likewise, the fact that *The Twilight Saga* itself is a series of films gives it a serial nature similar to a television program. Thus, *Buffy* and *Twilight* are indeed comparable for the purposes of this paper.

### **Authorship**

Roland Barthes defines textual analysis as a study of the process between the reader and the text, not the author and the text. Therefore, the author should be considered as a construction for interpretation rather than the ultimate source of meaning (1968, p. 348). Because the goal of this analysis is to identify the feminist messages encoded into these texts as they may potentially be interpreted by their adolescent female viewership, authorship is not a primary concern. However, it can still be a useful tool for analytical reference. As creator, producer, and head writer of the series, Joss Whedon is

clearly the author of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Each of the *Twilight* films, however, has been helmed by a different director. The series has instead relied heavily on two other common denominators to provide continuity to the storyline: screenwriter Melissa Rosenberg, who has penned all five screen adaptations, and novelist Stephenie Meyer, who was granted creative consultation rights for the first three films and a producing credit for *Breaking Dawn, Parts 1 and 2* (2011 and 2012). Filmmakers behind *The Twilight Saga* have professed to keeping the films as faithful to the original novels as possible (Carroll, 2008). Although differences between the adaptations and the source material do inevitably exist, they are minor and do not reflect the integrity of the feminist messages encoded into Meyer's original work. Therefore, Meyer will be considered the author of *Twilight* for the purposes of this paper, just as Whedon will be referred to as the author of *Buffy*.

**CHAPTER 4**

**FEMINIST THEMES AND REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER:**

**THE WEAKER SEX**

**Damsels in Distress**

One of the most prominent feminist themes represented throughout both *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The Twilight Saga* is the idea that women are the weaker sex. In most romance or fantasy stories, the female protagonist is expected to rely upon the male hero for protection, i.e. the classic “damsel in distress.” As cited earlier, however, both the character of Buffy and the program itself were created with the intention of inverting this gender stereotype (p. 7). Jowett observes that from the outset of the series, “*Buffy* plays with role reversal: the female is the vampire slayer, not the victim” (2005, p.19). Time and again Buffy proves that despite being a woman, and sometimes even because of it, she is more than capable of taking care of herself. In a particularly illustrative scene from the final season, Buffy’s vampire ex-boyfriend shows up in the midst of an apocryphal fight with Caleb, a misogynistic evangelist of evil. “I heard maybe you needed a hand,” Angel tells Buffy as he moves to intervene. Buffy stops him with a look and a hand on his chest and Angel nods, saying, “Ah—it’s one of those things you have to finish yourself” (“End of Days,” 2003).

Scenes like this are typical of a show like *Buffy*, in which many of the women are characterized as being physically equal to or stronger than men. (Willow, Buffy’s best friend and a witch, has arguably developed into the most powerful character by the end of

the series. Glory, a female hell-god introduced in season five, is Buffy's physically most powerful foe.) Buffy is threatened by many enemies during her high school and young adult years—including humans, vampires, and werewolves. Unlike the typical “damsel in distress,” however, Buffy always finds a way to defeat those enemies herself without having to rely upon physically stronger male characters for protection. Of course, Buffy does have some unfair advantages over most distressing damsels in the physical strength department. She is the Slayer, and as such she is endowed with the gifts of supernatural strength and speed, enhanced senses, and accelerated healing—abilities similar to those of a vampire. As a character, Buffy subverts the male power embodied in the traditional vampire and its slayer, and Vivian Chin interprets this as “using an antifeminist model, the helpless blonde, to present an alternative, feminist possibility” (2003, p. 94). For all intents and purposes, Buffy Summers is a superhero, while many other female protagonists, such as *Twilight's* Bella Swan, are simply ordinary girls. It is not Buffy's Slayer powers, however, that make her a strong feminist character and a positive role model for young girls—it is her attitude and overall characterization.

Buffy is not dependent upon men, either on the battlefield or in everyday life. Despite being surrounded by a number of powerful men throughout the series who often fight by her side and would gladly shelter her from harm (Angel, Riley, Spike), Buffy refuses to sit back and play the part of the damsel in distress. After Buffy defeats Caleb in the scene described above, she asks Angel what he is doing in Sunnydale. The vampire quips, “Not saving the damsel in distress, that's for sure.” To which Buffy replies, “Oh, you know me. Not much with the damseling” (“Chosen,” 2003). This exchange illustrates the way Buffy's character was crafted by Whedon to act as the

“hero” in a show influenced by film and television genres that are culturally coded as being masculine (action, horror, science fiction), rather than as a “heroine” who perseveres despite being a victim.

In her analysis of slasher films, Carol Clover describes the “final girl” who usually survives the serial killer and the threat he represents as a stand-in for the traditional male hero. Such a character is necessitated by the fact that “abject terror” is “gendered feminine” in our culture (1992, p. 522). As a result of their origins, Clover observes that final girls tend to be “boyish.” They embody masculine traits, such as curiosity and logic, and have androgynous names to match, such as “Sidney” (*Scream*) or “Laurie” (*Halloween*). While Buffy does display some masculine characteristics, such as a tendency to define herself by her profession/career (the Slayer) and the use of violence, she balances these out with a variety of feminine traits as well. At first glance, Buffy appears to be incredibly “girly.” She is fashion-conscious, paints her nails, wears pink, and wants to go to prom. Even Buffy’s name is reflective of her femininity, and “its inclusion into the show’s title underlines its irony” (Jowett, 2005, p. 22). Far from being androgynous, this blonde and tanned California girl is both hyper-masculine in her physical abilities and hyper-feminine in her appearance. Thus, not only does Buffy embody the tension between feminism and femininity faced by many women in a post-feminist society (Arthurs, 2003, p. 320), but she also cannot be written off as either a heroine dependent upon the male hero for protection, or a surrogate for the male hero himself. The Slayer is a hero in her own right.

In refusing to play the part of the damsel in distress, Buffy also challenges the masculine role of the protector. Although this theme underpins the entire series, it is

especially poignant in season four when Buffy clashes with the Initiative, an all-male commando unit that moves into Sunnydale to study and fight the demon population of the Hellmouth. Much to their dismay, the Slayer proves on a number of occasions that she needs no help protecting herself or the people she cares about. After Buffy rescues Giles, her Watcher and surrogate father figure, from a horrible curse gone wrong, Riley, her current boyfriend and an Initiative member, comments: “You’re really strong. Like, Spiderman strong ... And, you’re in charge. You’re, like, make the plan, execute the plan, no one giving you orders” (“A New Man,” 2000).

The soldiers of the Initiative are hyper-masculinized in build. Extraordinarily tall and muscular, they contrast visually with Buffy’s petite, more traditionally feminine frame. Although the leader of the Initiative, Psychology Professor Maggie Walsh, is also a woman, this character too is “masculinized by her roles as professor, scientist, and leader” (Jowett, 2005, p. 175). The dynamic between these two characters is illustrated in one humorous yet revealing scene where Buffy, dressed in pink, is surrounded by Initiative soldiers decked out in traditional military camouflage. When Walsh suggests that Buffy get “suited up” for the mission, she replies, “Oh, you mean the camo and stuff? I thought about it, but on me it’s gonna look all ‘Private Benjamin.’ Don’t worry. I’ve patrolled in this halter many times” (“The I In Team,” 2000).

The message here to young girls is that not only are women capable of taking care of themselves without masculine protection, but they also do not have to conform to masculine norms in order to do so. Jowett points to Dana Scully (*X-Files*) and Sydney Bristow (*Alias*) as examples of female television characters operating in a “man’s world,” who fight with masculine techniques (guns, science, technology) and adopt masculine



values (independence, logic, justice) to prove that they are “just as good as men” (2005, p. 20). As is illustrated by the scene described above, Buffy does not feel she has anything to prove to the Initiative. Although she does briefly attempt to work alongside them, she refuses to conform to their way of dressing, fighting, and thinking. In Buffy’s mind, she is not entering the military-like “man’s world” of the Initiative. Rather, by insinuating themselves into the practice of demon hunting, these male soldiers are entering hers.

As the Slayer, Buffy comes from a long line of women entrusted with the task of protecting the world from supernatural evil. The title sequence of each episode in the first season (1997) tells us: “In every generation there is a chosen one. She alone can stand against the vampires, the demons, and the forces of darkness. She is the Slayer.” Nowhere in the series lore is there any indication that *he* could be called as the Slayer—it is always *she*. Like those who have come before her, Buffy draws her strength from the feminine sources of magic and mysticism, rather than the masculine science and technology employed by the Initiative. Her weapons are phallic and penetrative (this also relates to the sexual subtext of vampire lore), but they are generally archaic and primitive. Her preference for crossbows, swords, and wooden stakes can be read as an assertion of the feminine resistance to technological weapons (guns) because they are gendered masculine. Even when she is deep in the inner sanctum of the Initiative, surrounded by hyper-masculine soldiers, Buffy’s methods never change. And at the end of the season, it is not the military (masculine) methods of the Initiative that are able to defeat Adam, a monstrous hybrid of robot and demon created by a now deceased Walsh; it is a magical (feminine) spell performed by Willow which empowers Buffy with the essences of her

tightly knit circle of friends—of which Buffy is the hand, Willow is the spirit, Xander is the heart, and Giles is the mind (“Primeval,” 2000).

In a final act of role reversal to round out the season, Buffy doesn’t join Riley’s military “boy’s club.” Instead, he leaves the Initiative to join her more feminine support group, nicknamed the “Scooby Gang.” Buffy’s inner circle was first referred to as the Scooby Gang by Xander in season two (“What’s My Line, Part 1,” 1997) as a reference to the group of ghost-hunting teenagers from the cartoon *Scooby-Doo*, and the name stuck for the remainder of the series. This reference in itself is an act of role reversal in that the cast of the original *Scooby-Doo* cartoon, *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You?* (1969-1970), featured two women who filled stereotypically weak female gender roles. Daphne, although beautiful and fashionable, typically played the part of the damsel in distress. Velma, while being the smartest member of the team and the one most often responsible for solving the case, was portrayed as an unattractive geek. Neither of these women held a leadership role on the team. Whedon inverts these stereotypes by imbuing Buffy and Willow with Daphne’s fashion sense and Velma’s brains respectively, while still positioning them as the most powerful members and strongest leaders of the team.

