Reflecting Women

*Looking at Feminism through Vampire Fiction*

Ritgerð til BA-prófs í ensku

Áróra Lind Biering

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Summary

The fight for gender equality has been ongoing for over one hundred years, with the New Woman fighting hard for the right to vote, to education and control over her own body. When the movement first came forth it met great opposition from the western patriarchal society, which wasn’t ready to relinquish the power it had held for centuries. Women, however, were determined to persevere, to prove that their worth was equal to that of the men in society and show they were destined for more than just being wives, mothers and homemakers. This state of affairs was also apparent in fiction, where women were usually shown as the weaker sex, being cast as the damsel in distress always needing to be saved by the men in their lives. A theme that has been fairly common in horror fiction and even today it can still be seen in works being produced. Feminism and its progress have done its part to change society’s attitude and improve the way women are depicted in fiction. This essay examines three works of vampire fiction that have been reviewed from a feministic viewpoint. The works all have women in a large or leading role and can therefore give some insight into the status of women in the society at the time they are written. They are; Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1897), Joss Whedon’s Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997-2003) and Stephenie Meyer’s Twilight saga (2005-2008. Although none of these works can be seen as a work of perfect feminism, they are all good for the New Woman’s cause as they can all cause readers/viewers to contemplate feminism and through that the cause can always be furthered.
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1. Introduction

Throughout much of history the majority of western society was ruled over by men and most positions of power within society were reserved for men. The general view was that women were morally, intellectually, and physically inferior to men. Women were seen as the property of men and that women's role in society was to reproduce and serve men in the household. Through perpetuating these theories patriarchy passed down through generations, children were taught that this was the way it was and therefore most didn’t see a reason to change it after growing up. This did not get better through the spread of Christianity which taught that the man, Adam, was created first and that it was the woman’s, Eve, fault that mankind was thrown out of paradise.

This superiority of men was apparent in fiction, which usually depicted the main male characters as! great, moral and heroic champions, from the Greek heroes Hercules and Theseus to Dumas’s *The Three Musketeers* (1844). Women were mostly cast as love interests or prizes which drove the main story, as the male character had to overcome obstacles or defeat the evil forces in order to reclaim them. These *damsels in distress* were usually portrayed as the epitome of archetypal femininity; they were beautiful, modest, pious and frail, and needed a strong man in their life for protection and guidance, as they themselves did not seem capable to go through life without the heroic male by their side. This state of affairs was very common in older stories and can still be found in today’s fiction. It was a theme very apparent in horror fiction, where women were most often cast as victims and secondary characters, which makes the horror theme interesting to delve into when dealing with feminism.

In the nineteenth century things started to change and some women started to question the order of society, arguing that patriarchy was an unjust social system and extremely oppressive to women. Society placed women and men in two groups; masculinity stood for freedom to rule and femininity’s role was subjection. The women’s rights movement was determined to change this attitude and prove that they could be productive in roles that were not directly related to being a wife and mother. They wanted to show, once and for all, that their worth was no lesser than that of a man; that they had the physical and mental abilities to function in the world outside the home. Feminism aimed for women’s rights to be equal to men’s, whether it be regarding education, property or sexual freedom.
This essay will explore attitudes towards the role of women in society at different times through their depiction in three works of vampire fiction, which have all been discussed in regards to feminism. In Bram Stoker’s novel, Dracula (1897), we get insight into the social order of the late Victorian era of England when patriarchy was starting to crumble. Moving forward a hundred years, an examination of Joss Whedon’s popular TV show, Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997-2003), and Stephenie Meyer’s books of the Twilight saga (2005-2008), will inspect how feminism has affected the depiction of women in modern society through increasing female rights.
2. Nineteenth-Century Victorian England

