

Of Virgins and Vampires: *Twilight* and the Issues of Beauty and Soul

NOËL FALCO DOLAN

Villanova University

Stephenie Meyer's popular *Twilight* series plays with double horror, offering a new take on not only the popular Gothic creatures, but also on the trials of high school life and romance for a teenage girl. Along the way, her main character, Bella Swan, must wrestle with fitting into a new high school community, coping with divorced parents, choosing between two very attractive boys, wanting to be beautiful and graceful, and, oh, a little thing like sacrificing the immortality of her soul for love. Interestingly, it is her vampire beau, Edward Cullen, who is more concerned with preserving her soul (and, as their romance progresses, Bella's virginity), while Bella's ethical code prizes love more highly. While the question of the immortality of the soul is the root of this argument between the two that extends over four books, neither Meyer nor her characters stop to consider fully what *soul* means. Still developing his understanding of the relationship between the soul and the body, St. Augustine writes in *On the Immortality of the Soul* that mind is life; it animates and thus correlates with soul, and thus every inanimate thing animated by the mind is alive. In keeping with his Neoplatonic roots, in which he comes to see the soul as superior to the flesh, he argues that if one possesses one's mind and reasoning, one must necessarily be alive (and thus human). He was obviously not familiar with vampires, let alone teenage ones. Meyer's vampires are fully rational beings capable of learning new languages and ideas, capabilities which would suggest by St. Augustine's definition that they are alive: "for nothing which is not alive learns anything."¹ St. Augustine argues that mind correlates with soul in that it is immortal and can exist beyond the physical limitations of the body. Yet, it is unclear that Meyer views the life of the soul as anything beyond something that exists independent of both body and thought. For undead Edward, who frets about what will happen to him if his body is destroyed, soul clearly has a moral element, and thus he worries about the value of his inherent goodness. Feeling the desires of and pressures on young women today, Bella has looming insecurities that are resolved only through her attachment to Edward and mark a focus on the physical side of life, culminating in the price she willingly pays for beauty and eternal love: her soul.

When we first meet Bella in book one, *Twilight*, she describes herself in ways that cast her as an outsider: "But physically, I'd never fit in anywhere. I should be tan, sporty, blond – a volleyball player, or a cheerleader, perhaps – all the things that go with living in the valley of the sun."² She describes attributes that could be seen positively – as indeed several of the young men at her new high school see them – and twists them into

negatives. She muses, “I was ivory-skinned, without even the excuse of blue eyes or red hair,” and contextualizes the appearance of her skin with her surroundings. If in Phoenix, her skin was too pale, in Forks (WA), “I looked sallow, unhealthy.... I had no color here.” She is happy on her first day at her new school to find that she blends in with most of her classmates, seeking only to attract no attention to herself.

As contrast, the Cullen family of teenaged vampires stands out as wildly attractive, and they become her new paradigm for beauty. While the boys are written off quite quickly with limited description – *big, muscled, lanky, taller, leaner* (about two adjectives and a hair color apiece) – the girls are described with greater attention:

The tall one was statuesque. She had a beautiful figure, the kind you saw on the cover of the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue, the kind 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. The short girl was pixielike, thin in the extreme, with small features. Her hair was a deep black, cropped short and pointing in every direction. (18)

Meyer chooses these details once and deliberately; she hearkens back to many of the same choices again and again over the four-book series (count how many times vampire Alice “dances” across a room). It is important to see the immediate impact on Bella, in that she recognizes that the beauty of all five vampire “siblings” is beyond her reach, that they are indeed what she calls “devastatingly, *inhumanly* beautiful” (19; emphasis mine). She aligns their look with the beauty that functions as the standard for most young women today, that of advertising (and secondarily, that of great art): “They were faces you never expected to see except perhaps on the airbrushed pages of a fashion magazine. Or painted by an old master as the face of an angel.” Thus, both art and advertising are logically connected with that which is inhuman, and, for art at least, the further connection is to immortality. Great works of art – and beautiful vampires– are forever. Throughout the series, Bella will refer to Edward’s angel face and often compare him to a marble statue, a “carving of Adonis” (299), not only for his beauty but for the cold skin of a vampire. As the series evolves, Bella will long again and again for the beauty and gracefulness of the Cullens, and as she approaches the need to be transformed into a vampire, these aspects will be part of her motivation.