Although Buffy was primarily created by Whedon to counteract the damsel in distress stereotype when it comes to physical powers, it is important to note that her value as a feminist character and role model for young girls lies in more than just her ability to beat up the boys. However, Buffy’s feminist persona beyond the Slayer is often overlooked or undervalued by feminist critics. S.E. Smith, for example, describes Buffy as a “ditz blonde who can’t manage the real world without the assistance of her friends” (2009). It is true that Buffy’s struggles with grades, managing money, and holding down

a job are stereotypical of the “Valley Girl” that Buffy’s character was meant to invert. For example, her failure to obtain a driver’s license despite having enhanced Slayer reflexes is comical, but also perpetuates the negative stereotype that women can’t drive (“Band Candy,” 1998). Although Buffy often expresses the desire to lead a normal life, killing demons usually comes easier to the Slayer than solving everyday problems. She undeniably hits her lowest point as a feminist and a character in season six while struggling with the recent loss of her mother in conjunction with her own death and magical resurrection. Despite being over eighteen, Buffy returns from the grave unable to care for herself and her younger sister Dawn without the help of Giles, who bails the Summers girls out of a serious financial crisis. She accepts her mentor’s apparently substantial check with only a token protest, claiming it makes her “feel safe” knowing he is “always” going to be there (“Life Serial,” 2001). Giles fulfills the masculine role of the caretaker for Buffy, and she uses her reliance upon him as an excuse to drop out of college and not worry about a long-term “life plan” for herself or Dawn. Woefully unprepared to financially support herself when Giles suddenly returns to England, Buffy is fired from a series of part-time jobs before eventually settling for a degrading position at a fast food restaurant. After Riley makes a surprise return to Sunnydale with his strong and beautiful new wife by his side, an insecure Buffy turns to the vampire Spike for sex. She begs him to “tell me you love me ... tell me you want me,” thus seeking male validation to boost her flagging self-esteem (“As You Were,” 2001).

Season six has sparked a great deal of controversy among both feminists and *Buffy* fans. Smith, for example, criticizes Whedon for putting Buffy into some “very classic victim positions” that she deals with quite poorly. While it is true that Buffy plays

the damsel in distress in these instances, part of what sets *Buffy* apart as a feminist program is that neither the show nor the other characters condone her behavior. Buffy is clearly making poor choices—the viewers know it, her friends know it, and even she knows it. Before exiting Sunnydale in a military chopper, Riley takes a moment with Buffy to discuss the extreme changes in her behavior since they last met. He reminds her that although she’s “in a bad place right now,” it doesn’t change the fact that she is still “one hell of a woman” (“As You Were,” 2001). Riley’s visit forces Buffy to take stock of what her life has become, and she’s not happy with what she finds. When Giles apologizes for abandoning her a few episodes later, she assures him he did the right thing. “It’s time *I* was the adult” (“Grave,” 2002).

By the time season seven opens, a much more grounded and mature Buffy is balancing a healthier part-time job with her Slayer duties and training Dawn to fight vampires. Although Xander still occasionally chauffeurs the Summers women to work and school, Buffy is seen driving her mother’s car with no problems in one episode, revealing that she has also developed that skill (“Him,” 2002). Buffy Summers is a hero, but she’s also deeply flawed, which is part of what makes her character so appealing to viewers. The key to a feminist reading of the character is that Buffy is able to recognize and learn from her mistakes. Over the course of the series, Buffy grows up, and by watching and learning from her mistakes, young girls are encouraged to do the same.

Sadly, the same cannot be said for Bella Swan. In *Twilight*, the negative gender stereotype of the “damsel in distress” is upheld because women in the series are almost exclusively portrayed as being passive and weak, both physically and emotionally. It becomes clear early in the narrative that Bella is firmly ensconced into the category of the

rescued, while Edward serves time and again as the rescuer. If not Edward, then some other male character is always coming to Bella's aid, such as Jacob Black (Bella's best friend and a werewolf), Sam Uley (the leader of Jacob's wolf pack), or Carlisle Cullen (Edward's vampire father and a doctor who often patches Bella up after accidents).

Although the damsel in distress literary trope has been romanticized by popular entertainment for decades, feminist scholars warn that traditional notions of male gallantry are, in reality, a form of female oppression. Marilyn Frye argues that door-opening and other similar services provided by men to women are symbolic gestures that imply women are incapable. (Doors, for example, must be opened for people who are in some way incapacitated and unable to open them for themselves.) "The message of the false helpfulness of male gallantry is female dependence, the invisibility or insignificance of women, and contempt for women" (1979, p. 43). This message of "false helpfulness" is perpetuated throughout *Twilight* in each of the three ways Frye describes.

First, the damsel in distress aspect of Bella's persona implies a strong "female dependence" upon men. In addition to counting on Edward and other males for protection from the vast number of enemies she is physically incapable of fighting—including humans, vampires, and werewolves—Bella comes to rely upon her boyfriend to look after her everyday needs as well. Silver argues that Edward frequently refers to or treats Bella as a child, thus infantilizing her to the point of not only being her lover, but also a sort of pseudo-father figure (2009, p. 125). For example, Edward sleeps with Bella all night, every night—not in a sexual way, but to provide security and comfort. We see in *New Moon* (2009) that she suffers from terrible nightmares when he is not in the room with her. He insists upon driving Bella everywhere, whether in his car or her own

vehicle. In *Twilight* (2008), he even tries to buckle her seatbelt as he whisks her away from James, Victoria, and Laurent—a nomadic coven of vampires who threaten to kill her. Other scenes depict Edward reminding Bella to eat (*Twilight*); insisting she take part in normal teenage experiences, such as attending prom or celebrating her birthday (*Twilight, New Moon*); packing her bags when they need to hastily retreat from Forks (*Twilight*); and filling out her college applications, without her prior knowledge or permission (*Eclipse*, 2010). Bella is habitually carried around by Edward and later Jacob. Edward, Jacob, and Carlisle all tend to klutzy Bella's numerous cuts and bruises as though she were a small child.

Heath (2011) warns that it is common for young girls to fall prey to controlling, paternalistic men because they are starved for fatherly love and attention. This is certainly the case with Bella. Although well-meaning, her own father, Charlie, is horribly inept at parenting. Because she is used to being left to fend for herself by her scatterbrained and childlike mother Renée, Bella seems to prefer it this way. Upon arriving at her father's home in Forks to little fatherly fanfare, her voice-over tells viewers: "That's the great thing about Charlie. He doesn't crowd" (*Twilight*). With both of her biological parents, Bella falls into the role of caretaker—also a stereotypical woman's role that many *Twilight* female characters play (Bella, Emily, Esme). Bella naturally transitions from taking care of Renée to cooking and keeping house for Charlie, who is somehow unable to handle even the most basic of domestic chores despite being a competent policeman who has lived on his own for years. Instead, Charlie enjoys the stereotypically masculine hobbies of fishing and watching sports on the big screen with his buddies while his daughter cooks and cleans for him. Because of her upbringing, it is

understandable that Bella would act like a child around men and cooperate with their caring for her, but this is not a healthy message for young girls about how women should relate to men. As Heath points out, “A loving relationship is one that is mutual, not paternalistic, not controlling. A woman needs a partner, not a daddy for her significant other” (2011, p. 44). Ironically, Edward’s paternalism is literal—he is old enough to be Bella’s great-grandfather.

Second, the message of “invisibility or insignificance of women” is perpetuated in the way that the women of *Twilight* are limited (with a few exceptions) to stereotypical female roles as girlfriends, caretakers, or vengeful lovers. In her groundbreaking 1973 article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey argues that Hollywood cinema favors a predominately “male gaze,” which privileges the male viewer in terms of both narrative and spectatorship, relegating the female viewer on and off-screen to a role of silence and passivity (p. 713). While female viewers of *Twilight* are certainly meant to take a more active role in the viewing process off-screen than Mulvey describes—for example, male characters in both *Twilight* and *Buffy* often appear shirtless, making them objects of sexual desire for female viewers (p. 718)—the female characters within the narrative play mostly silent and passive roles on-screen.

Bella is portrayed as being extraordinarily shy and socially awkward. The only scenes in which she appears to be comfortable and relaxed around her peers are those in which Edward is also present. After Edward leaves Forks in *New Moon*, a grief-stricken Bella cuts human friends out of her life almost completely. She only agrees to go to the movies with Mike to prevent Charlie from sending her to live with her mother. When Edward returns to school in *Eclipse*, he and Bella appear to once again become part of the

normal teenage fold. The fact that Bella is only capable of social interaction when Edward (or Jacob) is by her side reveals that she draws her confidence and security from her romantic partners. This sends the message to young girls that they need a boyfriend to feel good about themselves and fit in with the crowd. It also paints a picture that is disturbingly reminiscent of a stereotypical submissive wife following silently alongside her husband, speaking only when spoken to.

Finally, a “contempt for women” is shown throughout the series in the way that Bella is characterized. In addition to being physically unable to protect herself, Bella is graphically portrayed as being clumsy and frail in everyday life. Heath describes Bella as a “slapstick comedian without the comedy” (2011, p. 37). She trips over her own two feet, faints at the sight of blood, and makes a fool of herself in gym class (*Twilight*). She is emotionally weak in that she cannot cope without Edward being in her life. “You can’t ... You just can’t say stuff like that to me. You can’t,” she pathetically whimpers from her hospital bed, working herself into a near panic after Edward suggests she would be better off having never met him (*Twilight*). When the vampire actually does break up with her in *New Moon*, Bella falls into such a deep depression that she is practically catatonic for much of the film.

Bella also is socially weak—at least, when it comes to human companionship. We learn early in *Twilight* that Bella never really had any friends growing up other than her flaky mother. She jokes with a classmate on her first day at Forks High School that they kicked her out of Phoenix for being “too pale,” revealing how insecure she felt among the stereotypically tan and athletic girls of her old school. Although a core group of students in Forks readily accepts Bella, she is never really interested in being their



friend. When she does make an effort to spend time with other students, her interactions are forced and awkward. Bella simply does not know how to relate to others her own age, nor does she seem interested in learning. The only real exception is Jacob, who is like Edward in that he is both supernatural (a werewolf) and romantically interested in Bella.

Critics and fans of the character agree that Bella Swan resonates strongly with young girls (and women) because they relate to some of her feelings of awkwardness and insecurity, not to mention her “crush” on the seemingly perfect boy (Heath, 2011, p. 36). This is understandable, at least to some extent. Who hasn’t made a fool of themselves in gym class or felt like the ugly duckling? Silver counters, however, that Bella’s deficiencies go far beyond that of a typical teenage awkward phase. In the context of her relationship with Edward, Bella’s “gracelessness provides numerous opportunities, particularly in *Twilight*, for Meyer to demonstrate the dynamic in their relationship of perpetual rescuer and rescued” (2009, p. 125). Until the final half of *Breaking Dawn* when Bella herself is changed into a vampire, the “heroine” of *The Twilight Saga* is relegated to the role of the damsel in distress—a part she plays so skillfully and girls seem to relate to so easily that feminists have understandably become concerned.