In the Victorian society of late nineteenth-century England the suffragette movement was beginning and through that the heart of the average Englishman was filled with fear and concern over the fate of their patriarchal world. At this time gender roles were very fixed and distinct, women were designated as wives, daughters or mothers and their place was within the realms of the domestic (Gantz). The ideal Victorian woman was often referred to as the household fairy, she was the professional domestic woman and it was her job to make “her household a comfortable tranquil refuge, where the busy man could relax on returning from his toil” (Rowbotham 15). These women were charged with a life of self-sacrifice, a life in which their pleasure would come from doing their best to ensure the pleasure of others, this idea was widely accepted as representing “Christianity for women in its best and most English form” (Rowbotham 265). With the twentieth century fast approaching the so-called New Woman had arrived to challenge these ideals. She sought gender equality, higher education, the right to enter learned professions and work outside the home, but most shockingly she sought sexual freedom (Gantz). Due to this there was growing concern that women stepping out of their natural role as home-makers, would, in so doing, cease to put their domestic responsibilities first and reject the greatest feminine attribute; self-sacrifice. When it then became clear, around the 1890s, that women were not going to be stopped, attempts were made to use professionalism as a sanction of the activities of women. A hierarchy of desirable professions was established with the traditional role of home-maker heading the list, following were the professions that entailed the traditional feminine virtues, primarily nurse and teacher. Further down the list were options that were considered more self-indulgent, such as a journalist or a clerk (Rowbotham 267-69). In Bram Stoker’s novel Dracula the idea of the empowerment of the New Woman is an underlying theme throughout the book.

3. Bram Stoker’s Dracula

Most texts written about this theme in Dracula interpret Stoker’s characters as depicting men’s traditional fear of the New Woman, one of these is “The Women of Dracula: A Study in Victorian Gender Identity and Nationalism” written by Lauren Gantz. Gantz
sees this fear most clearly in the descriptions of the vampire women Jonathan Harker encounters while being held hostage in Dracula’s castle. Jonathan has been sent to Transylvania as a solicitor to assist Count Dracula in his purchase of a property in England, he soon finds himself prisoner of the strange Count and at the mercy of Dracula’s three vampire brides. They three women are portrayed in very sensual ways in Jonathan’s description of them, he talks about “the ruby of their voluptuous lips” and “a deliberate voluptuousness which was both thrilling and repulsive” (Stoker 42). They are clearly very sexual creatures and their behaviour would have been seen as anything but feminine to readers of nineteenth-century society. These women are endowed with masculine appetites and with their fangs they act as usurpers of the function of penetration, which is reserved for males, they are extremely aggressive and threatening to men who are used to women being demure and lady-like (Gantz). Their unnaturalness is greatly increased by their gross rejection of the role of the mother when they hungrily feed from the child Dracula brings them (Stoker 42).

Offering a different perspective is Jean Lorrah, who in her essay, “Dracula Meets the New Woman”, argues that Stoker was more forward thinking than people assume and that his story should be read as a more of an homage to feminism. She doesn’t see these three vampire women as possessing the spirit of the New Woman. They are very sexually aggressive, which is what men feared women would become, but they are not independent. When they are attacking Jonathan they stop immediately when Dracula tells them to and don’t even hunt for themselves as Dracula brings them people to feed on (Stoker 43). These women cannot be said to be good representations of the liberated New Woman as they are clearly, despite their supernatural powers, being ruled over by a man.

Through these two works we will look in more depth at the two main female characters of Dracula and the different views they give of the attitude towards women at that time. Gantz showing us the dangers of the flirtatious New Woman, Lucy, and the importance of the nurturing homemaker, Mina. While Lorrah gives us an example of the old-fashioned lady, Lucy, and the ideal New Woman, Mina.

3.1 The dangerous New Woman

Lucy Westenra does in the beginning seem an antithesis to the three vampire women.
She is described as lovely and sweet (Stoker 63), seems prim and proper in her ways and is adored by her friends and suitors. However, despite her not being overtly sexual, it is likely that her character would have been questionable to the Victorian readers. One instance of objectionable behaviour is when she takes almost gloating pleasure in having been proposed to by three men in one day (Stoker 57). Even more disturbing would have been when Lucy says “Why can’t they let a girl marry three men, or as many as want her” (Stoker 60). Even though she dismisses the idea as blasphemy, readers can’t help but think that she was serious which leads to thoughts about her heightened sexuality. In addition, Stoker has his character sleepwalk, which was considered directly linked with sexual looseness in Victorian England (Gantz). Judith Rowbotham’s book *Good Girls make Good Wives: Guidance for Girls in Victorian Fiction*, inspects how it was thought that stories could lead youthful readers down the right paths in order to maintain societies values and traditions (3), in it she explains that „flirtation was universally condemned as unfair, deceitful and impious and ultimately, a sure path to misery for the flirt herself “ (50) and by gradually making Lucy’s character more sexual, Stoker tries to make it easier for his readers to accept Lucy’s fate of becoming a vampire.