In the interim, during the developing romance between Edward and Bella, what is disturbing is how frequently Bella puts herself down in comparison to Edward. It is as if in the face of his ideal beauty, she cannot see any worth in herself. In *Twilight*, as she contemplates whether Edward might like her, Bella thinks, “Of course he wasn’t interested in meI wasn’t interesting. And he was. Interesting ... and brilliant ... and mysterious...and perfect...and beautiful” (79). Bella does not consider that she is pretty or charming, even as other boys in her high school ask her out and she turns them

down. It is Edward who informs her that on her first day of school, “every human male” was thinking of how attractive she was (210), and even then she does not believe it. Edward’s beauty is all the more otherworldly when he dispels the myth of vampires and sunlight for Bella, revealing a diamond-like sparkling of his skin in the light of a protected meadow. If Bella thought Edward was dazzling before, well... Even while Bella feels clumsy at prom in a cast, frilly chiffon dress, and curled hairstyle (“like Guinea Pig Barbie”), she marvels at Edward’s smile: “Would I ever get used to his perfection?” (481).

For brevity’s sake, we can skip over the moody whining of the break-up book, *New Moon* (where Bella’s self-esteem is perhaps at its lowest), and the action-packed reunion of *Eclipse* and turn to the last book, *Breaking Dawn*, to note Bella’s pleasure at her physical transformation once she has been made a vampire. For the first time, Bella feels beautiful in Edward’s presence. At their wedding, the still-human Bella, who never notes her human prettiness on her own, is surprised when her husband Edward points to a mirror: “I caught a glimpse of Edward’s reflection – a perfect duplicate of his perfect face – with a dark-haired beauty at his side. Her skin was cream and roses, her eyes were huge with excitement and framed with thick lashes. [...] [H]er body looked elegant and graceful – while it was motionless, at least.”³ To her, this is a fantasy, and she even hopes not to “blink and make the beauty turn back into me,” an ironic disassociation from her own name, Bella. It is through both her union with Edward (“at his side”) and the makeover that she was given by his vampire sister, a prefiguring of the more radical makeover of being turned into a vampire, that she attains a level of satisfaction with her appearance.

Bella’s strong desire is to be with Edward forever, which means becoming a vampire, undertaking a three-day process of being inflicted with fiery vampire venom until her heart stops (I am not making this up). After the painful transformation, and the even more painful literary pronouncement “I was a newborn vampire” (392), Bella first recognizes her new inhuman beauty in her voice, which now sounds like bells or song” (394). When she sees herself for the first time, she puts herself on par with the Cullens, whom she had seen as so unattainably beautiful on her first day in Forks. Bella looks in the mirror, and “[her] first reaction was an unthinking pleasure. The alien creature in the glass was indisputably beautiful, every bit as beautiful as Alice or Esme. She was fluid even in stillness, and her flawless face was pale as the moon against the frame of her dark, heavy hair. Her limbs were smooth and strong, skin glistening subtly, luminous as a pearl” (403). Why the skin that was unremarkable as *pale ivory* at the beginning of the series is only lovely now as *pearl* is not clear; the ideal of beauty is left to the reader and is colored only by Bella’s own critiques or satisfactions. If at first Bella judged herself within her physical context, now her self-assessment depends upon the company she keeps. This first glance in the mirror, like that early reflection on the day of her wedding, reveals a disconnect between image and self. “Who was she?” Bella asks herself, for “at

first glance, I couldn't find my face anywhere in the smooth, perfect planes of her features," markedly keeping the first person pronoun for her thoughts and the third person for this gorgeous reflection.

Her new looks distract Bella from the problems of her transition, such as controlling her new bloodthirstiness and a connecting to her human emotion. Motivated by looks and love, she dismisses any downside, such as not being able to maintain her family relationships (since she will remain eternally a teenager in appearance while her parents age), having red or amber eyes when thirsty (depending on whether she feeds on human or animal blood), never sleeping, subsisting on blood, and – a small item – not having a soul.

These difficulties had earlier moved Edward to suck out the venom when Bella was bitten by another vampire in *Twilight*, preventing Bella from being transformed (the implicit sexual metaphor of being bitten extends throughout the series as Edward, who was born in 1901, is a remarkably chaste vampire who withholds not only this bite but the sexual relationship that Bella craves; Bella in turn makes it clear that she would be happiest if Edward would be the one to bite her, but that he is not the only one who could). When Bella asks Edward why he stopped the venom, he replies, "I refuse to damn you to an eternity of night and that's the end of it."⁴ His later clarifications focus mainly on human physical experiences. He wants Bella to be able to grow and to change, to be able to have children. He says, "It's not right! I don't want you to have to make sacrifices for me. I want to give you things, not take things away from you. I don't want to steal your future,"⁵ making a distinction between future and eternity. *Future* to Edward has developmental possibility, while *eternity* is indicative of stasis.