As Heath points out, Bella “reflects the tension girls around the world experience between accepting and resisting socially constructed gender roles” (2011, p. 36). In representing Bella as a stereotypically weak female, Meyer is sending the message to young girls that they are neither capable of nor expected to take care of themselves. It is the man’s role to care for the woman, and any woman who lacks such a man is simply hopeless. Everyone has awkward moments, especially teenage girls, but part of growing

up means developing a confidence in one's own skin. Unlike Buffy, Bella never really does any of that—at least not until she becomes a vampire. Sadly, this transformation is not enough to redeem her as a feminist character (more on that later).

### **Knights in Shining Armor**

Where would our damsels be without their “knights in shining armor”? Although *Buffy* and *Twilight* are primarily targeted to young girls, it is important to consider the representations of male characters because their behavior may also influence audience perceptions of gender roles and healthy male/female relationships. As with the women, the representation of men in the *Buffy* universe is much more diverse and complex than in *Twilight*. As Jowett notes, “If *Buffy* is a negotiation of gendered identity, then this must affect men as well as women” (2005, p. 95). On the surface, Buffy's first and primary love interest, Angel, bears many similarities to Edward Cullen. Both are mysterious and brooding vampires, tortured by the evil inherent in their vampiric natures. In seeking redemption for his crimes, Angel is directed to Sunnydale to “help” the new Slayer (“Becoming Part One,” 1998). He first attempts to do this from a distance, following in the shadows, poised to step in and protect the young girl when needed. Buffy, however, is not impressed. The first time she and Angel officially meet, the Slayer turns the tables on her pursuer, knocking him down in a dark alley and demanding to know why he is following her (“Welcome to the Hellmouth,” 1997). Later, when Buffy catches Angel following her in a dark alley yet again, she becomes annoyed and stops to confront him. “You know, being stalked isn't really a big turn-on for girls” (“When She Was Bad,” 1997).

Buffy's relationship with Angel begins much the same way as Bella's does with Edward—an older man following around a teenage girl under the guise of protection—but there are several key differences to keep in mind when reading the text of their relationship. For example, as their initial meeting illustrates, Buffy is physically equal to Angel. Not only can she hold her own in a fight, but she can also hold her own in a fight against *him*. As the romantic hero of the series, Angel is the only male character to ever successfully use physical means to rescue Buffy from danger (Jowett, 2005, p.152). However, Buffy spends just as much time, if not more, saving and protecting him. This sort of role reversal places their relationship on more of an equal ground than that of the shining knight and distressing damsel. Although initially insisting that Buffy needs someone to “watch her back” (“When She Was Bad,” 1997), Angel's willingness to step back and allow Buffy to finish off Caleb in the series finale without protest illustrates the way he has come to respect her capabilities (“Chosen,” 2003).

This role reversal is a common theme in Buffy's relationships, both romantic and platonic. However, some of Buffy's male companions are more capable of accepting it than others. Riley, for example, often feels emasculated by Buffy's physical strength, even to the point of voluntarily taking the military grade steroids prescribed by the Initiative just to have a chance of keeping up with her on the battlefield (“Out of My Mind,” 2000). This attitude and behavior is condoned neither by Buffy nor the series itself, and it eventually becomes a key factor in destroying their relationship.

Then, there is the obvious issue of stalking. From the very first scene with Angel, *Buffy* sends the message to young girls that stalking is dangerous and unhealthy, even when it springs from seemingly honorable motives. This point is further driven home in

season two when the gypsy curse that restored Angel's soul is broken, and he resumes the characteristics of his evil alter ego, Angelus ("Surprise," 1998). Angelus displays the stereotypical traits of a dangerous, older ex-boyfriend and stalker. He skulks outside Buffy's window, leaves threatening notes, kills Willow's fish, and warns Buffy's mother (who believes Angel is just a college student Buffy used to date) that he may try to kill himself if her daughter does not take him back. Thus, Angelus displays behavior that is frighteningly realistic for women. Spike also stalks Buffy in season five. Although his actions are portrayed as much more comical (looking through her underwear drawer, stealing a sweater, lurking outside her house so he can pretend to accidentally bump into her when she leaves), they are still clearly coded as danger signs. Buffy, her mother, and her friends all comment that Spike, although now physically unable to hurt people due to an Initiative implant in his brain, is still dangerous and unstable. This prompts Buffy to ask Willow to perform a "de-invite" spell on Buffy's house and rescind the vampire's invitation ("Crush," 2001).

While *Buffy* is lauded for its representation of female power, it is also worth noting that the series celebrates the men who work alongside and support powerful women as well. Many of the best representations of this kind can be found not among Buffy's lovers, but within her friends and family. Xander, for example, is a gender role-reversing character in that he more often acts as the damsel in distress than the knight in shining armor. Early in the series, Xander struggles with a desire to fulfill the "hero" role and protect Buffy, although he is portrayed as physically unable to do so. (Unlike Buffy and Willow, Xander has no supernatural powers and is often knocked out or incapacitated in fights.) Although Xander certainly has the guts, the role of the traditional hero is not

one he is destined to play. Instead, Xander becomes the “heart” of the Scooby Gang, someone who provides useful information, advice, or a shoulder to lean on. He does save the world in season six, but it is through his friendship with Willow rather than traditional masculine heroism. Dark Willow’s sarcastic remark, “You’re going to stop me by telling me you love me,” is almost exactly what Xander does (“Grave,” 2002). As Jowett observes, the fact that “Xander represents emotion, love, and friendship is part of the project of disassociating gender and behavior: more conventionally the ‘heart’ of the Scooby family would be female” (2005, p. 134). Xander inverts the stereotype of women being the weaker sex, but he does not feel emasculated by the strength of Buffy or Willow (unlike Riley). Although Xander does eventually select a stereotypically masculine occupation (construction) and often drives the Summers women around town, it doesn’t take away from his representation as a positive, role-reversing male character.

The male representations in *Twilight*, however, are much more distressing. While the women of the series are stereotyped as passive, childlike, and weak, the men are characterized as controlling, angry, and abusive—none more so than Edward Cullen. Long before they are officially dating, Edward takes it upon himself to protect the clumsy and trouble-prone Bella. After being rescued from a group of attempted rapists, a shaken Bella asks Edward if he has been following her, to which the vampire eerily replies, “I feel very protective of you” (*Twilight*). Soon after that, Bella turns around in her own bedroom to find Edward watching her. When asked if he has been “doing that often,” he replies, “only for the past couple of months.” Rather than being horrified by this stalker-like behavior, Bella finds Edward’s preoccupation with her safety romantic and allows it to continue. Like Angelus, Edward exhibits dangerous behaviors in this fantasy story

that are far too realistic for a series targeted to young girls. But when Angelus breaks into Buffy's room to watch her sleep at night, it paints a strikingly different picture for impressionable viewers than similar scenes of Edward watching over Bella, which are coded as sweet and comforting. Thus, not only does Bella condone Edward's dangerous behavior, but the series does as well. Danger is a common element in many romance novels, but Heath argues the greatest danger in *Twilight* is Edward and Bella's relationship, many aspects of which "normalize abuse in the name of love. This is more than a romance novel. It is a story that is potentially dangerous to young readers who may internalize abuse as part of the romance package" (2011, p. 22).

As the series progresses, so does Edward's overprotectiveness. He is jealous of Bella's friendships with other males, sabotages her truck to keep her from sneaking out of town to visit Jacob, bribes members of his vampire family to spy on her, and lies to her when she is in danger. Meyer describes Edward's overprotectiveness as the "tragic flaw" in his character: "Edward's big mistake is overreaction. It's in his nature to be too extreme ... and it makes him unreasonable" ([www.stepheniemeyer.com](http://www.stepheniemeyer.com)). The problem with Meyer's assessment is that she underplays the violence and rage underlining these "extreme" reactions. In any other context, Edward's behavior would be interpreted as that of a controlling and abusive boyfriend, but in *Twilight* these transgressions are largely ignored or played off as "natural" and even "admirable" masculine protective behavior. Jealousy, obsession, and violence—all are acceptable in the name of love. Bell Hooks warns against excusing or overlooking male violence in the name of female protection, as often happens within popular entertainment: "The more violent the male hero is (usually in his quest to save or protect a woman/victim), the more he receives love

and affirmation from women” (1984, p. 123). In *Twilight*, acts of male violence and aggression by Edward (and Jacob) are portrayed as being committed out of love for Bella, and therefore viewers are prone to forgiveness.

**CHAPTER 5**

**FEMINIST THEMES AND REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER:**

**SEXUALITY AND SEX**

**Bad Girls**

A second feminist theme heavily encoded into *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The Twilight Saga* is the idea that female sexuality is inherently evil. The roots of this negative stereotype run deep, grounded in the patriarchal religious belief that women are responsible for the temptation and downfall of mankind. In 1405, Christine de Pizan wrote that all educated men “concur in one conclusion: that the behavior of women is inclined to and full of every vice” (p. 14). This stigma is present in *Buffy* on numerous occasions, from the hyper-sexualized representations of the evil female vampires to the Sunnydale townspeople attempting to burn witches at the stake (“Gingerbread,” 1999).

One particularly sickening storyline falls within a context of religious patriarchy similar to that which de Pizan and her first-wave feminist contemporaries cried out against. The season seven episode “Dirty Girls” (2003) opens with the misogynistic evangelist Caleb meeting a “Potential Slayer” on the side of the road at night. Beneath his priest’s collar, Caleb is a sadistic sociopath with a pathological hatred of women. He compares the terrified teenage girl to the “whore of Babylon” before brutally murdering her, saying, “There’s no blame here. You were born dirty, born without a soul.” For the next four episodes, Caleb continues to use patriarchal religion as his justification for killing “dirty girls” and “purifying” the Slayer line. He cites the biblical story of creation



in explaining that Buffy herself will eventually come to him out of “curiosity,” because that is “woman’s first sin. I offer her an apple. What can she do but take it?” (“Dirty Girls,” 2003).

The symbolism in this storyline references Eve’s decision to eat a forbidden piece of fruit, which resulted in the supposed damnation of mankind (Genesis 3:6). In the Western (Protestant and Catholic) interpretation of the creation story, Eve’s invitation for Adam to join her in eating the fruit is explicitly sexual. Caleb views Buffy and all women like her (the Potentials) as objects of sexual desire that form a dangerous temptation to him and other men. Therefore, they are all evil and must be killed. It’s not their fault, of course. As women, they are all “born with that gaping maw that wants to open up and suck out a man’s marrow” (“Dirty Girls,” 2003). Because this belief is embodied by Caleb, who is a villain, it is clearly coded within the series as being false. Contrary to what Caleb preaches, exploring one’s sexuality in the *Buffy* universe does not automatically cast a female character into the role of a dirty or “bad girl.”