After the men fail to save Lucy from her fate, she begins to resemble the vampire women encountered by Jonathan. She becomes blatantly sexual and even before she dies she talks to Arthur in a “soft, voluptuous voice” (Stoker 188) a phrase which recalls Jonathan’s descriptions. Later, Lucy the vampire is described as moving with voluptuous grace and having a wanton smile (Stoker 188), the woman has become a monster and is seen as unnatural by the men who loved her, which fits well with the Victorian idea of seeing “the sexualisation of woman as a deformation.” (Gantz). She, like Dracula’s women, rejects her role as caring mother and starts feeding on innocent children, reversing the image of the nursing mother by draining the children as she clutches them to her bosom (Stoker 187). In the end her unnatural ways are dealt with by a stake through the heart by her lover, her unfeminine, sexual ways repressed by the power of the patriarch and so the New Woman is disposed of.

Gantz has Mina Harker in the role of the novel’s Victorian angel, displaying all the virtues of the perfect Victorian woman, described by Van Helsing as “one of God’s women, fashioned by His own hand” (Stoker 168). She seems to fit the ideal image of
the Victorian woman, she is virtuous, devoted and almost asexual, as her physical appearance is never described in detail and she seems more an object of adulation than desire, even to her husband. Towards Jonathan she acts, in many ways, as a mother figure, as when she nurses him after his ordeal at Dracula’s castle, which is quite fitting as the ideal couple at the time was the motherly wife and the nurtured husband (Gantz). Despite being the delicate female, Mina remains one of the most stable characters through the story, often comforting the strong men. Like the true women of the time she lives a life of self-sacrifice, she represses her own feelings and keeps up an air of cheerfulness in order to support and comfort the male characters. Her motherly nature is rich and comes clearly across when she consoles Arthur in chapter 17:

“We women have something of the mother in us that makes us rise above small matters when the mother-spirit is invoked; I felt this big, sorrowing man’s head resting on me, as though it were that of the baby that some day may lie on my bosom, and I stroked his hair as though he were my own child. (Stoker 203)

She becomes these men’s emotional haven and her goodness is one of the factors which drive them in their fight against Dracula. The men’s hatred for the Count is also greatly fuelled when Dracula turns his attention to Mina and starts the process of turning her into one of his kind (Stoker 247), Mina’s honour and purity is at stake and killing the monster becomes an even greater necessity.

Mina becomes an integral part of this fight, despite the fact that the men wanted to keep her as far from it as they could, as she shares a psychic link with the Count after being made to drink his blood. In addition there are certain aspects of her character that bend the periods gender expectations; she is very intelligent and knowledgeable. Her intelligence is often remarked upon and in keeping with the mood of the period it is likened to that of a man’s, as Van Helsing puts it: “She has a man’s brain – a brain that a man should have were he much gifted- and a woman’s heart” (Stoker 207). He makes it clear that intelligence is a man’s quality and kindness a woman’s, and that he considers her almost one of a kind. This is linked to the stereotype of the time which saw women as inferior to men in physical, moral and intellectual ways, a stereotype which Mina defies. It is likely though that her gender bending would not have been seen as a threat to the patriarchal society, since she is perfectly content to fulfil her gender expected role as the typical household fairy. She only uses her intelligence to help her
friends on their mission of justice and not as a way to further her own interests, which would most likely be acceptable to Victorian readers (Gantz).

3.2 The triumphant New Woman

In Lorrah’s essay Lucy is a symbol of the weakness of the typical Victorian lady. Lucy is a pampered young woman raised in privilege, these are nearly the only things we learn about her as a person, along with the fact that she is beautiful and sweet (Stoker 63). The New Woman was a woman of many interests and was concerned with social progress, Lucy, on the other hand, doesn’t seem to have any interests, her life seems to revolve around her mother and her three suitors. When writing to Mina she never mentions books she has read or conversations with anyone except for the men who propose to her, this doesn’t sound like the exciting and rich life of the New Woman (Lorrah 35). Through one of her suitors she gets a chance to change all of this, to live a more adventurous life; Quincey Morris a rich and outdoorsy Texan. The dainty Victorian lady opts instead for the status quo and accepts the proposal of Arthur Holmwood and English lord, a choice that should make sure that her life changes as little as possible (Lorrah 35). Stoker uses Lucy’s inability to resist Dracula’s powers to show how the weakness of the old-fashioned Victorian woman and to show that only with drive and determination can you overthrow patriarchy (Lorrah 33).

