

**TWILIGHT**  
**AND**  
**PHILOSOPHY**  
VAMPIRES, VEGETARIANS,  
AND THE PURSUIT OF  
IMMORTALITY

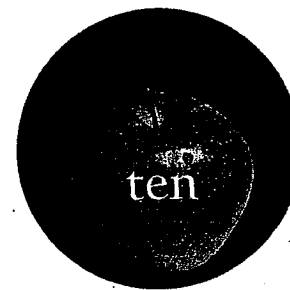
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**VAMPIRE LOVE:**  
**THE SECOND SEX**  
**NEGOTIATES THE**  
**TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

*Bonnie Mann*

This chapter started in a moment of parental panic. My thirteen-year-old daughter, who habitually reads very thick books of dubious character, was unusually insistent in her pleas to be allowed to attend the midnight release party for the last volume in some book series she was reading. Remembering to thank my lucky stars for her literary commitments, I grudgingly drove her to Borders at about 10 P.M., expecting to see ten or twelve bookish adolescents drinking hot chocolate while they waited for the clock to strike midnight.

The crowded parking lot was my first indication that I was walking into a world everyone knew about, except me. My second was the store, packed wall-to-wall with teenage girls in the full bloom of an almost frighteningly incandescent excitement, many of them dressed in low-cut black gowns

with their faces shining like floodlights through pale white paint. I stopped in the doorway of the store and turned to Dee Dee, whose normally beautiful human eyes were already radiating the luminescence of another sphere. I grabbed her arm and held her back. "Just what is this book about?" I asked.

What she gave me to understand with the twenty-five or so words I got out of her before she pulled away was that the glowing faces and the black gowns had something to do with the possibility of being loved by a bloodsucking man.

I later learned that I had delivered my daughter to the release party for *Breaking Dawn*, the fourth and final book of the blockbuster *Twilight* series, by Mormon housewife turned literary millionaire, Stephenie Meyer. These stories, of an all-consuming romance between a human teenage girl named Bella and a vampire frozen in time named Edward, have sold over forty million copies worldwide, and have been translated into thirty-seven languages.

I had to accept that, in the words our new president used to acknowledge Sarah Palin on the campaign trail, vampire love was a "phenomenon." What did it mean that millions of girls were fantasizing about men who could barely repress the desire to kill them? In 2008?

### Back in Time

When I opened the first novel, *Twilight*, my impression was that I had gone back in time. The female protagonist struck me as a representative of the idealized womanhood of my mother's generation, transposed into twenty-first-century circumstances. A child of divorced parents, the seventeen-year-old Bella Swan has chosen to go live with her father in the small town of Forks, Washington, on the Olympic Peninsula, leaving Phoenix, Arizona, to give her mother a chance to spend time with her new husband.

Bella loves Phoenix and hates Forks, but self-sacrifice is her specialty. In fact, other than her penchant for self-sacrifice and the capacity to attract the attention of boys, Bella isn't really anyone special. She has no identifiable interests or talents; she is incompetent in the face of almost every challenge. She is the locus of exaggerated stereotypically feminine incapacities and self-loathing. She has no sense of direction or balance. She is prone to get bruises and scrapes just in the process of moving from one place to another and doesn't even trust herself to explore a tide pool without falling in.<sup>1</sup> When she needs something done, especially something mechanical, she finds a boy to do it for her and watches him. Her only areas of skill are cooking and doing laundry, which she does without complaint for her father, who is incompetent in the kitchen in spite of years of living alone (he must have been near starvation when she showed up).

When Bella draws the attention of the stunningly handsome and hyperbolically capable vampire, Edward Cullen, her response is disbelief. "I couldn't imagine anything about me that could be in any way interesting to him," she reports.<sup>2</sup> Frankly, having the feeling that I'd met Bella somewhere before and quickly forgotten the encounter, I couldn't either. When Bella falls in love, then, a girl in love is all she is. By page 139 she has concluded that her mundane life is a small price to pay for the gift of being with Edward, and by the second book she's willing to trade her soul for the privilege.