At this point, Edward distinguishes *immortality* (such as of the soul) from *eternal existence* (Edward resists using the word *life*), although by book four, Bella will use *immortality* to stand for eternal physical existence, more in the character of mythic deities than of the soul. For one thing, even though they are not alive, vampires can be "killed" by being ripped to pieces (possible only for other vampires and werewolves to do since Meyer's vampires are as hard as marble) and then burned to ash. For another, Edward fears that he does not have a soul. When Bella asks Edward if he finds her attractive halfway through book one, his answer reveals the simplicity with which Meyer treats the question of being alive: "I may not be human, but I am a man."⁶ This is a neat bit of semantics; how Edward can be a man and not be human is unclear. That Meyer allows Edward to have both rational thought and emotion (as alluded to here, lust) but still defines him as not human calls into question St. Augustine's definition of the soul, which in this text marks an intermediary ground in his philosophical development. It would seem as if the distinction between *man* and *human* for Meyer – and Edward – hinges on the question of the soul.

Yet, if as St. Augustine writes, "For whatever dead thing is said to be abandoned by life, is understood to be deserted by the soul. Moreover, this life which deserts the things

which die is itself the mind, and it does not abandon itself; hence the mind does not die,”⁷ then we must consider the continuity of the mind for Edward and Bella. In *Twilight*, Edward is puzzled by what he deems human hungers, meaning desire, for he is accustomed only to thirst for blood, yet he says, “I have human instincts – they may be buried deep, but they’re there.”⁸ Telling Bella his life story, Edward clarifies that though human memories fade, he can “remember how it felt” (287) to be *saved*. *Saved*, with its evangelical overtones, is used as a synonym for transformed, and later, Edward tells Bella, “you’re *resurrecting* the human in me” (304, emphasis mine) of her ability to make him feel jealous of other boys. If Edward is correct and he has retained his human instincts and feelings in his transition from being human to becoming a vampire, then does he not exist as alive? If he has a mind with which to think, and this mind recalls that which was there in the human form, then can it be said that mind has abandoned body in the transformation? And if not, if mind indicates life, then does he not have a soul?

Meyer seems to build a case for this in one of her subthemes. Each vampire in Edward’s family has a special quality that defines him or her, and for some these become talents. Edward explains, “Carlisle has a theory...he believes that we all bring something of our strongest human traits with us into the next life, where they are intensified – like our minds, and our senses” (307). It is Carlisle, the oldest of the vampires in this family and thus the father figure, who has the most to say on religious faith. His struggle with the faith of his clergyman father defined the conscience he brought to his vampire existence: “But never, in the nearly four hundred years now since I was born, have I ever seen anything to make me doubt whether God exists in some form or the other.”⁹ It is the existence of God that gives life meaning for Carlisle, although he admits of vampires, “By all accounts we’re damned regardless. But I hope, maybe foolishly, that we’ll get some measure of credit for trying” (36–37). Thus, being a vegetarian vampire (and doctor!) count as forms of good deeds, which when allied with faith may allow for salvation.

Edward accepts the existence of God, as in his explanation of where vampires come from when he first speaks of evolution, then pronounces, “Or, if you don’t believe that all this world could have just happened on its own, which is hard for me to accept myself, is it so hard to believe that the same force that created the delicate angelfish with the shark, the baby seal and the killer whale, could create both our minds together?”¹⁰ Although he is not sure how to clarify the beginning of his existence as a vampire, waffling between *born* and *created* (342) because of the need of another being to effect the unnatural change, Edward recognizes a greater force at work in the world, one with whom he must connect in some way. In part, this connection comes through his first existence, but otherwise it comes through his mind, specifically through his conscience. He reflects on his need to stop drinking human blood, “I thought I would be exempt from the...depression...that accompanies a conscience.... But as time went on, I began to see the monster in my eyes” (342–43). Surely if he has a conscience, must he not have a soul?