Mina is then put forward as the ideal image of the New Woman, the one men should have less reason to fear. Mina is a woman of modest upbringing, she has been trained as a teacher, which at the time was a suitable job for a woman (Rowbotham 269), but she has also furthered her talents by learning shorthand and typing in order to help her husband in his law career. Due to this she can be said to deviate from the norm by using her intellect intending to fill the usually male positions of the time by acting as a secretary and clerk, but in showing none of the sexual promiscuity that men feared the New Woman would bring, she is accepted and the men in her life can see what an asset she truly is.

Although she lacks the sexual aggression feared by men at the time, she does show great initiative and strength. The best example of this being when she decides to travel alone to Hungary, which to her is a strange and unknown country, to marry and take care of the man she loves (Lorrah 33), with her making all the arrangements while
Jonathan recovers (Stoker 100). It is also through Mina’s decision to read Jonathan’s diary (Stoker 161) that the men begin to make headway in solving the mysterious case of Lucy’s death. Her talents, shorthand and typing, prove important when it comes to providing all parties with the information found in the character’s diaries and so Mina’s independence proves indispensable.

No matter how strong and useful she has proved herself to be, the men still decide that the *weaker* sex needs protecting, they leave her behind when they go out hunting for Dracula and in so doing they leave her unprotected, which in the end leads to Dracula tainting her innocence by making her drink his blood (Stoker 247). A weaker woman might have given up at this point, but Mina’s courage is greater than that and it is in fact she who directs the final chase of Dracula to Transylvania. Mina, as the noble New Woman resists Dracula’s power and although the men deliver the killing blow, it is obvious they could not have been able to do so without her intelligence and strength (Lorrah 41).

Stoker’s novel works, in a way, as a social commentary, giving insight into the thoughts of men in Victorian society regarding the New Woman. Through his female characters he takes on the issue of gender roles and depending on the reader, can either show the pros or cons of feminism in a time when the patriarchal society was beginning to feel the heat of female empowerment, a movement that would only become more prominent in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

4. Increasing Female Rights

The twentieth-century was a century of change in western society, especially when it came to women’s rights and equality with men. The suffragette movement’s battle for equal rights may have started in the nineteenth-century, but it was in the twentieth that it really gained momentum. Before the middle of the century great headway was made with getting women equal pay for equal work with men and in ensuring the right for all women to work outside the home, should they choose to (Whittick 290-91). The New Woman’s quest for sexual freedom was also well on its way by the second half of the century, with increased rights to use birth control and the right to have an abortion, women had greater control over their bodies and sex-life (“Timeline... 1946-1974”). This fight for equality took its time and that is understandable when looking at how
much needed changing. Dame Margery Corbett Ashby’s explained it well at the celebration of the 50th anniversary of equality of voting in Britain:

“There will be no more spectacular victories, and equality will be gained little by little. It is much easier to change the law than to change the attitude of the community and the home.” (Whittick 293)

By the 1990s the world had changed greatly and the 90s have sometimes been described as the decade of Girl Power, the decade where young women showed their independence and individuality. There were several shows on television that decade which revolved around empowered women, often also granted with supernatural powers as a way to assert their power, the Charmed sisters and Sabrina were witches, the Powerpuff Girls had super-strength and could fly, but one the most influential fictional women of the 90s was without a doubt Buffy Summers.

5. Buffy the Vampire Slayer

Buffy is one of the most studied female TV-character of recent times, with numerous books and essays written in several disciplines including gender studies. It is interesting to note that this supposed embodiment of the empowered woman was created by a man, Joss Whedon. Whedon’s idea of Buffy came from a stereotypical character of horror movies, the blonde girl who goes into a dark alley and gets killed, this was an idea Whedon wanted to subvert, he took that idea and create a hero from someone that had always been the victim (“Welcome to the Hellmouth”) and he told her story through seven seasons of the TV-shows Buffy the Vampire Slayer, which aired from 1997-2003.