Edward, in contrast to Bella, is masculine grandiosity writ large. Beautiful beyond compare, the rock-hard seventeen-year-old body Bella comes to worship belongs to a hundred-year-old vampire (frozen in time after a bout with the Spanish flu). He knows everything, having had a hundred years to learn it. He's been everywhere and speaks multiple languages. He reads most people's minds and is strong enough to break a mature tree in two like a matchstick. He runs as fast as most cars drive and rescues the

accident-prone Bella over and over; in a first early encounter he rescues her from a vehicle sliding toward her on ice by stopping it with his hands.<sup>3</sup> He is smug and confident and tortured by his desire to drink Bella's blood. He belongs to a cobbled together "family" of vampires who have sworn off human blood for ethical reasons and regularly suck the life out of large game animals instead. Edward's moral struggle with his instinctual bloodlust charges his physically intimate encounters with Bella with erotic, mortal, *and* moral danger. Chivalrous to a fault, he is as deeply concerned with protecting Bella's virtue as he is with keeping her alive.

The strong sense I had of having gone back in time to an old-fashioned world where women were seen as empty conduits of masculine desire and valued for their propensity to self-sacrifice alone drove me to take another look at *The Second Sex* which, widely acknowledged to be a founding text for feminist philosophy, was written by Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) half a century ago.<sup>4</sup> De Beauvoir, in contrast to others of the existentialist tradition, never wrote a treatise on the *essence* of love. She asked instead how love is lived and imagined in a *total concrete situation*, by *these* people, at *this* time.

For de Beauvoir in 1949 France, the tragedy of adolescence in the feminine was its demand that the girl give up both herself and her hold on the world. As she enters womanhood, she learns that she is destined to be a "relative being" whose existence has meaning only in relation to the man who loves her. As if Meyer wished to provide the perfect literary illustration of de Beauvoir's claim, when Edward leaves Bella for a time in the second book, Bella describes herself as "like a lost moon—my planet destroyed in some cataclysmic disaster-movie scenario of desolation—that continued . . . to circle in a tight little orbit around the empty space left behind."<sup>5</sup> Bella's mother marvels to her upon seeing her with Edward later in the story, "The way you move—you orient

yourself around him without even thinking about it. . . . You're like a . . . satellite."<sup>6</sup>

De Beauvoir claimed that throughout her childhood, the girl learns that "the world is defined without reference to her."<sup>7</sup> Men make history, fight the wars, and produce the great works of art. This lesson becomes a crisis for the adolescent. "To feel oneself passive and dependent at the age of hope and ambition," de Beauvoir wrote, "at the age when the will to live and make a place in the world is running strong. At just this conquering age, woman learns that for her there is to be no conquest, that she must disown herself, that her future depends upon man's good pleasure."<sup>8</sup> What she is offered in exchange for her world-making and value-creating capacities is the love, if she is lucky and pretty enough, of one of the world-makers.

No wonder that the adolescent girl's fantasies of love include a dimension of retreat to the safety of parental protection. After all, the task of becoming a *feminine* adult presents an impossible contradiction. "To be feminine is to appear weak, futile, docile," femininity is a "renunciation of sovereignty,"<sup>9</sup> while adulthood is having the strength and independence to take on the world. This contrast looms large in Meyer's novels. Bella is facing all of the simple cultural markers for adult womanhood: her eighteenth birthday, graduation from high school, first sex, marriage, and motherhood. Yet through most of the story, Bella's vampire is father and mother, as much as lover. By the second book there is a competent, well-muscled werewolf named Jacob who is an equally protective parent. As Bella is handed off for safekeeping from vampire to werewolf and back, she describes the experience as "like when I was a kid and Renée would pass me off to Charlie for the summer."<sup>10</sup> Her weakness contrasted with their strength is that of an infant, contrasted with an all-powerful adult. Edward confides to Bella, "You are so soft, so fragile, I have to mind my actions every moment that we're

