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That Teenage Feeling

Twilight, Fantasy, and Feminist Readers

Anne Helen Petersen

Introduction

Like several feminist media critics before me, I find myself troubled by a “dirty” pleasure: I love *Twilight*. I fully recognize the numerous feminist objections to this particular text, yet I was completely swallowed by the four books one summer, devouring all 2,500 pages in a period of two weeks. *Twilight*’s narrative is simple and familiar: Bella, a passive, soft-spoken, plain, loner of a 17-year-old girl encounters Edward Cullen, a vampire forever frozen in the glory and strength of age eighteen. They fall immediately and irrevocably in love, but Edward must fight his overpowering urges to bite the object of his desire, effectively enacting a very thinly veiled allegory for the suppression of sexual desire. Over the course of the *Twilight* saga, Bella forsakes her future as an adult subject and her human identity in order to become a vampire with Edward, who refuses to allow her to join him until she agrees to marriage. Her love and desire lead her to acquiesce to Edward’s demands; she marries at age eighteen, attends the prom she always hated, and enters into the paternalistic sphere of the Cullen “household.” Conservative, regressive, decidedly postfeminist values are espoused throughout. Yet I love it. Indeed, I lose myself to the story with a depth of feeling last experienced in middle school.

The familiar conundrum, then, is how can a feminist take pleasure in media that explicitly contradicts my goals and aims as a feminist? What types of fantasy are enlisted in the process of said pleasure? Perhaps more importantly, in recognizing this persistent feminist problem, how can we understand and express the complicated set of pleasures, disavowals, acknowledgements, and sublimations that take place during the “indulgence” in such media? It is quite simple to dismiss the pleasure of others as juvenile, escapist, or elementary. But what happens when the pleasures are our own? When self-declared feminists—thousands of them!—are reading the text? This is difficult, contradictory, and personal

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work, but I do not think that means that we should shy from it. The question remains: how can we approach tension-ridden texts in a way that is at once critical and constructive?

I have thus turned to a very specific demographic—adult, female, feminist readers of *Twilight*—to garner a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which feminists experience and negotiate pleasure derived from postfeminist texts. I recruited participants using a method known as “snowballing,” garnering responses from approximately thirty women between the ages of eighteen and forty of varying educational backgrounds, geographical location, and ethnicity. These women all self-identified as feminists, but their means of engagement—as well as their overarching attitude towards the text—is by no means uniform. . . . Participants are PhD candidates, undergraduate students at private and public colleges, teachers, stay-at-home moms, and “young professionals”; they enjoy parts of the text, but are likewise troubled by aspects of the narrative and their own absorption therein.

Feminism Versus Postfeminism

. . . To be clear: I do not intend this article to function as an interpretation or critique of the *Twilight* phenomenon writ large—a project whose scope is beyond the limits of a single article. Rather, it uses the range of feminist responses as a lens through which we might gain better insight into the state of contemporary feminism.

For the uninitiated, the *Twilight* saga is a set of four published novels (*Twilight*, *New Moon*, *Eclipse*, *Breaking Dawn*) and one unfinished draft (*Midnight Sun*), readily accessible on the Internet. The first of the books was released in 2005; following initial success, Stephenie Meyer published three books in quick succession. *Twilight* frenzy hit its fever pitch in the summer of 2008, as anticipation grew for the August

publication of the series-concluding *Breaking Dawn*, with its initial printing of 3.7 million copies, and the release of the filmic version of the first book, simply named *Twilight* (2008). At the time of this writing, the books have sold over one hundred million copies worldwide, while the first three films have grossed \$1.799 billion internationally (Boxofficemojo.com).

The books are labeled Young Adult fiction. A large portion of *Twilight* readers—and initial readers in particular—are indeed teenage girls. But the reason *Twilight* has morphed into a veritable phenomenon is rather simple: unlike *Hannah Montana*, *The Jonas Brothers*, or *High School Musical*, whose fan bases have remained solidly within the “tween and teen” demographic, moms, sisters, and friends began to pick up this “teen” text, in turn, recommending it to their friends, sisters, and mothers. In this way, *Twilight* became an inter-generational female sensation, as reinforced by the enormously popular site *Twilightmoms.com*.