Buffy Summers is a young girl charged with an enormous task, although she is only fifteen years old she has a great responsibility as is made clear in the intro to the show: “In every generation there is a Chosen One. She alone will stand against the vampires, demons and the forces of darkness. She is the Slayer” (Whedon). To help her with this task, she is gifted with supernatural powers; she has superhuman strength, agility and heals very quickly. She is also helped by her Watcher Giles, a librarian who acts as her trainer and teacher; educating her on the monsters she has to face and how to defeat them. He acts as her guide and tries to help her stay grounded and focused on her mission, which to a young girl is not always the most important thing. Because, despite her very important job of keeping the world safe, she is often much more interested in
the things all girls her age are, namely boys, fashion and partying, which can be seen as fairly un-feministic as this is stereotypical of a Californian Valley Girl and her lack of enthusiasm for schoolwork can hardly be said to be inspirational.

However, it is her focus on the normal things in life that makes her so relatable to many members of the audience, as these are the things that they are familiar with in her world of supernatural things. Buffy is determined not to let her role as the Slayer take over her life, which is understandable because she didn’t choose it, instead she is the chosen one. She sees it as just one aspect of her very complicated life as a teenage girl in high school, there is this constant inner struggle between what she has to do and what she wants to do. Her attitude is apparent from the first show when she says to Giles: “It’s my first day! I was afraid that I was gonna be behind in all my classes, that I wouldn’t make friends, that I would have last month’s hair. I didn’t think there’d be vampires on campus” (“Welcome to the Hellmouth”). She basically has enough to deal with, starting a new school, making new friends and fitting in, without having to worry about the safety of the people of Sunnydale.

Living a normal life can prove difficult for a slayer, especially due to the fact that as a slayer she is meant to keep her supernatural identity a secret. These are among the orders given by the Watchers Council, which is an organization dedicated to supervising slayers. It is predominantly made up of stuffy conservative white males, who seem to believe themselves to have supreme authority in matters concerning the Slayer and that she is merely their tool (Þóra 52-3). The heroine then asserts her independence and fights tradition when she severs ties with the Council when they refuse to help her dying lover (“Graduation Day”), in doing this Whedon underlines the feminism of the show by having her stand up this patriarchal institute. In the episode “Get It Done” we learn that the first slayer was created by three Shadow Men, from whom the Council derives, when they infused a young girl with the essence of a demon, this scene has been seen as an allegory for rape and shows that she only has her power because of these men. Due to this many have deemed the show’s feminist potential as limited, since the strong woman’s power comes from the metaphorical rape by these men (Karius).

Whedon manages to reinsert the feministic power at the end of season seven, by having Buffy take control of the slayers’ power and fate (Karius). Buffy and Willow
find a way to imbue all the potentials, girls who might be called upon to be the next vampire Slayer, with the power of the Slayer, thereby shattering the rule that there can be only one Slayer (“Chosen”). But in doing so she is also taking these girls’ right to choose away from them, just like it has been since the first Slayer. Despite the fact that Buffy acts with the best intentions it is difficult to see how her doing this is any better than when the Shadow Men did it, as women oppressing women is no better than men oppressing women.

The idea of the Final Girl has become quite popular in film over the last decades and is often brought up when dealing with the sexuality in Buffy. The Final Girl is a concept put forth by Carol Clover, a professor of film studies, in her book *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992), where she reminds us that even though women were often on the receiving end of brutality in horror films, the last person standing is often a girl. This image surfaced soon after 1970 and in many ways became the new hero, through retaining her innocence and morals, by not having sex, drinking or doing drugs, she would manage to stall the killer long enough to be rescued or kill him herself (Jung). Whedon takes this topic of having to remain innocent to survive and chooses to defy it, giving his main character the sexual freedom the New Woman fought hard for. Unlike so many female characters in horror fiction there is no fall from grace for Buffy, the audience recognizes her right to engage in sexual relationships and her ability to fight evil does not diminish despite her actions (Karius). While Karius concedes that Buffy sometimes gets hurt or is made vulnerable in her romantic dealings, she does not see the events that follow them as punishment for her actions.