Buffy is sexually active, but she does not use her sexuality as a weapon or an artifice. This sort of stereotypical behavior is reserved instead for female characters who are already coded as bad for other reasons. Faith, for example, is represented as bad because she murders a human, but she also embodies the negative stereotype of the wily temptress (“Bad Girls,” 1999). After switching bodies with Buffy, she toys with Spike, seductively taunting: “I could ride you at a gallop until your legs buckled and your eyes rolled up. I’ve got muscles you’ve never even dreamed of” (“Who Are You?” 2000). She then has sex with Riley, asking him, “Am I a bad girl? Do you want to hurt me?” Both Dark Willow and Vamp Willow also behave in a similarly erotic fashion as a way to

further distinguish them from the character's normal "good girl" persona. Upon seeing her vampire doppelgänger for the first time, Willow remarks, "That's me as a vampire? I'm so evil and skanky" ("Doppelgängland," 1999).

When Buffy does occasionally use her sexuality to toy with men or get what she wants, this behavior is presented as negative and out of character (Buttsworth, 2002, p. 190). For example, Buffy wears a revealing dress and engages in a sensual dance with Xander to make Angel jealous in the season two episode "When She Was Bad" (1997). Not only is this stereotypical behavior coded as unusual for Buffy (it is attributed to her suffering from post traumatic stress after a recent brush with death), but the episode title even labels it as "bad." As Jowett observes, for Buffy "sexual purity is not essential, and her power is not dependent upon retaining it" (2005, p. 61). Instead, "Buffy as the Slayer embodies the female as the moral guardian," and she maintains sexual (moral) purity despite having an active sex life (p. 66).

In addition, most of the "good girls" in the series are portrayed as having healthy sexual relationships, including Willow (with Oz and later Tara), Anya (with Xander), and Buffy (with Riley). Faith, on the other hand, prefers meaningless one-night stands, such as when she seduces Xanders into losing his virginity with her in a sleazy motel and kicks him out, clothes in hand, immediately after ("The Zeppo," 1999). Created as a foil for Buffy to represent a Slayer who makes all the wrong choices (Jowett, 2005, p. 84), Faith connects sex with slaying: "Isn't it funny how slaying just makes you hungry and horny?" ("Faith, Hope, and Trick," 1998). Women in the *Buffy* universe are powerful and sexy, and sometimes it is their power that makes them sexy. Spike's obsession with killing Buffy, for example, eventually becomes sexual in nature. Angelus and Dracula

also objectify the Slayer sexually. In the contrast between Faith and Buffy, however, we can see that sex appeal is not the only power allotted to women within the series narrative. Unlike Faith, Buffy does not need to “get off” on slaying (“Bad Girls,” 1999).

Caleb receives his power from the First Evil, a non-corporeal being manifested from all the evil in existence (“Amends,” 1998). Again, the symbolism here points to Western religious tradition, in which Eve’s decision to eat the fruit is believed to be the first sin. Thus, not only is this stereotype coded as being false, but it also is represented as a product of the very oldest and deepest form of evil. It causes the deaths of many young women, not all of whom are murdered by Caleb. A Potential Slayer named Chloe is convinced by the First Evil to hang herself rather than try to fight in a useless war against his forces (“Get It Done,” 2003).

Caleb proceeds to best Buffy in battle twice, a rare feat in the Slayer universe, but one that is by no means coincidental. The power Caleb receives from the First Evil, which stems literally and figuratively from patriarchal religion, dwarfs many of Buffy’s foes from earlier seasons. De Pizan is not the only feminist to cite patriarchal religion as a justification for the oppression of women. Centuries later, during the second wave of feminism, Kate Millett argued that patriarchal religion constructs a “theology whose basic postulates are male supremacist” and functions to “uphold and validate the patriarchal structure” (1970, p. 340). Third-wave theorist Wendy Lynne Lee observed more recently that

“among the most striking of the apparent contradictions of the early twenty-first century is that of the undeniable economic, political, and social progress made by women in the face of an all too often violent and fanatical resurgence of religious fundamentalism” (2010, p. 149).

In other words, negative ideas about female sexuality inherent within religious fundamentalism are difficult for feminists to combat because such beliefs are so deeply ingrained in those who practice the religion.

Religious symbolism is also so deeply ingrained in our culture that even people who do not participate in patriarchal religion still recognize the meaning. Why else would the allusions to Eve and original sin be such an effective narrative device (both in *Buffy* and in *Twilight*)? It is also symbolically significant that Buffy finally kills Caleb (without the help of Angel) by slicing him upwards vertically in half from between his legs, literally castrating him (“Chosen,” 2003). Female power will always triumph over evil in *Buffy* because female sexuality is not portrayed as having evil roots. In this way, the series inverts yet another negative gender stereotype.

The theme of female sexuality being inherently evil rears its ugly head in *Twilight* long before the story even truly begins, as do the allusions to patriarchal religion. The cover art of the first novel depicts a pair of comely hands emerging from the darkness, holding a luscious red apple, as though offering it up to the reader. The following Bible verse prefaces the story: “But of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die,” (Genesis 2:17, KJV). The symbolism of the apple and the excerpt from the biblical account of creation, which is also translated into the film through a scene where Edward catches an apple Bella drops in the school cafeteria, represents Bella and her sexuality as a feminine/mortal object of temptation for Edward, who in contrast is depicted as an immortal and godlike creature. This alludes to the religious idea that man is superior to woman because Adam

was “created” in the “image” of God (Genesis 1:27, KJV), while Eve was “taken out of man” and created from one of his ribs (Genesis 2:23, KJV).

The representation of female sexuality as a temptation for man is clearly illustrated through Edward’s physical reactions to Bella’s body. He hungers for her blood, so much so that he is forced to leave school for a few days after they first meet just to get away from her tantalizing smell. Blood lust is commonly equated with sexual desire in vampire lore, and in the case of Edward and Bella, it is doubly so. Bella is “forbidden fruit” for the vampire not only because she is human and the Cullens abstain from drinking human blood for moral reasons, but also because she is the woman he loves and Edward believes couples should abstain from sex before marriage. As their romantic relationship turns physical, Edward must live in constant fear of losing control with Bella: “I could kill you quite easily, Bella, simply by accident” (*Twilight*). Bella is an object of temptation for Edward in more ways than one, and he often reminds her of this fact. In *Twilight* he calls her his “own personal brand of heroin,” and in *Eclipse* (2009) he chastises her for trying to “take her clothes off” and sexually arouse him. Examples like these are significant to feminist analysis because Bella is being stripped of her status as an active character in the narrative and relegated to the role of the “feminine object of desire” (Mulvey, 1975). Unlike Buffy, sex appeal is the only power that Bella has.

Bella also believes she is plain and unattractive, prompting her to respond to Edward’s declaration of love with disbelief: “It doesn’t make sense for you to love me. I’m nothing... Human” (*New Moon*). Despite this lack of confidence, Bella still has the uncanny ability to arouse seemingly any man around her, including Edward, Jacob, other

male vampires, high school boys, and drunken humans. This ability to be desired is the only power Bella is allowed by the narrative until she becomes a vampire. Her feminine allure also becomes the plot device that leads the characters into almost every life-or-death situation they face throughout the series. Even more disturbing, especially considering the young age of the target audience, is Edward's constant worry that Bella's sexuality will cause him to lose control and kill her "simply by accident." His telling her "I hate you for making me want you so much" (*Twilight*) is eerily similar to the stereotypical male accusation that a female rape victim "asked for it" by dressing or behaving in a way that was irresistible to the male rapist.

To be fair, Edward also places blame for his struggle with Bella's sexuality on what he perceives to be his own monstrous nature. The vampire is obsessed not only with his own morality, but also with Bella's, particularly the eternal soul he believes he no longer possesses though she still does. A seemingly offhand comment that he is "going to hell anyway" now that he is dating Bella casts Edward's love for her as the cause of his own eternal damnation (*Twilight*). Part of the universal appeal of *Twilight* comes from the love between Bella and Edward being depicted as forbidden, which is yet another classic literary trope. *New Moon* is even loosely based upon Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* ([www.stepheniemeyer.com](http://www.stepheniemeyer.com)). However, the implication that giving into this forbidden love will cause spiritual damnation should give the feminist reader pause. Just who is to blame for the wrongness of the situation? Allusions to the story of Eve seem to place the blame solely on Bella, whose "attractiveness to Edward is cast in starkly wicked terms," as though she is "the serpent and Eve all rolled into one" (Heath, 2011, p. 63).

Like Eve, Bella is a “bad girl.” She tries and fails to seduce Edward (who is miraculously still a virgin) on multiple occasions: “You really make me feel like I’m some sort of, like, villain trying to steal your virtue or something” (*Eclipse*). Unlike Adam, however, Edward is portrayed as having great spiritual strength in refusing to succumb to the forbidden fruit of Bella’s body. He is only able to resist out of his intense love for her, securing his status as the moral hero of the story. (This contrasts sharply with *Buffy*, where a female is represented as both the moral hero and sexually active.) Although fans laud this representation because it demonstrates the power of true love to overcome even the most severe temptation, the message encoded to young girls is antifeminist because the woman is represented as the stereotypical temptress while the man is the one who must resist her feminine wiles. Sadly, in “Meyer’s imagined universe, even a blood-sucking, lust-inducing male vampire is morally superior to a woman” (Heath, 2011, p. 64).

### **Punishment**

Both Buffy and Bella begin their respective story lines as virgins, and their resulting sexual experiences reflect the stance each series takes on female sexuality. Buffy’s first sexual encounter with Angel, for example, results in a shocking plot twist. The gypsy curse that restored Angel’s soul is broken when they consummate their relationship, causing him to revert to the monstrous Angelus (“Surprise,” 1998). Jowett reads this experience as the “ultimate teen allegory ... reflecting girls’ real anxieties about the value of sex in relationships” (2005, p. 63). Other critics argue that Angel’s lost soul is punishment for Buffy exploring her sexuality (Smith, 2009). It is important to note, however, that Angel’s soul was originally restored as the result of a curse meant to punish

him for his crimes. Although he loses his soul while experiencing a moment of “perfect happiness” during sex with Buffy, Angel is actually the one being punished because the incident is clearly a result of his sin rather than hers. After his soul is restored, Angel is forced to live a celibate lifestyle to preserve his soul, while Buffy is able to go on and participate in other sexual relationships. Despite his taunting Buffy that “you made me the man I am today” (“Innocence,” 1998), it is the male that is transformed and punished as a result of the sexual experience, not the female. Thus, Buffy reverses stereotypical gender roles regarding sex and punishment.

Another example of the *Buffy* gender role reversal regarding sex is seen in Buffy’s relationship with Spike. During her dark period in season six, Buffy engages physically in a sexual relationship with Spike, but not emotionally—something usually ascribed to the male partner. To further complete the gender role reversal, Spike is portrayed as having at least some degree of genuine feelings for Buffy, while she is just “using” him for sex. She is often shown as physically “on top” during sex scenes, which can be read as a way of coding women as active and independent (Jowett, 2005, p. 64). Again, this representation is unusual in popular entertainment because the female is portrayed as the active one holding all the power in the sexual relationship. As in his earlier relationship with Drusilla, Spike is feminized as a sex toy and relegated to the passive role of being “love’s bitch” (“Lover’s Walk,” 1998).

Buffy’s relationship with Spike is also ripe for feminist analysis because it is founded upon mutual sexual violence. During their first heated sexual experience, the supernaturally powerful couple collectively knocks down an abandoned building (“Wrecked,” 2000). The next day, Buffy limps around with bruises she falsely claims are



from slaying. Although Buffy's turbulent relationship with Spike seems to equate sex with violence, and therefore with punishment, it is important to recognize that the series never equates violence with love. Buffy's relationship with Spike is portrayed from the beginning as being loveless and unsatisfying, and she knows that her behavior is unhealthy and out of character. Buffy even goes so far as to apologize to Spike when she finally ends the relationship: "I'm using you. I can't love you. I'm just being weak and selfish" ("As You Were," 2002). In *Twilight* the burden of maintaining moral sexual purity is placed upon the male hero, but in *Buffy* it becomes the responsibility of the female to be the strong one. Unlike Edward, Buffy is the one who must choose whether to give in to temptation or to walk away. Her choice differs from Edward's, however, in that her relationship with Spike is not portrayed as being morally wrong because it is sexual. It is wrong because Spike has no soul, and therefore is incapable of real love. Thus, the male is coded as bad while the female is coded as good.

Love and violence are further distinguished from one another when Spike tries and fails to rape an injured Buffy in her own home soon after their breakup ("Seeing Red," 2002). Caught off guard by Spike's aggressive behavior, the powerful Slayer momentarily freezes and does not fight back. Pinned to the bathroom floor by a male attacker, screaming and crying as he rips open her bathrobe, Buffy is briefly stripped of her power and reduced to the stereotypical role of the powerless, fearful female victim (Jowett, 2005, p. 65). Buffy only is able to eventually stop Spike because she is physically stronger than him. After she regains momentum and kicks him across the room, Buffy stands, trembling with rage and reclaimed power, telling Spike: "Ask me

again why I could never love you ... Because I stopped you. Something I should have done a long time ago.”

Spike attempts to persuade Buffy that his actions are a form of grand passion, invoking the kind of romance she once believed in: “Trust is for old marrieds, Buffy. Great love is wild and passionate and dangerous. It burns and consumes.” However, neither Buffy nor the series judge this behavior to be even remotely excusable. In a show filled with ridiculous monster make-up and over-the-top costumes, this scene is shockingly “real” for viewers. While it can be read as a striking reminder that even the most powerful of women can be stripped of their power by such a devastating betrayal, it should not be misinterpreted as a punishment for female sexuality. This horrific experience sends a guilt-ridden and devastated Spike on a quest to regain his soul, along with the clear message to young girls that the myth of romance cannot be used to justify sexual violence.

*Twilight*, on the other hand, perpetuates the negative stereotype that female sexuality is inherently evil in the way that Bella is punished for exploring and enjoying her sexuality as a woman. First, she is punished emotionally by Edward, who believes that sex before marriage is morally wrong. Although parents have celebrated *Twilight* for its perceived stance on teen abstinence, it is important to note that it is never Bella’s choice to abstain. Instead, Edward uses Bella’s desire to experience sex while still human as a way to manipulate her into marrying him (*Eclipse*). Thus, the male holds all the power in the relationship. After their first rough sexual encounter leaves Bella covered in bruises, Edward refuses to have sex with his new bride again (*Breaking Dawn, Part 1*, 2011). While audience members might be inclined to forgive him for denying sex

to his wife because they understand his motivations arise from a genuine desire to protect her, feminist viewers should be outraged by a sequence of honeymoon scenes in which Bella's attempts to seduce her new husband are portrayed as awkward and ridiculous. Not only do viewers laugh at Bella parading around in skimpy lingerie someone else obviously packed for her, Edward chuckles as well. Although Bella seemingly wins their steamy battle of wills, it is only after she is reduced to a crying mess in their marriage bed, begging her husband to "please ... please ..." make love to her. Not since waking up in the hospital and pleading with Edward not to leave her at the end of *Twilight* has this character looked so needy and pathetic.

Bella is also punished physically for having sex. When Bella and Edward finally get married, Bella is still human. During their first sexual experience, Edward destroys the furniture, the bedding, and Bella's clothes. When she wakes up the next morning, the young bride remembers her wedding night as tender and sweet—even after she discovers the livid bruising on her body in the shape of her husband's finger prints. As if that were not disturbing enough, she then spends the morning explaining to Edward that it's not his fault because she understands he couldn't help it in the depth of his passion: "Why can't you see how perfectly happy I am?" (*Breaking Dawn, Part 1*). Bella's only concern is whether the sex was enjoyable for Edward, and she is soon begging him to take her to bed again: "I know it's not the same for you ... For a human, I can't imagine it get's any better than that." In contrast to *Buffy*, the message here to young girls is that sex and violence go hand-in-hand. Bella is so insecure about her relationship with Edward that she is willing to endure anything to keep him happy, even sexual abuse. It may be consensual, but that doesn't mean it's healthy.

In another shocking plot twist, Bella becomes pregnant on her honeymoon. The half-human/half-vampire fetus grows at an alarming rate, placing a great physical strain on Bella's body. The child rejects all human nourishment, leaving Bella emaciated and forced to drink blood for survival. It is also inhumanly strong, bruising Bella and breaking her ribs with its kicks. Despite Carlisle's warning that Bella will not live through the delivery, she insists on carrying the child to term. Not even Edward's pleading (or his twisted offer to allow her to have a child with Jacob instead) can persuade Bella to terminate the pregnancy. She loves the baby unconditionally, and after discovering he can read its mind, Edward loves it too. While some parents have criticized *Twilight* for glorifying teen pregnancy, religious groups have celebrated the series for its seemingly pro-life stance. In her book *Touched by a Vampire*, pastor's wife and theology professor Beth Felker Jones writes:

“In our society, it is becoming more and more common for mothers to be advised to have abortions when the babies they are carrying are seen, like Bella's half-human/half-vampire child, as being ‘abnormal’ ... It takes great courage to go against social pressure and to love and protect vulnerable children as Bella did” (2009, p. 121).

In contrast, Meyer justifies Bella's decision to give birth to her daughter as an exercise in her right to choose ([www.stepheniemeyer.com](http://www.stepheniemeyer.com)). In light of the many allusions to the story of Eve and the doctrine of original sin, however, Bella's unexpected foray into motherhood should be read from a feminist viewpoint as something larger than a debate between pro-life and pro-choice.

According to Western religious tradition, Eve was punished for her sexual sin by being doomed to birth children “in sorrow” (Genesis 3:16, KJV). To say that Bella gives birth to her daughter “in sorrow” would be a colossal understatement. After the placenta

detaches, Edward, Jacob, and Rosalie are forced to perform an emergency vampire C-section. There is blood, screaming, and broken bones. Because the supernatural pregnancy has altered Bella's womb, making it impenetrable to surgical instruments, Edward is forced to use his teeth to rip open Bella's stomach and remove the baby before she eats her way out. (Apparently vampire babies are born with a full set of teeth.) For all intents and purposes, the birth kills Bella. Edward is only able to save her at the last moment by turning her into a vampire. He stabs her in the heart with a syringe filled with his own venom, and when that seems to have no effect, he resorts to desperately biting Bella all over her already mutilated body. This birth scene is so gory and terrifying it pushes *Breaking Dawn, Part 1* beyond the genre of fantasy/romance and into the realm of horror, something the three previous films (despite being filled with vampires and werewolves) had not been able to achieve. Rather than an illustration of the power of maternal love, Bella's horrific pregnancy and birth should be read as an extension of her physical punishment for exploring and enjoying her sexuality.

**CHAPTER 6**  
**FEMINIST THEMES AND REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER:**  
**FEMALE EMPOWERMENT**

**It's A Man's World**

No feminist discussion of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The Twilight Saga* would be complete without an analysis of the representation of female empowerment within the texts. Whedon considers himself to be a feminist, and he claims to have created Buffy to be a show centered on the theme of “female empowerment” (Gottlieb, 2002). In doing so, he also placed his female protagonist in the midst of a fantasy universe firmly grounded in the reality of patriarchy. To understand how Buffy (and later Bella) achieves her empowerment, we must first examine how she functions within a patriarchal society and the way in which the series itself addresses the problem of patriarchy for women. Kate Millet defines patriarchy as “the birthright priority whereby males rule females” (1970, p. 338). Since the publication of her seminal book *Sexual Politics* (1970), feminists have adopted Millett’s terminology to define a social system in which the role of the male as the primary authority figure is central to structure and organization of the society as a whole. Millett argues that in a patriarchal society, such as ours, “gender” becomes more of a political construction than a natural distinction based upon a biological difference, i.e. “sex.” It is employed instead as a justification for domination or control, a way for one half of our society (men) to maintain control over the other half of our society (women) (1970, p. 338). She writes: “In the matter of conformity

patriarchy is a governing ideology without peer; it is probable that no other system has ever exercised such a complete control over its subjects” (1970, p. 344). The same proves true for Buffy. From the beginning of the series, it becomes clear that her struggle against patriarchy is as integral to the story line as her struggle against the vampires.

Buffy’s power is controlled by the Watcher’s Council, a patriarchal group of men who created and oversee the Slayer line. They maintain their authority over Buffy through her own personal Watcher, Giles, whom she also views as a surrogate father figure. From the first episode, Buffy balks against this arrangement, thus reflecting the real life challenge today’s girls face in finding empowerment within a society still structured according to the ideals of patriarchy. Buffy is quickly identified as unique among Slayers in that she rebels against the rules and conventions set forth in the “Slayer Handbook.” She also challenges the authority of Giles on numerous occasions, prompting him to comment, “After meeting you, Buffy, I was quite sure the handbook would be of no use in your case” (“What’s My Line, Part 2,” 1997).

The Watchers gave Buffy her power, however, and they can also take it away. In the season three episode “Helpless” (1999), they temporarily strip Buffy of her powers through a combination of drugs and magic, and then lock her in a room with a crazed vampire as part of a Slayer rite of passage on her eighteenth birthday. In this episode, Buffy is hurt not only by Giles, who betrays her trust by taking part in the ritual without her knowledge, but also by her biological father, who breaks his promise to take her to an ice show on her birthday. These events are significant to Buffy’s development as a feminist character because they mark the beginning of her estrangement from both a patriarchal father figure and a patriarchal leadership structure. Buffy’s efforts to assert

her independence as an adult and the Slayer culminate in the season three finale when she graduates high school and officially quits working for the Watcher's Council ("Graduation Day, Part 1," 1999). By this time, the Council has already fired Giles for choosing to support Buffy instead of them, and this loyalty allows her to maintain her father/daughter-like relationship with him. When she later asks Giles to become her teacher again, their relationship is built on more of an adult level of "mutual trust and respect" rather than a hierarchical parent/child authority (Wall and Zyrd, 2001, p. 73).

Early seasons of *Buffy* emphasize collectivity through close relationships with family and friends as the key to her power and success. Spike, who has already killed two Slayers by the time he crosses paths with Buffy, attributes her longer-than-average lifespan for a Slayer to the support of the Scooby Gang. After Buffy's mother (who at this point is still oblivious to the existence of vampires) saves her by hitting Spike over the head with an ax, the vampire complains, "A slayer with family and friends. That sure as hell wasn't in the brochure" ("School Hard," 1997). In season four, however, Buffy exercises her newfound freedom from the Watcher's Council by taking on most of the action herself, both personally and professionally. As a college freshman, Buffy moves away from home to live on campus at U.C. Sunnydale. She rarely communicates with her mother, her biological father has become estranged, and her relationship with Giles is confused now that he is no longer her Watcher. In addition, Angel and Cordelia have left Sunnydale for good, and Buffy's friendships with the remaining Scoobies (Xander, Willow, and Oz) have inevitably changed post-high school graduation. As the Slayer, Buffy's individualism causes her to clash with the Initiative. According to Jowett, "The Initiative is clearly presented as a patriarchal institution, and this adds a gender spin to the



individualist hero: rather than a male standing out against a threat to individualism, Buffy is a woman resisting patriarchy” (2005, p. 24).

As discussed earlier, season four ends with Buffy reconnecting with the Scoobies through a spell that harnesses their collective strength to defeat Adam (p. 18). Although Millet defines family as “patriarchy’s chief institution” (1970, p. 344), Buffy’s return to the Scooby Gang should not be read as a return to patriarchy because the group itself lacks traditional patriarchal structure. Although Giles serves as a father figure to Buffy and the other Scoobies, he does not act as the group leader. That role is always reserved for Buffy, except for the time lapse between seasons five and six when Buffy is dead and Willow takes over the reigns of leadership. Even when Giles officially holds a position of patriarchal authority over the Scoobies during early seasons as a Watcher and a high school employee, he still allows the teens agency and independence, and his role as a mentor and father dwindles as the series progresses (Jowett, 2005, p. 187).

Despite her close relationship with Giles, Buffy’s primary parental figure and caregiver is her mother Joyce, who is represented as a single, working parent. Jowett reads Joyce as “a kind of postfeminist matriarch ... the head of an all-female household who rarely needs a man” (2005, p. 181). Her motherly influence throughout the series defines the Scooby Gang as more of a “matriarchal” than patriarchal family unit. Although Joyce is unaware of her daughter’s role as the Slayer in the early seasons, she is still presented as a nurturing figure for Buffy and the younger Scoobies (and oddly enough, Spike). Joyce later develops into a core member of the team and represents a sense of safety and normality for the eclectic little family. After her death, the Summers house remains Scooby headquarters and Willow’s girlfriend, Tara, steps briefly into the

role of matriarch, nurturing and caring for the family, especially Dawn. Like Joyce, Tara can be read as more than a marginalized female caregiver in a patriarchal household because, as a lesbian and a witch, her power is wholly “female, she does not seek male approval or company, and she has no masculine characteristics” (Jowett, p. 54). Following Tara’s death in season six, Buffy fulfills the dual masculine/feminine roles as leader of the Scoobies and mother-figure to Dawn.

Much of *Buffy* can be read as a feminist struggle against patriarchy. Such a struggle is complex, however, because it involves more than changing laws to guarantee women the right to vote or receive an education (although that is certainly part of the reform process). Ultimately, a feminist struggle against patriarchy becomes a battle against the centuries-old belief system that denied women these rights in the first place. This also proves true for Buffy, who slowly learns that breaking free of the patriarchal influence of the Watchers entails more than simply refusing to work for them. By the end of the series, it has become a battle against the centuries-old belief system that created the Slayer line. In the season seven episode “Get It Done” (2003), the “First Slayer” appears to Buffy in a dream and explains her origins. The Slayer was created thousands of years ago by a group of shamans who tied a girl to the earth against her will and mystically implanted her with the essence of a demon. These shamans became the Watchers, who have controlled the Slayer and her powers ever since, limiting the abilities to “one girl” born into each generation.

Buffy finally breaks free of the Watchers in the series finale when she asks Willow to cast a spell that will allow all Potential Slayers in the world to manifest their

powers in order to defeat the First Evil. Buffy rallies her troops with the following call to action:

“In every generation, one Slayer is born because a bunch of men who died thousands of years ago made up that rule. They were powerful men. This woman is more powerful than all of them combined. So I say we change the rule” (“Chosen,” 2003).

In destroying the First Evil and saving the world for the final time, Buffy is, in essence, destroying the patriarchal mindset once and for all that has attempted to chain her throughout the series. By taking control of their power from the Watchers, Buffy and the other Potentials can finally become truly empowered themselves. As cited earlier (p. 8), this reflects the third-wave emphasis on female empowerment in the media during the *Buffy* years, particularly the Riot Grrrl call for young women to “take back” the meanings of derogatory pop culture terminology against women (Zobl, 2004, p. 445).

Like Whedon, Meyer claims her series deals with the theme of female empowerment, particularly during *Breaking Dawn*, in which Bella finally becomes a vampire and develops her own unique power—the ability to shield herself and those around her against the mental powers of others. She describes the cover art of *Breaking Dawn*, which depicts a chessboard with a queen in the forefront and a pawn in the shadows, as a metaphor for Bella’s progression throughout the series:

“She began as the weakest (at least physically, when compared to vampires and werewolves) player on the board: the pawn. She ended as the strongest: the queen. In the end, it’s Bella that brings about the win for the Cullens” (www.stepheniemeyer.com).

This symbolism is also present in the film *Breaking Dawn, Part 1* during scenes in which Bella beats Edward while playing chess on their honeymoon. Meyer also situates her female protagonist in a world structured according to the ideals of patriarchy. However,

while *Buffy* represents patriarchy as something evil and dangerous, *Twilight* constructs it as a condition that is desirable, natural, and safe.

Patriarchy is depicted as the most desirable familial state in *Twilight*. As explained earlier, Bella's romance with Edward is patriarchal in the sense that her attraction to the vampire is paternal. However, Bella is drawn not only to Edward to fill the patriarchal void in her life, but also to the entire Cullen family. Unlike the Scooby Gang, the Cullens are a traditional, hierarchical family. According to Millett, the principles of patriarchy are twofold: "male shall dominate female, and elder male shall dominate younger," (p. 338). This is certainly the case in *Twilight*. Dr. Carlisle Cullen, Edward's compassionate and godlike adoptive father, is both the undisputed leader and moral center of the clan. As such, he becomes the person whose respect and approval matters to Edward most. Carlisle's wife, Esme, is defined only by her nurturing role as a mother, which often extends beyond her immediate family. When Esme is first seen in *Twilight*, she is thoughtfully preparing an elaborate meal for Bella even though the Cullens do not eat human food and have never used their kitchen. In *Breaking Dawn, Part 1*, she also offers human food to the werewolves who are stationed outside the Cullen home to guard the pregnant Bella. The younger Cullens are portrayed as playful and supportive "siblings" to one another, as well as loving and dutifully respectful "children" to their "parents." In essence, the Cullens are represented as the perfect family—beautiful, happy, wealthy, and educated, they are living the American dream.

Heath argues that *Twilight* is "all about family: family values, the creation of families, broken families, longing for family" (2011, p. 3). As the daughter of the only divorced couple in the series, Bella is depicted as coming from a "broken" family. It is

not surprising, then, that she should want so desperately to become a Cullen. After the family leaves Forks in *New Moon*, a distraught Bella sends a series of emails to Edward's sister, expressing her grief over losing not only Edward, but the entire family: "Alice. I'm lost. When you left, and he left, you took everything with you." Upon being reunited with the Cullens at the end of the film, Bella brings her request to become a vampire before the entire family, asking them to "put it to a vote." The rest of the Cullens (with the exception of Rosalie) vote to accept Bella, and Carlisle even agrees to change her into a vampire himself if Edward continues to refuse. Edward does reluctantly promise to change Bella into a vampire, but only upon the condition that she marry him first. By this point, Bella's love for Edward had become so deeply entwined with her love for his family that it is almost indistinguishable. Not only is her decision to get married influenced by her desire to become a vampire, but her desire to become a vampire is influenced by her desire to become part of the perfect, patriarchal family.

Patriarchy in *Twilight* is also represented as being a natural way of life, and this extends to structures beyond the family. There are no women among the Volturi vampire leadership, only human minions, deadly servants (like Jane), and vague references to "the wives." Sue Clearwater is only allowed to join the Quileute Council of Elders to replace her husband who passes away unexpectedly (*New Moon, Eclipse*). However, this aspect of the character is not even referenced in the films. Instead, the widowed Mrs. Clearwater is seen fulfilling more traditionally feminine roles, such as attending Bella's wedding as Billy's date and cooking dinner for him and Charlie (*Breaking Dawn, Part 1*). Women are simply not leaders in the *Twilight* universe, and this arrangement is never questioned. Instead, females seem resigned to and, upon occasion, even proud of their

role of holding down the fort while the men march off to battle. For example, while worrying about Jacob and the safety of his werewolf pack in *New Moon*, Bella finds comfort in her solidarity with Emily, the fiancée of pack leader Sam Uley. Like most *Twilight* females, Emily is cast into the role of caregiver. She cooks breakfast for the wolf pack in her house, and even scolds the younger boys in a motherly fashion, telling them to “save some for your brothers.” Emily defines herself through her relationship with Sam and her role in his patriarchal pack/family, and she sees Bella the same way. When they are introduced, Emily comments, “So, you’re the vampire girl.” To which Bella replies, “So, you’re the wolf girl.” Not offended in the least, Emily says, “I guess so ... Well, I’m engaged to one.” Emily then tells the boys to make room for Bella at the breakfast table, because it’s “ladies first.” Unlike *Buffy* caregivers Joyce and Tara, Emily and Esme cannot be read as feminist characters because they have no source of empowerment outside the patriarchal home.