The *Twilight* phenomenon has taken place against the backdrop of what many feminist scholars have termed “postfeminism.” As Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra explain, postfeminism “broadly encompasses a set of assumptions, widely disseminated within popular media forms, having to do with the ‘pastness’ of feminism, whether the supposed pastness is merely noted, mourned, or celebrated” (2007, p. 1). This ideological attitude of “pastness” suggests, despite ample evidence to the contrary, that the battle for gender equality has been won; feminism is thus unnecessary, superfluous, and/or a total buzz kill. Postfeminist rhetoric and texts commodify the language and attributes of feminism, coopting catchphrases like “Girl power!” as advertising slogans as they frame the “freedom to choose” as the freedom to choose one’s lipgloss color. . . .

The effects of postfeminism are tangible: each year, fewer and fewer girls and young women are willing to identify themselves as

“feminists,” even when their beliefs, life philosophies, and politics align with those of the feminist agenda. In this way, the ubiquity of postfeminist rhetoric and texts have transformed “feminism” into the “F-word” for a new generation of women, painting feminists as a group of angry, bra-burning, lipstick-hating, middle-aged crones. But postfeminism has also proven a wedge within the women’s movement itself, further exacerbating pre-existing rifts concerning what goals feminists should pursue and how those pursuits should be enacted. As Susan Faludi explains in “American electra: feminism’s ritual matricide,” the women’s movement continues to be divided according to age, as “mothers” (generally affiliated with second and third wave feminism of the 1960s–1980s) find themselves at odds with their literal and figurative “daughters,” whose goals, pleasures, and articulations of feminism may diverge from their own (2010, p. 29). . . .

For many of these younger women, including many participants of this ethnography, feminism means the ability to choose: to go to graduate school or be in control of one’s own body, certainly, but also to not feel shame for staying at home, showing cleavage, finding pleasure in “postfeminist” objects, or rejecting any prescriptive definition of “true feminism.”

Stephenie Meyer, author of the *Twilight* series, is one such woman. Meyer, a stay-at-home mother of two when she first began writing the books, is also a Mormon. While neither Mormonism nor religion is mentioned in the books, the series’ general ethos and moral universe are in line with the conservative Mormon belief system, which forbids sex before marriage and encourages women to take a place in the home. According to Meyer, her lifestyle choices—or the life choices she has written for her heroine—do not render her anti-feminist. As she explains on her website, feminism is “being able to choose.” She continues:

One of the weird things about modern feminism is that some feminists seem to

be putting their own limits on women’s choices. That feels backward to me. It’s as if you can’t choose a family on your own terms and still be considered a strong woman. How is that empowering? Are there rules about if, when, and how we can love or marry and if, when, and how we have kids? Are there jobs we can and can’t have in order to be a “real” feminist? To me, those limitations seem anti-feminist in basic principle. (Meyer 2010)

Meyer’s definition of feminism and critique of its “modern” form reproduces postfeminist rhetoric, emphasizing the “freedom of choice with respect to work, domesticity, and parenting” (Tasker & Negra 2007, p. 2).

Indeed, within the text of *Twilight*, Bella is “free” to “choose” to give up her human life—including college, a job, independence—for eternity with Edward. Bella’s postfeminist traits become especially clear when compared to Buffy, another teen heroine grappling with her place in the vampire universe. Buffy has several romantic interests and dilemmas, but “her story always belonged to *her*” (Laura Miller 2008). She is likewise surrounded by a strong, supportive network that mirrors the multi-cultural ethos of third wave feminism. In contrast, Bella is hopelessly clumsy and incapable of physical coordination; she eschews the friendship of the girls at her school, opting instead for the thrall of her love for Edward. She plays helpmate to her father, cooking square meals every evening.

Meyer endows Bella with few distinctive traits, talents, or interests—there is little to sustain or define her apart from her all-consuming devotion to a man. She may attend high school, but few of the elements of teenage girlhood concern her. At seventeen, Bella is already figured as an adult, ready to participate in the rituals of traditional female adulthood, including marriage and motherhood. Bella’s very lack of distinguishing characteristics facilitates reader

identification; through this identification, the reader is effectively encouraged to feel Bella's overwhelming desire to sacrifice all for a man. In this way, *Twilight* offers what Elena Levine terms a "post-feminist fantasy," "bend[ing] the notion of feminist empowerment so that it becomes feminine devotion" (2010, p. 283).