Smith, in her article “Is Joss Whedon a Feminist? Buffy and Female Empowerment”, does not agree, pointing to the episode “Surprise” where Buffy loses her virginity to Angel, the vampire with a soul, and the shows that immediately followed. After they make love Angel loses his soul and becomes evil again, the demon Angelus then decides to focus his talents for destruction on Buffy and her friends. Buffy learns that the reason he changed is because Angel experienced a moment of true happiness, which is the only way to reverse the gypsy curse that was put on him as a punishment for his cruel ways (“Innocent”). Buffy blames herself for how things turned out, this does not become any easier when Angel starts terrorizing her friends and tries
to end the world, as now she also has to deal with her friends, mostly Xander, blaming her as well. In the end Buffy has to kill the man she loves to save the world, as Angel is given his soul back just before she kills him (“Becoming: Part 2”). All this does lend credence to the argument that maybe Buffy is not as free to enjoy her sexuality as Karius wants to believe, since Buffy doesn’t really get to enjoy this experience at all and is in the end punished severely as she is made to kill the love of her life.

For the most part Buffy has been put forth as a successful female role model and in a way seems to embody female empowerment as she is not limited to one gender role. She possesses many of the stereotypical traits of a male hero, including strength, determination and fearlessness (Singh), but still manages to cling to certain feminine ideals such as worrying about her hair and clothing (“I Robot, You Jane”). Whedon increases the effect of the powerful woman image by surrounding Buffy with reliable female companions, such as her best friend Willow and Buffy’s mother, Joice. Willow starts out as a seemingly dainty and quirky girl, she proves very valuable to the groups cause as she is extremely intelligent and tech savvy, and in the end she increases her value through her acquired immense magical powers that helps them multiple times. Joice is a single mother, breadwinner and active member of society, and therefore a great example of how unnecessary the worries of early twentieth-century people were, of how the woman would manage to fulfil all of her duties after getting work outside the home. Her death then forces Buffy to take on yet another great responsibility, when she has to take over the care of her younger sister and provide for the family (“The Body”).

When compared to the men in her life Buffy’s capability becomes even clearer, although the series introduces some reasonably heroic male characters, such as Angel, Oz and Riley, none of them compare to Buffy, neither physically nor mentally. Whedon seems determined to undermine the formerly domineering patriarchal society and one by one these characters leave the show. It is also refreshing that in a show written by a man in a world determined to make women into sex symbols, it is the men of the story that are more often put in that position. Fashion at the time meant that Buffy and the other women are often seen in short skirts and tight clothes which does diminish the feminism of the show, what redeems it is the fact that the men are constantly seen with their shirts off and cast in a more sexual light, as when Xander joins the swim team, he
is seen entering a scene in nothing but Speedo’s and is then shamelessly ogled by Buffy, Willow and Cordelia (“Go Fish”).

This reversal of roles is very interesting and made more dramatic by the fact that the men of the show are constantly in the background of the fights, with the small blonde on the front lines, even when she gets help from the good vampire Angel they fight as equals and sometimes she even ends up saving him (Singh). Angel doesn’t seem to mind and actually finds Buffy a welcome change from the dainty, helpless women he knew when he was younger, but not everyone is as happy about having to be saved by a girl as Xander demonstrated: “A black eye heals, Buffy, but cowardice has an unlimited shelf life” (“Halloween”).

Whedon created a very strong female character, but she is not only strong in a masculine, physical manner, it is her feminine, emotional strength that inspired the shows viewers, how she handled death, love lost and growing up in a world filled with tragedy, and still managed to come out triumphant. Ultimately, the show cannot be described as perfectly feministic, very few things can, but Buffy does come across as a very empowered woman and although the viewer may not always agree with her decisions, they are clearly hers to make. However, soon after Buffy was off the air, author Stephenie Meyer published her work that has been criticised for portraying the leading lady in a very anti-feminist manner

