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Toxic Masculinity, Unyielding Vaginas, and
Vampires: Gender Roles in Stephenie Meyer's
Twilight series and *Life and Death*

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On October 6, 2015, Stephenie Meyer announced that she had written a new book called *Life and Death*, which would be an alternate version of the first book in her popular *Twilight* series to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the saga's first book being published. The difference? All of the main characters would have their genders swapped; if they were originally female in *Twilight*, they would become male in *Life and Death* and vice versa. Meyer states that she wrote this book to address claims of her protagonist, Bella, having little to no agency in her own story, saying, "Bella is a *human in distress*, a normal human being surrounded on all sides by people who are basically superheroes and supervillains" (*Life and Death* 8, emphasis in the original). She also goes on to write, "it would have made no difference if the human were male and the vampire female—it's still the same story" (*Life and Death* 8). I disagree with Meyer's statements here; I believe that *Twilight* is so imbued with traditional gender roles that it is impossible to simply change the characters' pronouns and have the story remain the same. Moreover, I don't believe that's what she has done in *Life and Death*. In reality, *Life and Death* calls attention to the gender stereotypes present in the original *Twilight* series while creating new problems related to gender roles that are not found in the original work.

In the first book of the *Twilight* series, teenaged Bella is strangely drawn to an unfriendly Edward Cullen. Throughout the course of the book, Edward saves Bella's life several times and ends up revealing that his initial unfriendliness stemmed from the fact that he is a vampire and that Bella's blood smelled unbearably appetizing to him. The two enter into a relationship, and at the end of the book, Edward saves Bella's life again from the evil vampire James by managing to suck out James' venom from Bella's body

before it turns her into a vampire. The pair ends up getting married in the fourth book, and by the end of the series, Bella becomes a vampire herself. *Life and Death*'s plot is similar to the first book's, with the exception that Edythe, the female version of Edward, got to Bella's male counterpart, Beau, too late. Additionally, Edythe lacks the ability to suck out the venom, and as a result, Beau turns into a vampire by the end of *Life and Death*.

In the author's note at the start of *Life and Death*, Meyer breaks down the revisions she made, saying, "5% of the changes were because Beau's personality developed just slightly differently than Bella's. The biggest variations are that he's more OCD [and] he's not nearly so flowery with his words and thoughts," (*Life and Death* 10). However, these new facets of his personality are incredibly gendered; we, as a society, see men as more thorough than women, and Meyer's descriptor of the word "flowery" calls attention to the fact that we usually consider women to be more melodramatic and vocal than men.

Additionally, in both books, Bella/Beau's mother, Renée, is described as flighty and unreliable, demanding that Bella/Beau step into the role of caretaker. Bella does so because she is made to seem more capable than her mother whereas Beau seems to require more justification to step into the caretaker role. Beau states, "Unlike the other guys, I didn't have a ton of free time for hobbies. I had a checkbook to balance, a clogged drain to snake, and a week's groceries to shop for" (*Life and Death* 20). There is no mention of Bella having to make sacrifices in order to assume her caretaker role, but Beau has to give up more traditional masculine pastimes in order to take care of the household, with the implication that it's not a natural occurrence for a man to take over domestic duties.

Furthermore, there are multiple instances in which the same set of parents treats the protagonist differently. Several interactions between Charlie and Bella are changed when Bella becomes Beau. For example, in *Twilight*, Charlie, Bella's father, has to put chains onto her truck tires for the snowy weather. Bella's reaction is to feel grateful, emotionally moved that her father cares for her (*Twilight* 55). But the same scene in *Life and Death* has Beau feeling guilty, saying, "I probably should have been the one to think about putting chains on his [Charlie's] tires, if I could figure out how to do that" (*Life and Death* 50). This operates on the gendered idea that the younger, sprier man should be aiding his father, but that a father should make his daughter feel safe by performing a traditionally-masculine activity like working on a car.

Another instance where the gender of the protagonist changes his or her interaction with Charlie is the scene in which Charlie meets his child's significant other for the first time. When Charlie hears that Bella is romantically involved with Edward Cullen, his first reaction is to say, "He's too old for you" (*Twilight* 357). Bella is quite evasive, and when Charlie asks if Edward is her boyfriend, she says, "It's kind of at an early stage, you know. Don't embarrass me with all the boyfriend talk, okay?" (*Twilight* 357). When Charlie meets Edward, the two are cordial but nothing more. This is incredibly different from the same scene with Beau as the protagonist. Charlie appears proud of Beau for dating the beautiful Edythe Cullen, and when Beau is asked whether or not Edythe is his girlfriend, he says, "I felt a strange sort of pride, being able to claim her this way. Kind of Neanderthal of me, but there it was. 'Yeah, she's my girlfriend,'" (*Life and Death* 263). Edythe then smiles at Charlie, and it is implied that he, too, is attracted to his son's (to his knowledge, underage) girlfriend: "Charlie gave me a wide-eyed look. [...] I didn't know how I'd gotten so lucky either," (*Life and Death* 265). In

both interactions, the women in the situations are seen as prizes, objects to be won. The only difference is that in the first interaction, Charlie is the one losing the prize by reluctantly handing his only daughter over to Edward, whereas in the second interaction, Charlie is proud of his son for acquiring the prize of a beautiful woman. Either way, each reinforces traditional gender roles, and the women in each scene are defined primarily by their relationships to the men.