It is Carlisle who explains to Bella in *New Moon* that Edward's belief, while it extends to God, heaven, and hell, does not allow for an afterlife for vampires: "You see, he thinks we've lost our souls."¹¹ This fear will not allow Edward to change Bella, for he cannot allow her to risk her soul for him. Carlisle makes this clear to Bella when he pointedly asks, "If you believed as he did. [*sic*] Could you take away *his* soul?"

The possibility of losing *her* soul does not seem to concern Bella. Of more pressing concern is a teenage girl's fixation on looks, and the second novel opens with Bella's nightmare of being an old woman while Edward has remained frozen as a seventeen-year-old. She wakes on the morning of her eighteenth birthday to examine her face in the mirror, searching for wrinkles. After reassurances that being one year older than Edward is no big deal, she automatically thinks of her desire to become a vampire because of its physical benefit: "[I]f I could be *sure* of the future I wanted, sure that I would spend forever with Edward, and Alice, and the rest of the Cullens (preferably not as a wrinkled old lady)...then a year or two one direction or the other wouldn't matter to me so much. But Edward was dead set against any future that changed me" (10). For Bella, the material benefits of the change are what matters, and she dismisses any discussion of greater consequence – or more disturbingly, never engages any discussion at that level of thought. "What was so great about mortality?" she wonders, focusing again on the physical rather than spiritual level. "Being a vampire didn't *look* like such a terrible thing" (emphasis mine). Perhaps it would be a hard conversation for Bella to enter, as she notes, "My own life was fairly devoid of belief" (36) – an interesting comment from a girl who accepts wholeheartedly the possibility of vampires because of internet research she does one afternoon. Bella does not debate whether Edward has a soul so much as discount its importance when compared to the power of love. Faced with a break up in *New Moon*, Bella cries, "This is about my soul, isn't it? ...I don't care! You can have my soul. I don't want it without you – it's yours already!" (69). Love is the proof and purpose of existence, and Meyer uses Bella's powerful love as her special vampire trait: her love becomes a protective shield she can extend.

The novels end with a happy satisfaction at the endless time for love that stretches before them (the point has been made in the last novel that coupled vampires have quite active nights): "Forever and forever and forever."¹² Instead of fearing that there is no afterlife for vampires because they have no souls, Edward and Bella, having escaped destruction at the hands of the nefarious Italian Volturi coven, rejoice in the immortality of their physical life and love, even as it seems illogical to trust in this physical existence if what they are celebrating is the fact that they were *not destroyed*. Meyer's surface-level treatment of this is clear in an interview in which she discusses whether one of the werewolves is immortal: "Jacob can continue to be the same age as he is now as long as he keeps turning into a werewolf every now and then, which is really not that hard for him. So luckily for [him and Renesmee], they're both set up for immortality, which is nice."¹³ Immortality: that's nice.

Am I expecting too much of a teenage vampire romance? Most likely. Yet I am more disconcerted by Bella as a heroine. She has to trade her human life for the things she wants the most, love and beauty, and to her it seems like an obvious and easy choice. For Bella, love is stronger than improbability and danger: “About three things I was positive. First, Edward was a vampire. Second, there was a part of him – and I didn’t know how potent that part might be – that thirsted for my blood. And third, I was unconditionally and irrevocably in love with him.”¹⁴ The message that young women readers receive is that romantic love is the most powerful force and deciding factor of existence. Love overrides any difficulty; love is more durable – and desirable – than the soul itself.

Notes

1. St. Augustine. “Mind is Life, and Thus It Cannot Lack Life,” in *On the Immortality of the Soul*. Trans. George G. Leckie (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1938). Creighton University, 2009. Accessed June 21, 2010, <http://puffin.creighton.edu/phil/Stephens/Augustine/On%20the%20Immortality%20of%20the%20Soul.htm>
2. Stephenie Meyer, *Twilight* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 10.
3. Stephenie Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2008), 57.
4. Meyer, *Twilight*, 476.
5. Meyer, *Breaking Dawn*, 28.
6. Meyer, *Twilight*, 311.
7. St. Augustine, “Mind is Life.”
8. Meyer, *Twilight*, 278.
9. Meyer, *New Moon* (New York: Little, Brown and Company 2006), 36.
10. Meyer, *Twilight*, 308.
11. Meyer, *New Moon*, 37.
12. Meyer, *Breaking Dawn*, 754.
13. Tami Heide, Interview with Stephenie Meyer (Royce Hall, University of California, Los Angeles, August 7, 2008) in Stephenie Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2008).
14. Meyer, *Twilight*, 195.