6. Twilight

Meyer’s four books of the Twilight saga tell the story of the teenage girl Bella Swan who has just moved to her father’s house and is faced with the problems of getting to know a new place and fitting in. At its core is a traditional, romance narrative, where the two main characters fall in love, marry, have a child and live happily ever after. This is where most of the criticism against the novel’s message stems from, as Pratt puts it: “The modern marriage novel continues to picture a patriarchy, a wife subordinate to husband” (42) and to many people the story’s main character, Bella, cannot be considered a good role model for the young women and girls of today’s society, who have become so attached to the books and their characters. The story is written for teenagers and so many of the problems Bella faces are easily identifiable with by teenagers today, such as starting a new life in a strange place:
It wasn’t just physically that I’d never fit in. And if I couldn’t find a niche in a school with three thousand people, what were my chances here? I didn’t relate well to people my age. Maybe the truth was that I didn’t relate well to people, period. (Twilight 9)

This is a very common theme, the characters experiences are that of an outcast; she’s unpopular and doesn’t fit into the world she finds herself in. Most such stories have a bildungsroman style, where the protagonist overcomes his/her shortcomings and emerges at the end of the story a changed person, having learned a lesson (Eddo-Lodge). This is a theme many critics find missing in the books, accusing Meyer of not allowing her character to develop and change through her experiences. This seems an unfair judgement when considering the fact that at the start of the first book, Twilight, Bella is simply a teenage girl with simple teenage problems and at the end of the fourth book, Breaking Dawn, she has grown into a young, married mother, which seems quite the development.

Another criticism has been that Meyer seems to hold fast to outdated patriarchal ideals and that these are shown openly in her text. Throughout the story Bella is described as fragile (Twilight 310) and breakable (Breaking Dawn 22), which seems to be used as an excuse for her the men in her life to control her actions, as she is often pulled, dragged and restrained; a process Bella doesn’t try to fight: “He was towing me toward his car now, pulling me by my jacket. It was all I could do to keep from falling backward. He’d probably just drag me along anyway if I did” (Twilight 89). Bella seems to take on the role of the archetypal damsel in distress, spending most of the story on the side-lines of action, constantly having men fight her battles.

When taking into account that she is merely human and dealing with vampires and werewolves, this is not that surprising. Bella doesn’t have the physical ability to defend herself from such supernatural beings and therefore, having the supernatural men around her take these creatures on, is simply the only way. She is strong mentally and shows that by dealing with this unfamiliar world she has entered in a surprisingly calm manner. In addition her determination to become a vampire, despite the fact that, as she puts it: “Edward was dead set against any future that changed me. Any future that made me like him—that made me immortal“ (New Moon 10). Bella gets her way in the end, but only after deciding to go through with a life threatening pregnancy. Her choice has caused controversy, with people accusing Meyers opposing abortion which isn’t in tune
with feminism’s idea that women should have a say in what their body goes through. However, it can also be seen as feminist in the sense that Bella does have a choice and Edward actually makes his opinion clear when he says “We’re going to get that thing out before it can hurt any part of you” (*Breaking Dawn* 133), Bella makes up her own mind and decides to keep the baby.

Bella can be described as an empty vessel, which is a large part of the reason why fans are so drawn to the books as so many young girls can easily identify themselves with her character and project their own desires for love onto her. Due to this worries have risen that the books do introduce a picture of a healthy relationship to these impressionable, young readers. Bella’s relationship with Edward does show some of the classic signs of domestic violence. Edward is very protective of her and sometimes to the extreme, he isolates her from her family and friends, which she willingly accepts to obtain what she wants most of all, eternal life with Edward. Bella’s low self-esteem, her apparent lack of confidence constantly causes her to excuse Edward’s behaviour and take the blame, which does not send a good message to young girls who might take this as an acceptable sacrifice when in love (Goodfriend). On the other hand, this is a romance fantasy starring vampires and werewolves, its purpose is more to serve as an escape from daily life than to act as a guidebook for relationships. Edward’s actions can be seen as simply overprotective and abusive, she is weaker than he is because she is human and he is a vampire, he knows the dangers she faces by being with him and he wants to keep her safe.