It's not just the interactions with the parents that, when placed side by side, are rife with gender-role reinforcement. There are several instances where what should be the same scene from *Twilight* has been unnecessarily changed in *Life and Death*. On page 96 of *Twilight*, there is a scene in which Bella, at the sight of another classmate's blood, grows weak and has to be taken to the nurse's office. In *Life and Death*, Beau also feels faint at the sight of blood, but he states, "I have a weak vasovagal system[...] It's just a neurally mediated syncope" (*Life and Death* 82). This implies that a woman fainting at the sight of blood is a normal reaction but that a man fainting at the sight of blood requires a medical excuse.

Another minute difference that is heavily steeped in gender stereotypes is the difference between Bella and Beau in terms of their choice of leisure books. Both characters are fond of classic literature, but Bella chooses to read *Wuthering Heights*, a book primarily focused on the unhealthy romance between the characters Heathcliff and Cathy, which certainly could parallel Bella and Edward's (*Twilight* 34). Beau does not read *Wuthering Heights*; instead, he picks up *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* and specifically mentions scouring it for interesting sea monsters (*Life and Death* 116). The point here is that in Meyer's universe, women read novels that focus on romance

and interpersonal relationships written by women, but men would never do this and turn instead to stories of adventure written by other men.

A major source of gendered language throughout *Life and Death* that is not present in *Twilight* is Beau's protectiveness over Edythe and his disbelief at her strength. Bella, when she discovers that Edward is a vampire, realizes that "He [is] dangerous" (*Twilight* 93). Beau, on the other hand, treats a similar revelation quite differently. When he first realizes that Edythe might be a threatening supernatural being, Beau states, "She was smaller than I was, no more than my age, and delicately built. Under normal circumstances, I would have laughed at applying the word dangerous to someone like her" (*Life and Death* 78). But even after Beau sees physical evidence that Edythe is stronger than him, he is still preoccupied with how small she is (*Life and Death* 86-87). For example, Edythe proves her strength by showing that she can run faster than any other creature and can physically lift a van, but when she offers to give Beau a piggyback ride, Beau is uncomfortable with the idea of being lifted by someone much tinier than himself (*Life and Death* 211). When hostile vampires come into the Cullens' territory—vampires that can and will kill Beau without a second thought—his only thought is protecting Edythe (*Life and Death* 277). This is the same Edythe whose power of mindreading puts her at an advantage over most other vampires and who is part of a group of other vampires that significantly outnumber these intruders. This is the very same Edythe. What reason, other than antiquated patriarchal notions of masculinity, could Beau have had to want to protect his obviously stronger girlfriend in this scene, especially when Bella does not react in the same manner in the exact same scenario?

These details are littered throughout *Life and Death*, and sometimes, the character-gender dissimilarities are not as subtle as those aforementioned. In *Twilight*, there is a scene in which it is heavily implied that Bella is about to be gang raped and possibly killed by four men while visiting a nearby town. When she commands them to leave, one of the men calls out to her, “Don’t be like that, sugar,” using a traditional pet name to imply that he is interested in her sexually and to assert his power over her (*Twilight* 161). *Life and Death*, on the other hand, clunkily hints at the sinister nature of some men and women at the airport when Charlie picks Beau up at the beginning of the story (16). Because of Beau’s association with Charlie, the Chief of Police, these strangers assume Beau is an undercover police officer who is there to arrest them for illegal activities (*Life and Death* 121). When the protagonist is male, all implications of sexual violence are expunged from this particular segment. Twitter user Cleolinda Jones, in her recap of *Life and Death*, points out that Bella, as a woman, is just assumed to be in danger, while Beau needs a reason for strangers to want to murder him. And while I would have no qualms with Meyer changing these scenes to highlight the dangers that women in society have to face, her main purpose in writing *Life and Death* is to prove that gender roles and differences would not affect her story.

Worse yet, the ending of *Twilight* and the ending of *Life and Death* are completely different. *Twilight* ends with Bella and Edward at prom, with the two at an impasse over whether or not Bella should become a vampire. But at the end of *Life and Death*, Beau turns into a vampire and has the Cullens fake his death so his parents won’t find out. As mentioned previously, the point at which the endings diverge is when an enemy vampire bites Bella/Beau and injects vampire venom into her/his system. In

Bella's version of events, Edward has to suck the venom out, and it's presented as a heroic moment for him; although the temptation of Bella's blood is intensely powerful, Edward is able to overcome his thirst in order to save Bella's life (*Twilight* 456). Beau's version of events differs significantly because Edythe and the rest of the Cullens do not make it to Beau in time for her to suck out the venom. Instead, Edythe must offer Beau the choice to live as a vampire or die as a human. In both situations, it is the man that controls the decision to transform, and Beau's decision is to stay with Edythe as a vampire (*Life and Death* 331). The fact that only Beau is allowed to choose whether or not he becomes a vampire presents a horrifying implication: only men deserve agency.

