

A Response to Zoë Snider

Evelyn Henson
Furman University

Zoë Snider's "Vampires, Werewolves, and Oppression: *Twilight* and Female Gender Stereotypes" argues that "the image of women and relationships presented in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series is oppressive to women because it legitimizes violence against women by their male partners, portrays its heroine as stereotypically feminine, and glorifies unequal relationships in which the woman is dependent on the man" (128). Snider's feminist critique offers a refreshing perspective on the popular saga, and demonstrates that *Twilight* seduces its audience to "bite" into Meyer's facade of romance. Snider contends that Meyer's "romance" resonates with female gender stereotypes and oppressive relationships. The most dangerous problem Snider reveals is how Meyer veils the oppression, appealing to her female audience's desire for love. While Snider demonstrates several problems with *Twilight*, her feminist critique could be furthered with greater attention to the saga's immoral sense of beauty. Closer analysis shows how cleverly Meyer conceals this emphasis, which threatens its female demographic.

Snider's argument against *Twilight* focuses on unhealthy relationships and female stereotypes. She accurately conveys how *Twilight* legitimizes abusive and addictive relationships by romanticizing them, specifically by establishing empathy. Meyer creates a love triangle among the teenage girl Bella, the vampire Edward, and the werewolf Jacob. By exploiting aspects of young romance, Meyer makes these relationships desirable despite the dangers both Edward and Jacob pose. Snider argues that the saga appeals to women because they not only sympathize but also empathize with what Bella feels for Edward and Jacob. Meyer lures the reader into being emotionally invested so these dangerous relationships feel more like romance. Snider shows how this illusion of romance makes dangerous situations—such as when Edward stalks Bella—feel romantic. Without Edward to "love" her, Bella becomes catatonic, even going so far as to jump off a cliff. Bella's happiness depends on Edward, and her choices, such as forgoing college, revolve around being with him. Not only is Bella disconcertingly obsessed with Edward but, Snider also argues, that conforms to the stereotypical roles of temptress, damsel in distress, and mother. Meyer emphasizes Bella's scent as an irresistible temptation, her fragility as requiring constant protection, and her skills with cooking and cleaning as useful. As shown by the stereotypes Snider exposes, *Twilight* fails to develop Bella into a respectable heroine. Meyer conceals these female stereotypes by making Bella relatable just as she conceals the unhealthy relationship between Edward and Bella with appealing romantic language. As a result of this manipulation, readers empathize with Bella rather than acknowledging the disconcerting ethics and logic, including the issues Snider presents, behind *Twilight*.

The way *Twilight* subordinates women is threatening in our image-obsessed culture. According to Erica Goode of the *New York Times*, "nearly every human female has uttered ["I'm too fat"] . . . as children grow up in a society where thinness is prized." The *Twilight* saga appeals to a young female demographic, arguably those whose body images can be most easily damaged by the shallow beauty values demanded of women. Most obviously, the name "Bella" means beauty, but interestingly, Meyer always describes Bella as plain. Before giving her one of many makeovers, Edward's sister Alice tells Bella that "no one will dare to call you plain when I'm through with you"

(*Breaking Dawn* 42). Such comments infer Bella's human beauty, or "plainness," makes her inadequate. These qualities attributed to human females such as Bella starkly contrast to the level of beauty Meyer attributes to the female vampires, specifically Edward's sister Rosalie Cullen: "the tall one [Rosalie] was statuesque. She had a beautiful figure, the kind you saw on the cover of the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue, the one that made every girl around her take a hit on her self-esteem just by being in the same room. Her hair was golden, gently waving to the middle of her back" (*Twilight* 18). Even though Rosalie lacks the kindness of other characters, Meyer makes sure we always remember her "inhumanly beautiful" appearance (*Twilight* 19). The audience overlooks Rosalie's narcissistic comments, such as "[A]dmiration [is] like air to me Bella," and her unfriendly behavior towards Bella because Meyer conceals them behind her perfect figure and hair (*Eclipse* 155). As glamour triumphs over moral character, beauty becomes the ideal in Meyer's vampire world.

By highlighting the beauty of the vampires, Meyer establishes image to be of great value. Bella first openly concerns herself with looks after she dreams of herself as old and wrinkly while Edward is still young. Since vampires do not age, growing old serves as an ugly reminder to Bella that she is not a vampire, and she cannot have eternal youth as she wishes. Here, Meyer makes youthfulness a desirable part of beauty, but one perfected only by the vampires. As ideals of beauty, Rosalie and Alice ridicule plain Bella for her initial disregard of her image. Her shortcomings in the beauty department thus become one of Bella's highlighted flaws. Alice and Rosalie both "chide Bella for her lack of designer fashion know-how and continually encourage her to make herself over" (Wilson 52). When Bella chooses to become a vampire, she also chooses to enter and adhere to this beauty-obsessed culture.

Within this fixation on beauty, Meyer's vampire world more specifically perpetuates a negative body image. Given Meyer's young female audience, this underlying issue proves to be the most threatening aspect of the series. Though *Twilight* depicts Bella as plain, Snider mentions her being described as thin (132). Still, this detail of her weight does not truly surface as problematic until she meets Edward. Since vampires (according to Meyer) do not eat, only Bella eats when they are out on dates. Noticeably, Bella's relationship with Edward quickly influences her eating habits. When Edward asks, "Aren't you hungry?" Bella tells him "no," and then confides to the reader that "her stomach was already full—full of butterflies" (*Twilight* 78). Bella's love for Edward prompts her to eat little to nothing. His love now fulfills her. While Meyer calls this "butterflies," the need to be good enough for Edward is what truly motivates Bella not to eat. Once she transforms into a vampire, she willingly enters a world where she does not and cannot eat.

Consequently, Bella surrenders her appetite completely, perhaps in the hopes of achieving the *Sports Illustrated* figure flaunted by Rosalie. Meyer's vampires therefore dangerously perpetuate a poor body image to a young female culture already susceptible to eating disorders. As research proves, a startling number of young women feel self-conscious about their body image, and many ultimately turn to extreme dieting and develop serious eating disorders. Erica Goode reports in the *New York Times* that Dr. Neumark-Sztainer et al. found in 2002 that "among 4,746 junior high and high school students, 57 percent of the girls had fasted, gone on diets, used food substitutes like Slim-Fast or smoked more cigarettes to lose weight; and 12 percent had resorted to extreme measures like diet pills, vomiting or using laxatives or diuretics." Considering this high percentage of *Twilight*'s demographic vulnerable to eating disorders, examples such as Bella not eating become that much more threatening. To veil these messages, Meyer manipulates our thinking the same way Snider shows us she does with abusive relationships: just as Edward cannot be blamed for his innate violent nature, Bella and the other vampires cannot be faulted for not eating because, again, it's part of being a vampire. Bella's choice to be a part of this beauty-obsessed culture dangerously implies that we should too.

Therefore, although Snider accurately represents some aspects of a feminist stance on *Twilight*, her argument is incomplete without acknowledging the shallow emphasis on female beauty. As Natalie Wilson notes, “Like the witch’s red apple, this story only looks good. Once bitten, once the surface gloss of the tale is penetrated, we can see that Bella is, like many female heroines before her, trapped” (72). Now that Snider has “bitten” into the glossy romantic surface, not only does she help unveil the saga’s oppressive relationships and stereotypes, but her feminist perspective inspires further analysis, such as the series’ dangerous portrayal of beauty. Like Edward, these values which prove so degrading to women should stay in the darkness—but, unfortunately, Meyer brings them all to light.

Works Cited

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