Finally, patriarchy is depicted in *Twilight* as representing safety. In the first film, it is not only Edward who protects Bella from the evil vampires James, but also the entire Cullen family. At first, Edward’s sister, Rosalie, questions the need to help the human, asking “What is she to me?” (*Twilight*). Carlisle clarifies the transition of Bella’s relationship to the family, declaring “Bella is with Edward. She is part of this family now. We protect our family.” True to Carlisle’s word, the Cullens do protect Bella, ultimately destroying James and the threat he poses to their newest member. In contrast, Bella’s biological father, Police Chief Swan, is unable to solve the two violent murders already committed by James and his vampire companions. Thus, Bella’s biological family, which is labeled defective due to her parents’ divorce, is unable to provide her

with the security that the more traditional and complete Cullen family offers. This trend of Bella turning to patriarchal structures to protect her from danger while keeping poor Charlie in the dark continues throughout the series. When the Cullens are out of town, it is the wolf pack who grants Bella sanctuary (*New Moon, Eclipse*).

### **Happily Ever After**

From the time most girls are born, they hear stories of beautiful princesses who marry the men of their dreams, have children, and live “happily ever after.” These tales are in keeping with patriarchal tradition that represents marriage and motherhood as the key to female happiness and the truest measure of a woman’s success. Media, for the most part, has faithfully perpetuated this stereotype. Even the most successful of women are typically represented as also desiring romance and children, at least on some level. Consider, for example, the women of *Sex and the City* (Arthurs, 2003, p. 317). In keeping with the “notion of the postfeminist ‘superwoman’ balancing career, family, and social life” (Jowett, 2005, p. 24), single and childless women are rarely depicted in media as being happy and fulfilled. The tension between these desires is present in *Buffy*, which has been described as a “wry ongoing parable of the modern woman’s greatest challenge: the challenge to balance personal and professional life” (Bellafante, 1997, p. 81). With the series emphasis on female empowerment through rebellion against patriarchy, it should come as no surprise that *Buffy*’s take on “happily ever after” is also highly unconventional.

For example, Buffy ends the series single. She also ends the series childless, although it could be argued that her mothering of Dawn is filling that void in her life. Spike, who Buffy describes as not her boyfriend but “in her heart” (“Chosen,” 2003), dies

in the final battle. Although clearly affected by his passing, the final scene depicts Buffy as not overcome by grief, but intrigued by the possibilities her life holds now that the Hellmouth has been closed and she is no longer the “only” Slayer. It is strongly implied that these possibilities do not include rushing back into the waiting arms of her first (and arguably true) love, Angel, from whom she has been romantically separated since the end of season three when Whedon gave the popular character his own spinoff series. Buffy’s relationship with Angel has caused a great deal of consternation among feminist critics. Jowett, for example, argues that Buffy sees her love for Angel as “fated,” which leaves her powerless in the relationship (2005, p. 63): “Don’t love you? I’m sorry. You know what, I didn’t know I got a choice in that” (“The Prom,” 1999). Further, Angel’s decision to leave Sunnydale at the close of season three because he believes it would be best for Buffy despite her protests highlights her lack of agency. Thus, as Buffy’s mother points out, her feelings for Angel weaken Buffy and make her “just like any other girl” (“The Prom,” 1999).

However, the key to a feminist reading of Buffy’s relationship with Angel lies not in who controls the relationship at the end, but that Buffy does not allow the end of the relationship to control her. Rather than lose herself in grief and self-harm as Bella does after being dumped by Edward (*New Moon*), Buffy goes to college (season four) and begins to date other men. After a reasonable period of mourning, she lets go of her ex-boyfriend and gets on with her life. Although she still bumps into Angel occasionally (the character continues to make cameo appearances on the show), this does not prevent her determination to be involved in other healthy relationships. Unlike Edward and Bella, Angel does not continue to hold power over Buffy. In the series finale, Buffy



refuses Angel's first real attempt to rekindle their relationship, describing herself to him as "cookie dough." She's always assumed there was something wrong with her because she could never make her romantic relationships work, but lately she has come to realize that the timing for her to settle down just isn't right. "I'm not done baking yet," she tells Angel. "I'm not finished becoming... whoever the hell it is I'm gonna turn out to be. I've been looking for someone to make me feel whole, and maybe I just need to be whole" ("Chosen," 2003). Thus, *Buffy*'s happily ever after does not completely dismiss the idea of true love, but it sends the message to young girls that romance is not essential to happiness or wholeness. Also, women who do not find "true love" are not defective, no matter what society tells them. As in real life, women in the *Buffy* universe can be single, strong, *and* happy.

Although *Buffy* ends the series without a man by her side, it is important to note that she does not stand alone. In season seven, *Buffy* is represented as neither the lone superhero fighting evil, nor the lone woman resisting patriarchy. Instead, an emphasis is placed on collectivity and the power of the female line through the inclusion of the "Potential Slayers" into the story arc. Because the Watchers have limited the Slayer abilities to a single "chosen one" born into each generation, the Potentials are born with no supernatural powers. (It is only through a magical fluke that both *Buffy* and *Faith* have been granted Slayer powers at the same time.) Although many of these young girls are unaware of their "potential" to be called as the next chosen one, the First Evil still targets them in an attempt to destroy the Slayer line. When *Giles* begins rounding up Potentials and bringing them to *Sunnydale* for protection, *Buffy* is charged with the task of helping a new generation of young women become empowered ("Bring on the Night,"

2002). Her plan to use the collective power of the Slayers to defeat the First Evil is radical. According to Giles, it “flies in the face of everything we’ve ever—that every generation has ever done in the fight against evil” (“Chosen,” 2003). For Buffy, merely existing within a patriarchal society isn’t enough. Nor is it enough for her to secure her own personal freedoms without thought to the bondage of other women. In her mind, every girl deserves to be empowered. She explains her plan to the Potentials:

“From now on, every girl in the world who might be a Slayer, will be a Slayer. Every girl who could have the power, will have the power ... who can stand up, will stand up. Every one of you, and girls we’ve never known, and generations to come... they will have strength they never dreamed of, and more than that, they will have each other. Slayers. Every one of us” (“Chosen,” 2003).

It takes the collective female power of all the Slayers, both new and old, to defeat the First Evil. Thus, sisterhood becomes the key to happily ever after in *Buffy* rather than romance.

*Buffy* is a show birthed by the third-wave emphasis on female empowerment, but postfeminist issues like choice and free will are also represented throughout the series. As the opening sequence of season one reminds us, Buffy does not choose to be the Slayer, instead she is “chosen” by fate, as is fairly common in superhero narratives. Under the firm control of the Watcher’s Council, Buffy is positioned in the beginning of the series as lacking the power to make her own choices within a patriarchal society—a right, as explained in the previous section, she spends the duration of the series fighting for. In early seasons, Buffy often resents her calling and expresses a desire to lead a “normal” life. In season seven, however, she not only helps the Potentials receive their power, but she also offers them the one thing she never had—a choice about what to do with it. She explains, “This is about choices. I never had one. I was chosen. And I

accept that. I'm not asking you to accept anything. I'm asking you to make your own choice." In the end, Buffy is rewarded for her efforts by achieving not only control over her own power, but the right to make *her* own choice as well. As Faith observes in the final scene, "You're not the one and only chosen anymore. Just gotta live like a person. How's that feel?" Buffy never answers the question. Instead, the final scene ends with a close-up on Buffy, a small smile creeping onto her lips as she considers her options. With the world at her fingertips, Buffy's "happily ever after" will be entirely of her own making.

In *Twilight*, however, "happily ever after" manifests itself in a much more traditional form. After overcoming seemingly insurmountable odds to her eternal happiness, Bella marries the man of her dreams and starts a family with him. Thus, unlike Buffy, Bella does not find empowerment by resisting the norms of patriarchal society, but instead by choosing to accept her stereotypical place within it—as a wife and a mother. Meyer defends Bella's decision to forego college and career to marry and have children by citing *Twilight's* postfeminist emphasis on individual female choice:

"One of the weird things about modern feminism is that some feminists seem to be putting their own limits on women's choices. That feels backward to me. It's as if you can't choose a family on your own terms and still be considered a strong woman. How is that empowering?" ([www.stepheniemeyer.com](http://www.stepheniemeyer.com)).

Although Edward sometimes denies Bella the freedom to make everyday choices in the name of protection, such as where she can go and whom she can be friends with (p. 31), it's true that all major life choices are undeniably her own. In *Eclipse*, she explains to Edward that her choice to become a vampire is not "all" about him. "This wasn't a choice between you and Jacob. It was between who I should be and who I am."

However, Jenny Coleman argues that a woman merely having the freedom to choose is not enough to justify a choice as feminist.

“Feminism is not simply about an individual woman choosing how she will live her life, and it is not sufficient to claim that an individual’s *intention* to resist and subvert dominant power structures or societal conventions equates to feminist resistance and subversion” (2009, p. 11).

The problem for the feminist reader of *Twilight* is not that Bella fails to make her own choices, it is that her concept of who she “should be” is developed from the patriarchal gender stereotypes which the series embraces.

For example, no one in the *Twilight* universe is portrayed as being single *and* happy. Virtually everyone is paired off, whether they be human, vampire, or werewolf. First, there are the high school students. The boys of Forks High throw themselves at Bella on her first day of school, and her human friends (Mike, Jessica, Angela, Eric) continue to pair themselves off throughout the series. Unlike in the real world of the teenage viewers, no one in Forks even considers attending prom with a group of friends. The vampire world is no different. All of the Cullens, save Edward, are already mated to their ideal companion before the series begins. Even the evil James and Victoria are bound for the duration of their immortal existence. The werewolves find their soul mates through an irresistible attraction called “imprinting,” which Jacob describes as being like gravity. “Your whole center shifts. Suddenly, it’s not the earth holding you here. You would do anything, be anything she needs—a friend, a brother, a protector” (*Breaking Dawn, Part I*). (It is interesting to note that in a series that supposedly advocates female choice, the women and girls upon whom the werewolves imprint have seemingly no choice for themselves in the matter. Jacob, for example, imprints on Renesmee when she is only a few minutes old.) In contrast, the few characters who have either lost or not

found their true loves are portrayed as being bitter (Leah), vengeful (Victoria), spiteful (Irina), and inept (Charlie).

It is no wonder that Bella becomes obsessed with spending eternity with Edward (and when he is temporarily out of the picture, takes comfort in another potential true love—Jacob). Although her parents' failed marriage causes her to initially balk at the idea of marrying young, Bella has no qualms with committing herself to Edward by becoming a vampire before she even graduates high school. A long human life with Edward is simply not enough for Bella. While dancing with Edward at prom, Bella tells viewers in voice-over: "No one will surrender tonight, but I won't give in. I know what I want" (*Twilight*). Despite Bella's claims to the contrary, her decision to become a vampire is intrinsically tied to her desire to spend eternity with Edward. Earlier in their conversation at prom, Edward comments somewhat bitterly, "So that's what you dream about, becoming a monster." Bella replies, "I dream about being with you forever." In *New Moon*, Bella resents her eighteenth birthday because it symbolizes her turning one year older than Edward, who is eternally frozen at seventeen. In *Eclipse*, she agrees to marry Edward because that is his final condition to change her into a vampire.

When the newly married Bella finally has "forever" with Edward firmly within her grasp, it is suddenly no longer enough for her either—or rather, *Edward* is no longer enough. Despite Rosalie's warning that she would one day wish for children, Bella insists, "There's nothing I'm ever gonna want more than Edward" (*Eclipse*). The moment she discovers she is pregnant, however, everything changes. For the first time in the series, there *is* something Bella wants more than Edward, and she wants it so much that she is willing to completely disregard his feelings on the matter and team up with

Rosalie to defy him. When Edward says he can't live without her, Bella tells him, "You have to accept what it is," (*Breaking Dawn, Part 1*). Angry and desperate, Edward replies, "Because you've given me no choice! Bella, we're supposed to be partners, remember? But you decided this on your own. You've decided to leave me."

Here, the relationship dynamic between Bella and Edward dramatically shifts. Now that *she* is the one in control, he suddenly wants to talk of partnership and equality within their relationship. It is interesting that this shift should take place as the result of an unplanned pregnancy considering the real life sociopolitical debate that has surrounded women's reproductive rights since the second wave of feminism. While viewers are clearly meant to admire Bella for exercising her right to choose, many cannot help but sympathize with Edward's position. Exhausted and emotionally drained from helplessly watching the love of his life wither away, the vampire has never seemed more human. This tension between male and female reproductive choice reflects the conflict between feminism and patriarchy within the series. In true patriarchal fashion, however, Meyer solves the problem by allowing Edward to suddenly be able to read the baby's mind. This convinces him that the fetus his wife is carrying is a viable life—it is a child, *his* child, and as such it must be cherished and protected. This revelation allows Edward to accept the pregnancy and step into his patriarchal role as father and protector after the baby is born. As the wolf pack surrounds the house soon after the birth of his daughter, Edward vows, "I won't let anyone hurt my family" (*Breaking Dawn, Part 1*).

Like marriage, motherhood is considered natural and desirable for the women of *Twilight*. Rosalie, a beautiful and powerful vampire, is also eternally bitter because her life lacks the one final thing patriarchy tells women they need to feel complete—children.

She tells Bella that despite loving Emmett, she resents her life as a vampire because there is no possibility of ever “sitting on a front porch somewhere, Emmett grey-haired by my side, surrounded by our grandchildren, their laughter” (*Eclipse*). Although this is only hinted at in the film, Rosalie only agrees to help Bella in the novel on the condition that she be given custody of the baby if Bella does not survive the birth (Meyer, 2008, p. 181). Despite being the only female werewolf in the history of the tribe, Leah Clearwater also resents her supernatural abilities because she dated Sam before he imprinted on Emily. Unlike the males in the pack, Leah has not yet imprinted. She begs Jacob to let her join his new pack to get away from Sam: “I’ll do whatever you want, except go back to Sam’s pack and be the pathetic ex-girlfriend he can’t get away from. You don’t know how many times I wished I could imprint on someone ... anyone” (*Breaking Dawn, Part 1*). Because imprinting is a genetic attraction designed to breed stronger wolves, Leah theorizes that she herself must be a “genetic dead end” because Sam was not drawn to her despite her impressive tribal bloodlines: “So I became a freak—the girlie wolf—good for nothing else” (Meyer, 2008, p. 318). In a narrative universe where happily ever after is defined according to patriarchy, even beautiful and powerful women like Rosalie and Leah are reduced to bitter stereotypes desperate for marriage and motherhood.

As cited earlier, Meyer argues that Bella becomes empowered as a feminist through her choices (p. 6), and her empowerment is then realized through her transformation into a vampire (p. 50). It is true that Bella does indeed transform into a powerful vampire in the second half of *Breaking Dawn*. Her physical appearance changes, making her “every bit as beautiful as Alice or Esme” (Meyer, 2008, p. 403). As a newborn vampire, Bella is temporarily stronger than any of the older Cullens, and

Edward describes her as “quite graceful—even for a vampire” (p. 409) as opposed to her previous clumsiness. Her limited ability as a human to shield her private mind from the mental powers of other vampires expands into the ability to project a mental shield that can defend those around her as well (this is how Bella helps insure victory for the Cullens in the final battle against the Volturi). Vampire Bella becomes everything that human Bella was not—strong, graceful, beautiful, and confident. Together with her perfect vampire husband and extraordinary half-human/half-vampire daughter, this “goddess” (p. 403) can now live happily ever after.

However, a feminist reading of Bella’s transformation attributes her empowerment not to her decision to become a vampire, but to her decision to spend eternity with Edward. Bella never would have chosen to become a vampire—or even realized that vampires existed—had she not fallen in love with Edward. Although she did have some power to shield her mind as a human, she never would have known had Edward not been unable to read her mind (*Twilight*). Bella says to Edward on the eve of their wedding, “Hopefully a year from now, I’m gonna look in the mirror and see someone like you. Someone capable of courage, sacrifice, and love” (*Breaking Dawn, Part 1*). Thus, Bella does not become an empowered version of herself when she transforms into a vampire; she actually becomes a feminized copy of her male lover.

The message here to young girls is that happily ever after can only be found in marriage and motherhood. True empowerment, however, comes not from the ability to choose, but from the choices one makes. In the patriarchal world of *Twilight*, Bella makes the only choices available to her within the narrative—she *has* to choose love, she *has* to choose marriage, and she *has* to choose motherhood. Even if she had chosen



Jacob over Edward, Bella would still be making the proper patriarchal choice—love and marriage. No other options were even seriously considered. While this could be chalked up to character preference, the fact that *every other woman* in the series exemplifies this same belief system negates any possible feminist credibility for the series.

“No women in the *Twilight* saga are single, strong, intelligent, *and* happy. We see no women occupied in a profession that is good for humanity; no women who are married, mothers, *and* have an interesting and meaningful work life outside the home; and no women who have a sense of humor, whether they are vampires, werewolves, or human. Not one” (Heath, 2011, p. 47).

Instead, *Twilight* is a classic fairytale, complete with damsels in distress, knights in shining armor, a conflict between good and evil, and characters who live happily ever after—in a purely patriarchal sense, of course.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

As even these few examples illustrate, there has been a clear regression of feminism from *Buffy* (1997) to *Bella* (2005). Although *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Twilight* address many similar feminist themes, they differ vastly in the content of the feminist messages portrayed to their adolescent female audiences. Whedon clearly succeeded in his original goal for the character of Buffy Summers. By inverting stereotypical gender roles, he created a truly empowered woman who is not merely a heroine, but also a hero in her own right. Fans and feminist scholars alike have embraced *Buffy*, heralding her as one of the few truly feminist role models for young girls in television history (Stabile, 2009, p. 89). Although *Buffy* makes her share of mistakes during her journey from an angst-filled teenager to a confident young woman, she can teach young girls a great deal about questioning and resisting traditionally oppressive gender norms. The show itself, however, is by no means perfect. Of particular concern to critics is the lack of people of color and lower social class among the lead characters.

“One inescapable though perhaps more invisible message in *Buffy* is that women can be and do anything only if they are young, white, middle class, and conventionally attractive. It has often been noted that the ‘choices’ of postfeminist society really only apply to members of the professional middle class, who begin from a position of privilege” (Jowett, 2005, p. 195).

Despite these concerns, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is a feminist program at its core, and today’s popular media could use more like it.

This need becomes particularly glaring when considering the current popularity of a blatantly antifeminist series like *Twilight*, which comes out of a time when a lot of questions are being asked about feminism. The confusion and contradictions about the current state of feminism in popular culture are reflected in the series text. Meyer clearly believes she is promoting feminism by defending Bella Swan's often dangerous and irresponsible choices by citing the character's feminist right to choose. However, this intent is not realized in a feminist reading of her text. The most young girls can learn from Bella is to "choose" to follow the patriarchal status quo.

Meyer further claims that Bella's "fictional choices" were never meant to influence anyone in "real life." On her website, Meyer describes Bella as "a character in a story, nothing more or less." She adds that her series is "not even realistic fiction, it's a fantasy with vampires and werewolves, so no one *could* ever make [Bella's] exact choices" ([www.stepheniemeyer.com](http://www.stepheniemeyer.com)). A closer study of Bella's choices reveals, however, that most of her life decisions have little to do with the "fantasy" element in the story (vampires and werewolves), but are more closely intertwined with the "romance" part of the series. At its core, *The Twilight Saga* is a love story between Bella and Edward, and the negative elements of their relationship resemble real life much too closely to be written off as purely fantasy. It could also be argued that Bella's world is much more grounded in reality than Buffy's. Forks, for example, is a real town, while Sunnydale is entirely fictional. Bella begins the series as a normal human, while Buffy has supernatural abilities from the start. These added elements of realism in *Twilight* should make feminist critics even more wary of the potentially negative effect the antifeminist messages in this series could have on young viewers.

What does it say, then, about the current state of feminism in our society that women of all ages are embracing a series like *Twilight*, despite the antifeminist messages which abound within the text? Third-wave girls, according to Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, are of a generation that is “born with feminism simply in the water” (1999, p. 83). In other words, today’s girls are reaping the benefits won by the women of the second wave, largely oblivious to the more blatant sexism and gender discrimination found in earlier media representations of women. As a result of the commodification of girl power through children’s entertainment, Banet-Weiser argues that the “empowerment of girls is now something that is more or less taken for granted by both children and parents” (2004, p. 332). Unlike their second-wave predecessors, girls growing up during the 1990s and 2000s have become a generation socialized to expect media with strong female leads. Thus, the seemingly negative gender representations in *Twilight* could be interpreted as a backlash against almost a decade of strong female lead characters in shows such as *Buffy*. This would support McRobbie’s argument (p. 9) that society has transitioned into a “post-feminist” era, as in the feminist movement has come to a close. This is opposed to the idea of “postfeminism” being the next wave or progression of the feminist movement.

It could also be argued that the prominence of these strong feminist characters has led to a sort of desensitization against weaker characters such as Bella. Today’s girls may simply lack the feminist education to properly discern negative gender stereotypes among popular characters because they have not been socialized to search for them. Therein lie both the problem and the challenge for contemporary feminists. Even as the personal and political gains made by the second and third waves of feminism are

celebrated, today's feminists must not take for granted or abandon one of the most foundational aims of the feminist movement—education. If the popularity of *Twilight* reveals anything, it is that a proper feminist education is sorely lacking among the women and young girls of today. This lack of awareness has opened the door for a regression of feminism in media as viewers have become seemingly unconcerned with or ignorant of negative representations of gender in popular culture.

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