In the afterword of *Life and Death*, Meyer says that she intentionally did, in fact, lie in her author's note at the beginning, so as to not spoil the ending change for the reader, states:

The fact that Beau became a vampire has nothing at all to do with the fact that he is a boy, not a girl. This change does not mean I prefer it to the original or think that the original was 'wrong.' This has just always been the big *what if?*, and I wanted to see if it would feel like if *Twilight* had been the end of the story. (365)

I submit that this is not the case at all but merely the ending she had to go with because sex between the human Beau and the vampire Edythe would not have been feasible nor would it have resulted in a child like Bella and Edward's did in the final book of the *Twilight* saga. Throughout the series, Bella is the sexual aggressor in her relationship with Edward, but he controls the pace of their physical relationship. Eventually, she compromises with Edward and agrees to wait until after marriage to have sex (*Eclipse* 619). In her article for the *Journal of Undergraduate Research* at Missouri State

University, Alexandra Owens, writes, “While this segment reverses traditional gender stereotypes—we typically imagine the woman wanting to hold off on sexual relations until marriage—Bella represents gendered conventions by ignoring her own will and submitting to Edward’s wishes” (133). After their wedding in *Breaking Dawn*, the final book in the series, Edward and Bella have sex on a private island owned by Edward’s adoptive father. After Edward penetrates her, Bella becomes pregnant with the couple’s half-human, half-vampire baby. Bella’s pregnancy is difficult and requires her to drink blood in order to sustain the fetus. Giving birth nearly kills her, and had Edward not been around to turn her into a vampire, she would have died. The fact that Bella almost immediately becomes pregnant, which in turn almost kills her, shows that she is not sexually liberated. In her essay “Cullen Family Values: Gender and Sexual Politics in the Twilight Series,” Carrie Ann Platt, an associate professor of communication at North Dakota State University, writes, “the overall ideological message [of the *Twilight* series] is clear: to be young, female, and sexual is to court danger, destruction, or even death” (80).

This is not the case at all in *Life and Death*: Beau neither expresses sexual desire for Edythe nor mentions that he is desperately attracted to her. Instead, Edythe is the one who brings up sex, saying that while it can happen between vampire couples, it is unlikely to happen between the two of them because, “Beau, you don’t know how...well, fragile you are. I don’t mean that as an insult to your manliness” (*Life and Death* 232). It is a quote that is almost identical in the original version of *Twilight*; the only difference Meyer has is Edythe softening her language in this interaction so that Beau does not feel emasculated. In traditional heteronormative sexual dynamics, the woman

is the soft, submissive receiver, while the man is the penetrator. Additionally, the vampires in the *Twilight* series are often described as being “carved in some unknown stone, [or] smooth like marble,” (*Twilight* 260). Now, in keeping with this description, it is perfectly acceptable for a penis to be hard and smooth, but it would probably be quite uncomfortable for a vagina to be that unyielding. Furthermore, due to her inhuman strength, Edythe would be the more powerful one in the sexual relationship, putting her in the dominant position. Rather than addressing the idea that a woman could be dominant in a sexual relationship, Meyer has her characters skirt the issue entirely.

What’s more, when it comes to Beau’s sexual needs, he’s practically neutered; Meyer, “discreetly never mentions blood going anywhere but to his [Beau’s] neck,” (Jones). Even once they are both vampires, Beau and Edythe do not even plan to have sex, even though they frequently discuss the overwhelming desire they have for one another. Instead, Beau delivers this thoroughly underwhelming marriage proposal: “You would really marry *me*, Edythe? [...] Will you?” (*Life and Death* 353). This lack of focus on sex makes sense if one subscribes to the idea that sex only exists between married couples for the purpose of having children, and, based on the *Twilight* series as a whole, it is not improbable that Stephenie Meyer does. Anna Silver notes, “Marriage and motherhood [in the *Twilight* series] provide women with equality that they do not possess as single women” (123). But because Beau is male, he does not need to bear children to equalize the power dynamic between himself and his vampire lover. He also does not have the seemingly innate need to bear children that Bella in the *Twilight* series has.

Stephenie Meyer did not achieve her goal of trying to fix the sexism and gender stereotyping present in the original *Twilight* series by publishing *Life and Death*; if anything, she called attention to the sexist choices in the original while she made different, but still sexist, choices in the newer book. Perhaps the most enraging problem is that these books are sold primarily to an audience of women. They're marketed to teenage girls. I was one of those teenage girls that uncritically loved the *Twilight* series when I was in middle and early high school, one of the girls that thought Edward Cullen was the perfect boyfriend and that the *Twilight* series was a literary masterpiece. As an adult, I recognize that a lot of Edward's behavior is, at best, creepy and, at worst, abusive. These books can shape young girls' (and boys') values, and the values that Stephenie Meyer espouses in her *Twilight* series are heavily based upon traditional gender roles that should not have a place in our society today.

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