Meyer may not be *anti-feminist*. But she, her texts, and their stunning success form one of the most striking manifestations of postfeminist culture in recent years. Levine cautions, however, that just because "such a fantasy is so appealing to so many girls and women," it does not mean that *Twilight* fans are "dupes of patriarchy." Rather, "it means that they are so fully immersed in contemporary post-feminist culture that both feminist empowerment and feminist fulfillment have taken on new meanings" (2010, p. 284). Here is where this article intervenes, attempting to ascertain what empowerment and fulfillment mean to feminist readers—and whether they are, in fact, locating it in *Twilight*. If they are, how is the process accomplished? Is it negotiated? And if they are not, what else are they finding in the text that compels them to engage further? . . .

Fantasy and Pleasure

If readers were not finding pleasure in a feminist hero, or through rewriting the text themselves or other fan practices, what did they find so pleasurable and attractive about the text? The most frequently voiced form of pleasure was in response to *Twilight's* cultivation of fantasy—but a very particular brand of fantasy, best explained by Elizabeth Cowie. Cowie's nuanced theorization of female fantasy speaks directly to a greater understanding of female desire, particularly as it pertains to fantasy spaces such as an ostensibly regressive vampire narrative. Cowie posits fantasy as a "mise-en-scène of desire": a setting forth of an elaborate scene of

drawn-out pleasure, of almosts and near-misses, of denial and the controlling of masculine and feminine subject positions. In her words, "fantasy depends not on particular objects, but on their setting out; and the pleasure of fantasy lies in the setting out, not in the having of the objects" (Elizabeth Cowie 1984, p. 79). Within this scenario, pleasure is not linked to consummation but rather to "the happening and the continuing to happen; in how it will come about, and not in the moment of *having happened*, when it will fall back into loss, the past" (1984, p. 80).

Yet what might lead a feminist to pursue distinctly non-feminist fantasies as roundabouts to pleasure? Following Freud and Lacan, Cowie explains fantasy as a manifestation of early, even pre-Oedipal desires, through which the present context is mapped with future desires. Fantasies bring pleasure through the representation of a wish, "but also by presenting the failure of a wish if the latter has undergone repression" (Cowie 1984, p. 81). Desires that have been repressed—as socially unacceptable, untenable within a functioning family unit, or discouraged by a feminist politics—rise to the surface in the form of the fantasy scenario. Crucially, personal fantasies often speak to a wide audience, thus explaining how a fantasy scenario like *Twilight* (the premise for which occurred to Meyer in a dream) can resonate with a broad swath of readers. Fantasies are likewise "contingent": viewers may simply translate the basic architecture of the fantasy to form their own mise-en-scène of desire, adorning it with the specifics of their own experience (Cowie 1984, p. 85).

What, then, are the original fantasies of *Twilight* for feminist readers? One might expect the answer to fixate on Edward, yet most readers were not necessarily attracted to the character, per se, but to the rituals of courting, love and devotion he represents. According to one respondent, "As a formerly outsider-ish teenage girl, I liked seeing the new girl in town become the object of

desire of the hot outsider guy who nobody has managed to land” (Gillian, thirty-two, Graduate Student). For some, it is a matter of “being chosen,” or offering the pleasure of first love: as a 20-year-old reader explains, “I can’t believe how well Stephenie Meyer brought back all of those butterflies of falling in love for the first time!” (Jen, twenty, Undergraduate Student).

These original fantasies—Edward’s devotion to Bella, the evocation of first love—combine to structure *Twilight*’s dominant mise-en-scène of desire. Importantly, many of these fantasies are rooted in an emotional return to feelings first felt as a teenager—a time when passions were unfettered by reason. Yet it is the way in which these fantasies are “laid out” that truly define reader’s engagement: feelings of absorption, forestalled pleasure, and disappointment with the series’ culmination run throughout the responses—emotions that associate strongly with “the happening and continuing to happen” of Cowie’s framework. The pleasure of the series, it seems, is very much rooted in the extended escape to the world of Edward and Bella—and the equally extended time it takes for the couple to consummate their relationship. This “strategy,” as one respondent cleverly explains, is one of the “slow-burn” (Gillian, thirty-three, Graduate Student).

The books may be about sex, but they certainly do not depict it. There is relatively little description of kissing or making-out; the text is clean enough for Meyer’s Mormon readers. At the same time, the text is imbued with the romance and tension that attend abstinence: yearning and unfulfilled passion far more exciting than any amount of raw pornography. The passion within and produced by the books may be likened to a form of “rapture”—a term that connotes the extreme pleasure and joy of orgasm. The pleasure, as Cowie emphasizes, comes not in the conclusion; in fact, most readers express extreme dissatisfaction with the depiction of the eventual culmination. Rather, it is

the tossing and turning in between, the pages upon pages of dithering over how, and when, sex will occur, that most clearly constitutes *Twilight*’s mise-en-scène of desire.

Cultural critic Caitlin Flanagan (2010) argues that the resonance of “super reactionary love stories,” whether *Twilight*, *High School Musical*, or the bestselling songs of Taylor Swift, is this generation of women’s way of demanding *more*. Having spent the last decade “being hectored—via the post-porn, Internet-driven world—toward a self-concept centering on the expectation that the very most they could or should expect from a boy is a hookup,” girls and young women are rejecting the “low” romantic expectations set by their parents’ generation (Flanagan 2010). In their place: “boyfriend stories” reminiscent of their *grandparents*’ texts, inflected with the very cultural mores against which many of these girls’ parents were rebelling.

Respondents’ attraction to the traditional and “true love” aspects of *Twilight* highlight a yearning for traditional courtship and delay of sexual activity, even on the part of feminists. For these women, the gradual destigmatization of sexual activity and promiscuity (and the concurrent rise of “hook-up culture”) has had an unfortunate sideeffect: the end of romance. One reader elaborated on this point at length, contrasting the depiction of romance to the complicated “reality” of relationships today:

The books resonated a lot with me and perhaps other women because of [their] absolute simplicity. Bella and Edward’s love story is intense, focused, and unmediated. What I mean by that is that in contemporary society, relationships are tempered by all sorts of “considerations”—work, distance, “timing,” finances, etc. There’s a mediocre, cynical view of love these days, down to when to “hook up” with someone or who should pay a bill, etc, etc. I think a lot of women long for those days when there was a magic to the mere thought of

kissing someone and being madly, deeply destabilized by love. Where just one look from the parties involved can be enough to make you swoon. (Gloria, thirty, Graduate Student)

For Gloria, the lifestyle afforded by the advances of the women's movement—including the right to work, to have an independent lifestyle, even the "right" to pay the bill—have obviated the simple pleasures of love and passion. Another reader underlines the ways in which the romance read, to her, as a subversion of contemporary relationship norms, even as it confirmed traditional notions of true love:

Bella and Edward represent the fantasy of subverting normative heterosexuality, and allow us to find faith in the existence of such a thing as true, passionate romantic love. In our everyday lives, we as twenty-something women getting older and more "responsible," feel pressure to date the Mike Newmans [Bella's other, "normal," human suitor] of the world; we want to date men who have jobs, who can pay their rent, who can function socially with our friends and family, who can keep their apartment somewhat clean, not the "bad boy," or brooding boy with whom many of us had passionate romantic flings in our younger days. Bella doesn't choose Mike Newman, she subverts the pressure to do that, and instead chooses Edward. And the fling isn't just a fling. It's true love that lasts, we imagine, through the banalities of a long-term relationship [. . .] And I took great pleasure in rooting for that. (Kate, twenty-seven, PhD Student)

For these women, *Twilight* provides a romance and experience for feminists that the realities of contemporary culture and living as an adult, responsible, woman do not.

Yet the attraction to this type of traditional romance is fraught with ambivalence. In part due to their feminist beliefs, almost all respondents articulate an initial

hesitancy to engage with the text. "I was highly skeptical," says one; "there was no way I thought that I could get into a vampire book"; "I was not interested at all"; "I was vehemently anti-*Twilight*." Yet akin to a classic tale of seduction, each reader was compelled, almost against her will, to engage in the fantasy of Edward and Bella's relationship. Once "seduced," the "slow burn" of the story took control. Readers articulate the resultant pleasure in varied fashion:

[The] physical tension between [Bella and Edward] was really unlike anything I'd read in a long time. Their fingers can brush against each other and it takes half a page and you're on the edge of your seat the whole time. (Ally, twenty-three, Master's Student)

The best reason I can come up with for having been completely glued to the story is that it reminded me of falling in love, or of being younger and thinking that love was about to happen. That is a fun feeling, whether you're experiencing it immediately or remembering it from years past. (Laura, thirty, Teacher's Assistant)

I think that (to generalize) a lot of people our age have settled into some sort of stability, whether it is a relationship, a job, a social group, and it was exciting to feel a little bit of the way we did when we were young, when a word, a gesture, or a look could make a huge impact on you. (Alex, twenty-nine, Marketing Specialist)

In other words, the books were transpor- tive: like all fantasy, they allowed readers to vacate their own lives, however temporarily, and inhabit a different space, with different rules, many of which might not be termed feminist. Importantly, envelopment and submission to these fantasy scenarios is facilitated, and perhaps even contingent, upon a specific form of engagement with the text: that of "girl reading."

The Pleasures of Girl Reading

As evidenced above, the books inspire a sort of rapture—and as pleasurable as rapture may be, it also connotes a certain sense of surrender and danger. Indeed, for a number of respondents, the text, and the obsession that accompanied it, treads a knife-edge between satisfaction and a frightening loss of self. The shame of indulging, both in the romance and in absorbing texts in general, is nothing new. Building on Freud, Cowie explains how such shame stems “not only for being childish (and hence for a denial of reality) . . . but also surely because of the cathexis deriving from the archaic, original wishes involved” (1984, p. 85). *Twilight*-based cathexis—the process of focusing all energy on one person, idea, or thing—is, for some respondents, laughable, or a point of exclamatory pride:

It was an immediate obsession. I could not put the book down, and even with chasing my daughter ALL day, I finished reading the first book within three days (two nights)! (Courtney, twenty-five, Stay-at-home Mother)

My girlfriend and I read them out loud to each other, and we literally inhaled the first book. We couldn't get enough. (Dena, twenty-eight, Veterinary Assistant)

I found the experience, as is typical with my previous experience with romance and/or suspense novels, to be immersive, exciting, and pleasurable. I read the books [. . .] over the course of about a week and a half, sacrificing precious late-night and early-morning sleep hours just to be able to finish them. (Meredith, twenty-four, PhD Student)

I was devoured into the story. (Mandy, twenty-five, Stay-at-home Mother)

I read it in huge bouts—a couple hours at a time, uninterrupted—and I remember

getting frustrated when my *Twilight* reading was interrupted by the important stuff like assembling furniture. (Ellen, twenty-eight, PhD Student)

For others, however, the obsession, however pleasurable, was lined with shame and chaos:

As soon as I started the first book I knew I was a goner . . . I read them all in a week, and was totally lost to the world. This does happen to me from time to time with a book, movie, or series, I'll get very involved in it and escape for a bit, but nothing has ever affected me like this. I couldn't talk, it was hard for me to focus on real life, I went grocery shopping for the week and only got milk . . . I am usually a very prepared, planned person, and after a bit it was hard to be so wound up—by the middle of third book, I just wanted it to end so I could have my life back! Of course, I also wanted it to never end, and missed it when it was done. (Ann, thirty-three, Preschool Teacher)

I truly hate to admit it, but I did find myself caught up in the swoon of the romance. (Lindy, twenty-six, Yoga Instructor)

I feel so sad that a book about a teenage girl and her vampire boyfriend could drag me in so far, so quickly, so (as Bella would put it) irrevocably. (Meghan, twenty-eight, Fundraising Manager)

For these readers, the fantasy space and engagement with the *mise-en-scène* of desire became so intense and detailed that it began to challenge the *non*-fantasy space of the outside world. In this way, consumption produced feelings of inadequacy—as if something must be wrong with one's life to seek such shelter in another.

Loving a vampire did not generate this shame. Rather, the shame resulted from the way the narrative overtook everyday