together so that I don't hurt you. I could kill you very easily Bella, simply by accident . . . you don't realize how incredibly breakable you are."<sup>11</sup> Bella seems to need to be carried everywhere and often falls asleep in the arms of her vampire only to wake up tucked gently into her own bed with him watching over her or playing the lullaby he's written for her; her first dance with Edward is successful because she puts her feet on his and he moves her about the floor.<sup>12</sup> De Beauvoir noted that the woman in love is "trying to reconstruct a situation, that which she experienced as a little girl, under adult protection."<sup>13</sup>

But Bella's physical incapacities carry other meanings. She is a foreigner in physical space, who seems to look over a high fence into the spheres of action and meaning. According to de Beauvoir, the adolescent girl relinquishes her younger self's dominant mode of bodily being, which the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) described as the "I can," the body as the center of living action and intention. When the young girl internalizes and assumes the masculine gaze, de Beauvoir said, she takes up a perspective on herself as prey. As in the fairy tales, she becomes "an idol," a "fascinating treasure," "a marvelous fetish," sought after by men.<sup>14</sup>

In Meyer's books, Bella continually discovers boys looking at her in various modes of desire. The masculine gaze confers meaning on her otherwise empty existence by giving her a place in the story as the very location through which masculine action instantiates meaning. "Through [her beloved]—whose gaze glorifies her," de Beauvoir wrote, "nothingness becomes fullness of being and being is transmuted into worth."<sup>15</sup> Of course, if ever that spotlight should be removed, her very existence is at stake; "the absence of her lover is always torture, he is an eye, a judge."<sup>16</sup> Indeed, when Edward leaves Bella for much of the second book, she sinks into a kind of living death, and it is only the gaze of a virile werewolf that begins to bring her back to life. Part

of the seduction of this vampire story must be that, aside from Edward's absence in *New Moon*, his gaze is simply never averted. In a world that is still extremely heavy-handed in its insistence that a young woman's *primary* worth is derived from her ability to awaken masculine desire, Meyer offers girls the fantasy of a male gaze that is intense, constant, and faithful.

When I saw that what de Beauvoir wrote six decades ago seemed so relevant to Meyer's story, my parental panic became dull depression. For de Beauvoir, however timeless the myth of the "eternal feminine" claims to be, it arises from and points back to a total concrete situation, specific in time and place. Certainly the situation of girls in the United States at the dawn of the twenty-first century couldn't be the same as that of girls in 1949 France!<sup>17</sup>

### The Second Sex in the Twenty-first Century

Truth be told, the legal and formal barriers to women's equality *have* been eroded. A *New York Times* report from 2006 about "the new gender divide" in education noted that "women now make up 58 percent of those enrolled in two- and four-year colleges and are, over all, the majority in graduate schools and professional schools too. Men get worse grades than women," and "women are walking off with a disproportionate share of the honors degrees."<sup>18</sup>

We are accustomed to thinking of women's subordination as a thing of the past. Yet contemporary philosopher Susan Bordo argues that in a media-saturated culture, as gendered power retreats from law and policy it is even more intensely concentrated on women's bodies and the processes by which they come to think of themselves as persons.<sup>19</sup>

Mary Pipher, the acclaimed psychologist whose account of her experiences as a therapist for adolescent girls, *Reviving*

*Ophelia*, reached number one on the *New York Times* best-seller list over a decade ago, agrees. "Something dramatic happens to girls in early adolescence . . ." she wrote, "they lose their resiliency and optimism and become less curious and inclined to take risks. They lose their assertive, energetic, and 'tomboyish' personalities and become deferential, self-critical, and depressed. They report great unhappiness with their own bodies."<sup>20</sup> This is particularly disconcerting for feminist mothers, because while "we . . . raised our daughters to be assertive and confident . . . they seemed to be insecure and concerned with their femininity."<sup>21</sup> Our messages of equality and opportunity, she noted, are sent out in a world where they run headlong into the "junk values" of a culture obsessed with a narrow version of female beauty. Being attractive to boys is still the first avenue to existence in the imaginary domain of the American middle school girl. In film and on TV women are overwhelmingly represented as "half-clad and half-witted,"<sup>22</sup> while girls are explicitly advised at home and in school that they can be anything they want to be. Girls negotiate these paradoxes at a time when "they don't have the cognitive, emotional, and social skills" to do so, Piper argued. "They are paralyzed by complicated and contradictory data that they cannot interpret. They struggle to resolve the unresolvable and make sense of the absurd."<sup>23</sup> They are overwhelmed by the effort. Describing her own daughter and her friends, Piper said that at times "they just seemed wrecked. . . . Many confident, well-adjusted girls were transformed into sad, angry failures."<sup>24</sup>

Writer Lynn Philips confirms that these conflicts are not resolved for most young women just by surviving adolescence. Women in college face "an environment filled with tangled messages."<sup>25</sup> A good woman is both *pleasing* in the traditional sense: passive, pleasant, childlike, and subordinate, bent on self-sacrifice; and *together*, meaning she knows who she is and what she wants sexually and professionally, and goes after it.<sup>26</sup>

What young women learn about male sexuality is equally paradoxical.<sup>27</sup> On the one hand, batterers and rapists are pathological exceptions to normal men. On the other hand, male sexuality in general is dangerous, men's "natural sex drive is inherently compelling and aggressive," and young women should not start what they aren't willing to finish.<sup>28</sup> Even today, young women report losing a sense of their own voices in sexual encounters. They feel "a sense of responsibility to go along with and even fake being excited by whatever a male partner [does] in order not to interfere with his arousal."<sup>29</sup>

Young women are presented with two messages about heterosexual love. On the one hand, the notion that love conquers all is ubiquitous—it is presented as a young woman's only chance at salvation. On the other hand is the notion that love hurts, that women can't expect too much from men, who after all are from Mars, not from Venus.<sup>30</sup>

From these contemporary thinkers we learn that while legal inequality has receded, the infantilization of women as objects of male desire has intensified. As subordination has unraveled in arenas of the public sphere, it has retained its hold on the private sphere, especially that most private sphere where the process of becoming who we are is under way. Cultural messages about womanhood are fraught with paradox. And the imaginary domain in which young women negotiate these realities has become a messy place indeed.

### A Feminist Subtext

Stephenie Meyer's genius is to clean up that imaginary domain and give girls a story that seems to hold all the contradictions together. While I've already said a great deal about the ways in which Bella seems to be committed to the womanhood we might associate with the 1950s, I haven't said much about the ways that she departs from that representation.

The most surprising thing about Bella's romance with Edward is not that Edward has to resist the urge to perforate her pulsing jugular vein, but that he, not she, puts the brakes on their erotic encounters. Knowing that any loss of control spells death for his beloved, Edward's restraint allows Bella to be the one consumed by desire. She is regularly physically rebuffed by him as she longs to tear off his clothes. In the end, he is pushed into agreeing to sex while she is still human, only by forcing Bella to agree to marry him. We learn that Bella has been "raised to cringe at the very thought of poofy white dresses and bouquets" by her mother, since "early marriage was higher on her blacklist than boiling live puppies."<sup>31</sup> Yet in the end, Bella turns eighteen, graduates, marries Edward for sex, and gets pregnant, practically all at once.

In Phillips's interviews with young women in college, she noted that what was missing from the stew of discourses about sex, love, and sexuality were stories of male accountability and female pleasure without penalty. Meyer offers her readers the first of these missing narratives, which must be a great pleasure for girls who have, no doubt, wished for such stories. As one adolescent girl said to me recently, following an unpleasant encounter with a teenage boy in a car, "I wish he would just get it." Edward gets it. He knows that sex is dangerous for Bella; he reads every sign of emotional distress or joy with extraordinary accuracy and sensitivity.

Meyer still doesn't offer her young readers a clear story of female desire without penalty. For a moment she seems to be providing us with the most brutal critique of heterosexual pleasure and motherhood that we've seen in thirty years. First sex with the vampire leaves the bed in splinters and Bella covered with bruises. She becomes pregnant with a vampire child who threatens destruction from the inside; every fetal kick causes internal bleeding. Depleted to the point of death by the accelerated pregnancy, on the verge of becoming a "broken, bled-out, mangled corpse," Bella drinks human blood,

supplied from the blood bank by Edward's doctor vampire father, because nothing else seems to quiet "the little executioner."<sup>32</sup> Rather than letting the little beast chew its way out, a vampire cesarean is performed as Bella plummets toward death; Edward is compelled to inject his venom into Bella to save her, transforming her.

While it took a long time for me to notice, because it is deeply buried, particularly in the first two books, there is a subtle feminist subtext to this vampire love quartet. Bella announces in *Twilight* that she "doesn't like double standards," and writes an essay for her English class on "whether Shakespeare's treatment of the female characters is misogynistic," a subtle textual invitation to the reader to wonder the same thing about Meyer's characters.<sup>33</sup> We discover that Bella wants to be a vampire, not only to avoid out-aging Edward and live with him in immortal bliss, but because in the vampire world, all bets are off when it comes to gender. Vampire women show no particular deference to men. They are endowed with superpowers just like the guys. Rosalie, Edward's vampire sister, is the best mechanic in the family. The female vampires are clearly the answer to the helpless Bella's lament at the end of *Twilight*. "A man and a woman have to be somewhat equal," she says, "as in, one of them can't always be swooping in and saving the other one. They have to save each other equally. . . . I can't always be Lois Lane," she continues, "I want to be Superman too."<sup>34</sup> For the reader, too, the boredom inspired by the thousandth rescue incites hope for something else. "I want to be fierce and deadly," Bella tells us.<sup>35</sup> "Just wait 'til I'm a vampire! I'm not going to be sitting on the sidelines next time."<sup>36</sup>

And though Bella's transformation is a trial by fire (almost literally, since the pain involved in becoming a vampire burns), it does not disappoint. Bella steps back into her "I can" body with a vengeance. "The instant I considered standing erect," she marvels, "I was already straight. There was

no brief fragment in time in which the action occurred."<sup>37</sup> She is faster and stronger than Edward. "I could feel it now—the raw, massive strength filling my limbs. I was suddenly sure that if I wanted to tunnel under the river, to claw or beat my way through the bedrock, it wouldn't take me very long."<sup>38</sup> Instead of being carried through the woods by Edward like a baby, she runs with him, "I flew with him through the living green web, by his side, not following at all. . . . I kept waiting to feel winded, but my breath came effortlessly. I waited for the burn to begin in my muscles, but my strength only seemed to increase as I grew accustomed to my stride. My leaping bounds stretched longer, and soon he was trying to keep up with me. I laughed again, exultant, when I heard him falling behind."<sup>39</sup> More than anything, this physical prowess signals an existential change: "Now I was in the story with him," Bella says triumphantly, and the readers, too, sigh with relief.<sup>40</sup> In the final horrific encounter, between good and evil, life and death, it will be Bella, not the boys, who saves the day.

### The Price of Existence

What is heartening about Bella is that her story doesn't end the way the fairy tales do, with the kiss that brings the princess back to life, or the wedding at the palace. The fairy-tale ending turns to a nightmare in fact, as the half-vampire fetus beats away at her life. But finally, a self-destructive love bleeds its way into the kind of love de Beauvoir would have described as authentic, a love between two liberties, lived in equality. The tragedy of feminine self-alienation is overcome by journeying *through* it. Meyer sorts the paradoxical narratives of female passivity and power, purity and desire, innocence and responsibility, dependence and autonomy, into a story where one leads, finally, to the other.

When faced with an adult life as what de Beauvoir called "a relative being," a girl may well become convinced that

"there is no other way out for her than to lose herself, body and soul, in him who is represented to her as the absolute, the essential."<sup>41</sup> But the ecstasy of this process of self-loss is not, at bottom, masochistic: "She chooses to desire her enslavement so ardently that it appears as the expression of her liberty; she will try to rise above her situation as inessential object by radically assuming it."<sup>42</sup> Under her paroxysm of sacrifice, what de Beauvoir calls the "dream of annihilation," "is in fact an avid will to exist. . . . When woman gives herself to her idol, she hopes that he will give her at once possession of herself and of the universe he represents."<sup>43</sup>

What is disheartening about Meyer's books is her rein-statement of this old promise: assume your status as prey, as object, and you will gain your freedom as subject, as the center of action and meaning. Seek your existence in the eyes of a sovereign masculine subject, and you will find it. The old stories drop the female heroine into an abyss. We don't know what happens to Sleeping Beauty or Cinderella or Snow White after the kiss or the proposal or the wedding—the "happiness" they find is a blank death. But we *do* know what happens to Bella, she is literally torn to shreds by the needs and desires of others. Meyer promises resurrection as a full participant in the not-quite-human drama, and a grasp on the world that is strong—and one imagines Meyer herself, resurrecting herself, furiously writing herself back into existence.

There is a slippage between the promise to the reader and the activity of the writer here. Meyer doesn't come to celebrity life out of the purgatory of feminine nonexistence by letting the blood be drained out of her. It takes a hard-working self-authored creative act to resurrect a woman's life. But how does one open the door of the feminine imagination for young women so that they might trace paths to themselves that don't pass through traditional feminine annihilation? Is the only way to do this through the use of our traditional misogynistic metaphors? If so, Meyer is to be congratulated. But in

her insistence on resurrecting the promise that a meaningful life comes *through* self-annihilation in the interests of others, comes *through* appending oneself to one of the special creatures who lives the adventure of life firsthand, she promises our daughters the same things our mothers were promised. In that sense, the wild success of *Twilight* might be cause for despair.

### NOTES

1. Stephenie Meyer, *Twilight* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), p. 116.
2. *Twilight*, p. 228.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 157.
4. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. by H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).
5. Stephenie Meyer, *New Moon* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2006), p. 201.
6. Stephenie Meyer, *Eclipse* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2007), p. 68.
7. De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 331.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 359.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 336.
10. *Eclipse*, p. 236.
11. *Twilight*, p. 310.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 488.
13. De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 645.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 350.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 649.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 657.
17. That was just five years after women won the vote there, just seven years after the last person was executed for performing abortions, sixteen years before women could accept paid work without authorization from their husbands, and before the dramatic mobilizations of the 1970s' women's movement.
18. Tamar Lewin, "The New Gender Divide: At Colleges, Women are Leaving Men in the Dust," *New York Times*, July 9, 2006.
19. Several texts make this claim both explicitly and implicitly. See *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); *Twilight Zones: The Hidden Life of Cultural Images from Plato to O.J.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); *The Male Body: A Look at Men in Public and Private* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999).
20. Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1994), p. 19.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
25. Lynn M. Philips, *Flirting with Danger: Young Women's Reflections on Sexuality and Domination* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2000), p. 18.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 38–52.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 52–61.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 69–76.
31. Stephenie Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2008), pp. 6, 17.
32. *Ibid.*, pp. 355, 357.
33. *Twilight*, pp. 90, 143.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 473–474.
35. *New Moon*, p. 263.
36. *Eclipse*, p. 559.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 391.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 410.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 413.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 479.
41. De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 643.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 643, translation modified by the author.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 646.