### 7. Comparison

When comparing Buffy and Bella at the start of their stories it is easy to see that they have a lot of things in common. They are young girls getting a fresh start; they have just arrived in a new town and are faced with the problems linked with being a teenager and starting a new school, the problem of fitting in and making friends. Both characters live with a single parent; Buffy has a very capable mother, while Bella instantly takes over the role of homemaker in her father’s house:

> Last night I discovered that Charlie couldn’t cook much besides fried eggs and bacon. So I requested that I be assigned kitchen detail for the rest of my stay. He was willing enough to hand over the keys to the banquet hall. (“Twilight” 27)
Buffy and Bella also share the fact that they fall in love with vampires, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, however, is more of an action show and less focused on romance than the *Twilight* saga. The action plays a bigger part in Buffy’s life and through that Whedon gets a chance to properly showcase his heroine’s physical strength. Buffy shows independence and self-confidence, she is capable and not many things scare her. She is of course aided by her supernatural powers but not all things can be solved by brute strength and Buffy is faced with difficult things in her personal life, death of a parent and a broken heart to name a few. These are among the qualities that make her such a deep and compelling character (Jenson and Sarkeesian).

Bella is also faced with challenging things and has been criticised for how she deals with them, mainly when Edward decides to leave town in the second book, *New Moon*. A broken heart, like everyone who has experienced it knows, is a very difficult thing to deal with and everyone does so in their own manner. Despite this Bella’s way of dealing with her case has caused an uproar, with accusations of her not even trying to come to terms with it, instead becoming severely depressed and Meyer emphasizing this omits four chapters from the book. Her way to manage is through latching on to another man in her life, her friend Jacob who in her own words, she needs “...like a drug” (*New Moon* 192), a typical case of a rebound relationship.

Bella’s frailty and dependence on men does send the idea of women back at least 50 years, when Helen Andelin wrote *Feminine Dependency* (1963), a book which corresponded with Andelin’s marriage enrichment classes and emphasized traditional femininity and a wife’s obedience to her husband. In it is stated “when a man is in the presence of a... dependent woman, he immediately feels a sublime expansion of his power to protect and shelter this frail and delicate creature” (Andelin 84) and that “in acquiring femininity, you must first dispense with any air of strength and ability, of competence and fearlessness and acquire instead an attitude of frail dependency upon men to take care of you” (Andelin 87). These quotes are so indicative of the attitude of the time when women were only thought of as wives, mothers and homemakers.

Therefore it is very surprising to see it so blatantly shown in novels written in the twenty-first century, an age of equality, when young girls are taught that they can be anything and do anything. It is an attitude you expect to see in novels like *Dracula*, which we do as Mina is obviously seen as weaker than the men she is helping and
although they realize her mind is useful, they have no problems with putting her on the sidelines whenever it suits them. *Dracula* is written at time when women were only starting to realize that maybe they had a chance to become more than homemakers, so it is understandable that Mina is treated in this manner as she is part of a society that is still very patriarchal. Bella on the other hand, is part of a twenty-first century, western society, seeing her treated in a manner common in Victorian society does lend greater value to the books criticism and questions about whether it is a relevant topic in modern society.
8. Conclusion

The portrayal of female characters in *Dracula, Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Twilight* can be used to inspect the society at the time they were written and they give good insight into attitudes towards the feminine. Through Mina and Lucy we get a glimpse at a patriarchal society going through changes, a society where women were opening their eyes and seeing that they were capable of more. Stoker’s intentions are not clear and his main female character, depending on the critic, can either be seen as the obedient Victorian wife, who only uses her (manlike) intelligence to further the cause of the men in her life, or as the perfect, positive image of the New Woman, who takes her fate into her own hands and proves her importance.

After great success in the fight for female rights, TV-audiences started to see a new kind of hero; the strong female. The capable and independent Buffy overcame great obstacles and proved that she was in no way lesser than a man, physically or mentally. There are some flaws in the shows feminism and yet it is clear that it is meant as an homage to the New Woman and her empowerment. Despite all the work done to further the cause of equality, it is clear that the New Woman’s battle is nowhere near over since young women and girls are still drawn to books that have leading ladies deep inside a deeply regressive patriarchal narrative, which despite being a fantasy with certain positive aspects, does not seem to fit in with today’s idea of the capable modern woman.

None of these works gives a good clear view of society’s attitudes towards the New Woman and her cause, since they all seem to offer more than one interpretation. They can, however, all be considered good for the cause in the sense that they all inspire the discussion of feminism and as long as that is kept going, progress is always possible.
References:


