Monstrous Desire: Love, Death, and the Vampire Marriage

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Abstract

Myth and literature provide us with rich depictions of the vampire, presenting to the critical eye both the persistent archetypal qualities of this monster as well as the unique embellishments that captivate contemporary audiences. Such is the case with the stories of Eros and Psyche, the Greek god of love and the young woman he is sent to destroy and instead falls in love with, and Edward Cullen and Bella Swan, from the Twilight series of young adult novels. Though more than 2,000 years separate these stories and only one is ostensibly a vampire tale (since to date no one has explored the theme of vampirism in Eros and Psyche), examining them side-by-side illuminates the relationship among love, death, and marriage. In comparing these stories, an interesting question arises: Why do we fail to recognise the vampires in our midst – especially when they come disguised as beautiful lovers – and what are the implications of our blindness? This paper explores the answers from literary, psychological, and feminist perspectives.

Key Words: Bella Swan, Breaking Dawn, death, Edward Cullen, Eros and Psyche, love, marriage, psychological vampirism, Twilight, vampire.

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The vampire is a perennially fascinating monster who exploits the tension between desire and death. Though a bit “long in the tooth,” according to Newsweek,¹ the vampire is in no danger of being forgotten. The abundance of novels, films, and television rather suggest that the glare of media attention may instead kill this photophobic creature – or drive him to hibernate in the cool earth for a time. We easily can see the connection between love and death in vamp lore. The new Romantic vampire is smoking hot despite, or possibly because of, his lethality. But marriage?

Yes, marriage. In this paper, I will compare Edward and Bella from Stephenie Meyer’s Twilight novels with another pair of lovers, Eros and Psyche, from a 2,000-year-old Greco-Roman tale. “Look closer” will be our guiding principle, the log line from the film American Beauty, directed by Alan Ball, who also is the creator of True Blood. When we look closer at Eros and Psyche and Edward and Bella, a very strange thing happens. What is, in fact, marriage to a vampire is not monstrous, yet what appears to be divine intimacy between a lovely mortal girl and a glorious god can be interpreted as a textbook case of psychological vampirism.² This raises a very interesting question: How is it that we don’t recognise the vampires in our midst – especially when they come disguised as beautiful lovers – and what are the implications of our blindness? In the end I hope to show that Psyche and Bella confront what is truly monstrous and demonstrate a path toward agency within intimacy for contemporary women.
The archetypal vampire has persisted across time and culture because it can flexibly adapt to reflect our current fears and desires. Vampires emerge in many guises, some easily recognised, some not, in an intoxicating combination of dread and allure. “Their variety makes them survivors,” says Auerbach. Gordon and Hollinger agree. The impact of the vampire is due to its being not an actual physical being “but something much more powerful, a creature who can take on the allegorical weight of changing times and collective psyches. Like all our monsters, vampires “help us construct our own humanity, to provide guidelines against which we can define ourselves”. Author Suzy McKee Charnas makes a similar point: “The monster shows up the monstrosity of true human evil, as well as calling forth to match that evil the full exercise of human virtue – the courage, the compassion, and the steadfastness”.

The concept of the vampire arises from two potent beliefs: life after death and the magical power of blood. As a species, we can’t quite grasp the idea of abject nothingness where a loved one or an enemy once was. The vampire who, along with the cyborg and the zombie, exists between the worlds of life and death, particularly haunts our age of science. All three transgress ontological categories, mocking our ability to precisely measure what is real. But unlike the cyborg or the zombie, vampires always are “an irrepressible force whose dynamic energy is profoundly attractive”. Alert, restless, and hungry, with a predator’s spooky stillness and keen instincts, vampires survive only by feeding on the blood of the living. In vampire lore, blood becomes a symbol not only of basic biological life, but of psychological and erotic potency, the secret, salty warm fluid thrumming through the animate bodymind.

The experience of being possessed and drained of vitality, of feeding the deadly hunger of another either willingly or unwillingly, has a firm basis in our biology – we all fed off the life blood of our mothers at one time. The vampire of our imagination simply exaggerates a biological fact into nightmarish proportions. Vampirism is desire grown monstrous, a distorted hunger that leads to possession and exploitation, or threatens to, unless countered by a very strong will. And yet vampirism retains many of the qualities of its biological ground, including love and the willingness to sacrifice oneself for the beloved. The dividing line between the instinct for life and its opposite, Thanatos, the longing for death, is very fine indeed.

This calls to mind Sabina Spielrein's 1911 essay on the paradoxical relationship among sex, love, and death. Whereas Freud conjectured that sexual instincts are life instincts, Spielrein, his brilliant student, argued that a core aspect of sexuality is destruction of the individual self through fusion with the beloved, often portrayed in literature and art as dying in our lover’s arms. But unless we are speaking of actual vampires or sexual predators, this death is symbolic, what we might call erotic oblivion, a temporary state in which all boundaries between self and other have been eliminated. It is as though we can briefly participate in a vast oceanic stillness – the stillness, in fact, that is characteristic of our seductive literary vampires. Leonard
Wolf alludes to this when speaking about the vampire’s sexual grace. “A vampire bends over his or her victim; there is a not particularly painful little bite, and the victim's face takes on a look of bliss. How different – and to some readers, how soothingly different – that is from the usual and essentially awkward tumults of sex”.

Literary vampires in the European mold since the 18th century skillfully exploit this fine edge between eros and Thanatos. Love, not blood, is the crucial magical substance exchanged between the living and the undead. Many of these undead combine the intoxicating properties of eternal youth with ageless wisdom, and insatiable sexual appetite with consummate skill. Moreover, devotion to the beloved is literally undying. Or, as Sookie Stackhouse of True Blood tartly replies to someone criticizing her relationship with Bill Compton, “He’s a vampire. I have nothing but a future with him!”

The new erotic vampire also reflects our profoundly psychological culture in one other crucial way. Many of them don’t want to be monsters. For instance, when Anne Rice was asked to name her favorite vampire she chose Bill Compton, created by Charlaine Harris and featured on True Blood. Rice explained: “He’s a very romantic vampire. I love his suffering, his self-loathing, and his struggle to be good”. All of this could easily be said about Edward Cullen of Twilight. These vampires are like us: aware of their monstrous desire and tortured by it. They enact the tension of the opposing forces – their hunger and the desire to control it – intrapsychically (within themselves) and interpsychically (between themselves and the one they love). And voila, popular fiction presents us with what I call the “tortured gentleman vampire”. When it involves really good looking people, it’s great eye candy. “To feed or not to feed” becomes an ethical question for the likes of Edward Cullen. It never occurred to Eros in the tale of Eros and Psyche, which is why he is the more monstrous figure, as you’ll shortly hear. But now let’s turn to an all too brief discussion of marriage.

Feminists since Mary Wollstonecraft have argued that women have been treated as possessions throughout western history. In vampiric language, they have been possessed. Particularly in marriage practices, this treatment has been codified in both religious and secular law and custom for at least 2,500 years. The feminist movements of the 19th and 20th centuries would begin to challenge the status of women in marriage, but it would be quite a long time before a woman could assert herself as an individual person. The words of reformer Abba Woolsen, written in 1874, sound alarmingly modern: “I exist ... not as a wife, not as a mother, not as a teacher, but first of all, as woman, with a right to existence for my own sake”. The very few historical exceptions who come to mind, Vespasia, Cleopatra, and Elizabeth I for instance, were unusually potent and realistic women who understood themselves as pawns and played everyone else with strategic acumen. Memorable literary exceptions include Chaucer’s Wife of Bath who made a happy marriage when her
husband finally acknowledged her power to do just as she pleases. From a similar time in history, we have the story of Gawain and Dame Ragnell, who trenchantly answered Freud’s famous question, “what do women want?” Had Freud been a better student of Arthurian mythology, or inclined toward a more compassionate interest in listening to women rather than dominating them, he would have quickly discovered the answer. In a word, sovereignty, self-rule, or what psychologists and sociologists today call “agency”.

In the emphatically patriarchal cultures of ancient Greece and Rome, women were possessions passed from father to husband. A young woman became marriageable shortly after menarche and her father typically disposed of her shortly thereafter, as part of a marriage transaction, when she was around 13. Little wonder, then, that the Greco-Roman tale *Eros and Psyche* features a similar powerlessness of the female. The story, in brief, is this:

A king and queen give birth to the third of three daughters, so lovely that the people stop worshipping Aphrodite and instead make offerings to the girl, Psyche. She grows up worshipped and alone; whereas her older sisters marry and leave home, Psyche has no suitors. Perplexed, the parents consult the oracle and are told that their daughter is fated to marry death. They plan a wedding ceremony that will end with abandoning their daughter on a cliff to her terrible fate.

Meanwhile, the years in which Aphrodite has been neglected in favor of Psyche naturally has enraged the goddess. She sends her son, Eros, to aim one of his poisonous arrows at the girl so that she falls in love with a monster. But when Eros flies to the girl – now poised on the cliff, ready for her prophesied marriage – he falls in love with her instead. He whisks Psyche to a secret palace and visits her every night to enjoy the ecstatic combats of love. Every day, before dawn, Eros leaves. Psyche never sees her mysterious lover.

Months pass, and Psyche’s sisters visit. When they hear contradictory stories of her new husband, they grow suspicious and remind their little sister of the oracle – marriage to a monster, who they believe is merely biding his time before he devours Psyche and the child in her womb. Now mortally afraid, she confronts Eros with a lamp and knife and discovers that he is a god. When he abandons her, outraged at her disobedience, Psyche is heartbroken. Ultimately she propitiates her fearsome mother-in-law Aphrodite and heroically endures the four impossible tasks facing her.
The story ends in a conventional “happily ever after” manner: Eros publicly declares his love for Psyche, she is transformed into a goddess, and the two lovers, now immortal, celebrate a sacred marriage and soon become parents of an infant girl who they name Pleasure.\(^{16}\)

This ending is less interesting to me than the transformative moment in the story when Psyche confronts Eros. I wondered why so many sophisticated readers had ignored the fact that a passive and obedient girl pulls a knife on her lover.\(^{17}\) The knife, used for cutting, separating and destroying, symbolises what many artists have long known: we must destroy in order to create. But what does this mean in psychological terms? One interpretation is that so long as Eros treats Psyche as an object, not a person, the original unity of lovers is binding or suffocating; it must be broken apart to make way for the diversity of the particular. (This motif is reflected in cosmologies at the heart of the western tradition including Egyptian, Babylonian, Greek, and Judeo-Christian, where creation itself occurs via separation.)\(^{18}\) Psyche cannot see and does not know her lover. By implication, she cannot see and know herself in or through this relationship. Psyche resists the pull towards individual symbolic death – the death of her spirit or soul – and cuts through the sensual oblivion in an overtly aggressive act that clears the way for a higher order of union, a sacred marriage. Using lamp and knife, Psyche destroyed in order to create herself. As an allegory, the tale shows us that monstrous desire, desire that feeds off of another, is soul destroying. This is the epitome of vampirism.

What can we learn from Eros and Psyche? Without distance – without the ability to stand alone while we are together – authentic union is impossible. It is fascinating and noteworthy that the drive for separation comes from the feminine and specifically from sisters. They point out that Psyche does not know her beloved, nor does the beloved know her. Psyche's concession to Eros is naïve and possibly dangerous. And though Psyche's sisters “are envious and cruel … they push her in the way her soul requires, whereas Eros would happily have kept her in the dark”.\(^{19}\)

Psyche’s action wounds both lovers and it also releases both to begin individual healing journeys that ultimately results in true marriage. As allegory, the tale dramatises the fact that the soul feels compelled to individuate, but can only do so by attempting to honor conflicting obligations. It needs intimacy with Self and intimacy with Other, union with the beloved and separation from him. But even more than this, Eros and Psyche shows us that the soul wants to be known as a partner and a worthy opponent in the agon of erotic love. Thus, a thriving marriage will oscillate between periods of union and separation. One is not more loving than another; indeed, the hallmark of a vital relationship is how willing the partners are to view each other as separate beings, each with his or her own desire, will, and agency.
There are many intriguing parallels between the story of Eros and Psyche and Edward and Bella most fully realised in the final book of Stephenie Meyer’s Twilight series, *Breaking Dawn*, in which we see the transformation of Bella from maiden to wife to mother to immortal. I want to briefly discuss just three of them.

First, both stories clearly exemplify the fairy tale genre dramatizing conventional values and roles with happily-ever-after endings prominently featuring marriage. It’s almost as though we’re in an Austen novel without Austen’s delicious sense of irony. For instance, when Bella moves to Forks she quickly adopts a housewifely role for her father, who seems nearly unable to take care of himself. The vampires in the Twilight series, particularly the Cullens, clearly reflect heteronormative sexual relationships, a far cry from the mesmerizing pansexual vampires created by authors such as Anne Rice or Whitley Streiber. In a word, they have been domesticated. Psyche is rather meek and passive, first submitting to the ritualised marriage with death decreed by the oracle and orchestrated by her father, then submitting to imprisonment as Eros’s lover. The only real surprise in the tale is her bold move with lamp and knife – which she immediately regrets – and her impressive resilience under the withering treatment of a bitter and vengeful Aphrodite.

Second, both Psyche and Bella are pregnant. The unborn children, daughters both, symbolise the ineluctable pull of the future. This is particularly apparent in *Breaking Dawn*, where Renesmee assists Bella to develop her unique power, which closely resembles the ferocious protectiveness of animal mothers. As Bella grows into this new role, it is apparent that her focused rage is in service to life itself, not death, domination, waste, or destruction. This has been called an archetypally feminine notion of power, one that is fully enacted by at least three key males in the story – Carlisle Cullen, Edward Cullen, and Jacob Black – thus demonstrating the naturally “roving home” of femininity and masculinity in whole humans. The young mothers are driven to protect the child even at the risk of losing the beloved when Eros or Edward poses a threat. Thus the mother-child bond becomes primary. This biological imperative in its most basic form, change or die, symbolises the psychological transformation all must undergo to thrive.

Third, neither Psyche nor Bella is cast in a conventional heroic mold. They are pliable, vulnerable, and loving young women who develop, over time and through adversity, a surprising core of resilience. Their challenge to their respective lovers forces the relationship to new ground, immortality. At the end of *Eros and Psyche*, Psyche weds Eros in front of all the gods and takes her place as a goddess among them. Bella becomes Edward’s immortal beloved, one of the undead, and moves gracefully into her new world. This move is so graceful, in fact, that her enemy says, “In truth, young Bella, immortality does become you most extraordinarily … It is as if you were designed for this life”.

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These are just a few of many similarities too numerous to mention. The question is, how can we identify which relationship is truly vampiric? This is where our guiding principle, “Look closer,” is helpful.

As to Eros and Psyche: Just because someone is in love with a beautiful god, bears a divine child, and ultimately becomes a divinity, does not mean their relationship is divine. It could be psychologically monstrous though it appears perfect to the eye blinded by glamour. In truth, Eros was fully content with a compliant lover, seducing and manipulating Psyche to remain simple, small, and obedient. As a creature of the night, Eros preyed on the one he loved in a relationship between vastly unequal persons. Eros is a classic psychic vampire, beautiful, but deadly, and Psyche exemplifies one of the Greek words for wife, *damar*, which means tamed.23

As to Edward and Bella: Just because someone is in love with a vampire, marries a vampire, bears a half-vampire child and ultimately becomes a vampire does not mean the relationship is vampiric. Part of the appeal of *Breaking Dawn* is that it dramatises a relationship between equals. Bella individuates.

First, she finds her place in the world, a home and family who embrace her. Though she is adrift and awkward at the beginning of the series, Bella quickly becomes a beloved daughter to Carlisle and Esmee Cullen long before she marries Edward.

Second, Bella develops an authentic identity that blends her unique skill with her own values. It becomes clear that Bella’s human quirk – her ability to shield her thoughts from Edward – is an embryonic form of a substantial power. She doesn’t recognise her latent talent, as many of us fail to see ourselves clearly, but others help her. It is precisely here that Edward shows himself to be far more than her protector in a conventional bourgeois sense. He quickly sees the implications of a casual observation by one of their allies, Eleazar, who is pondering the potential of Edward, Bella, and their baby. “A mind reader for a father, a shield for a mother, and then whatever magic this extraordinary child has bewitched us with”.24 Not only does Edward pay attention, he positively encourages Bella to envision herself in this new and more potent way. Edward’s wholehearted devotion to Bella’s empowerment and his swift analytical imagination helps her to thrive.

Third, Bella achieves self-knowledge and self-mastery to play a genuinely meaningful part in her own story. She had already developed self control, tested under extraordinary conditions in her transformation to vampire. To become a truly potent shield, Bella learns to see, taste, and direct her rage. In the final test, when Bella’s entire way of life is at stake, she relishes her new power.

My fury peaked … I could taste madness on my tongue – I felt it flow through me like a tidal wave of pure power… I threw the shield with all the force in my mind, flung it across the impossible expanse of the
field – ten times my best distance – like a javelin... I could feel it flex like just another muscle, obedient to my will. I pushed it, shaped it to a long, pointed oval. Everything underneath the flexible iron shield was suddenly part of me – I could feel the life force of everything it covered like points of bright heat, dazzling sparks of light surrounding me... Barely a second had passed... Everything had changed absolutely, but no one had noticed the explosion except for me.

In the pitch of battle, no one but Bella does notice her skill. But the family acknowledges it later, celebrating her. Thus Bella ultimately comes into her own though the agon with her beloved and on behalf of what she loves, which includes a wildly diverse family made up of vampires, shape-shifters, half-breeds, and a couple of humans. Yes, the arena she chooses to act is, from a feminist perspective, quite traditional: home, family, marriage, and motherhood. Yet within that sphere she becomes powerful and effective. Just because a sphere is traditional does not mean it is trivial.

In the end, if we cannot assume that gods are divine and monsters are monstrous, what characterises monstrous desire? Monstrous desire produces psychological vampirism, in which one person exploits the other as the ultimate object, food. Vampire lore teaches us that seduction is key. We must enter freely of our own will, to paraphrase Stoker’s Dracula. And we do. We turn ourselves into prey for psychological vampirism through what psychologist’s call magical thinking and author Suzee McKee Charnas calls the victim’s delusion, that “mine is the kiss that will wake him and release all his powers in positive ways... how can he help but adore me for liberating him this way?” But adoration, like hunger, is not constant or even long-lived. Desire surges and recedes and so vampires, like their predatory cousin the shark, are ceaselessly on the move, seeking new prey.

Who is the ultimate victim? We all are. The charismatic, seductive vampire transforms beauty, charm, grace, and glamour into weapons, perverting our pleasure in pleasure itself. And does this not, in the end, breed vampirism? Because if we never can enjoy the feast of life and instead hover suspiciously at its edges, then we, too, remain hungry. Forever.

Notes

2 For an excellent introduction to this idea, see B. Hort, Unholy hungers. Shambhala, Boston, 1996
4 J. Gordon and V. Hollinger (eds), Blood read. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1997, p. 4
5 S. Charnas quoted in J. Gordon and V. Hollinger, 1997, p. 61
8 Spielrein is wrongly credited with anticipating Freud's death instinct, which he outlined in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* approximately nine years later. Her thesis was, in fact, the exact opposite of Freud's. He believed that sexuality was the only life instinct and that the end purpose of all other instincts is a return to our original inorganic condition. Or, as Freud pithily stated it, “the aim of all life is death” (quoted in P. Gay, 1989, p. 613). Freud conjectured that the sexual instincts are the true life instincts. For further discussion, see Spielrein, S., ‘Destruction as a cause of coming into being’ in *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 39 (2), 1911/1994, pp. 155-181 and J. Kerr, *A most dangerous method*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1993, p. 501
13 Quoted in M. Yalom, 2001, p. 280
14 For further discussion, see E. Vandiver, *Classical mythology*, The Teaching Company, Springfield, VA, 2000
15 Yalom points out that remnants of the idea of treating a marriageable daughter as a commodity “still exist in the Western marriage ceremony when the minister asks, ‘Who gives this woman?’ and the bride's father responds, ‘I do’” (p. 42-43). In Colonial America, as on the continent, a married woman became in the eyes of the common law, a *femme covert*, one whose legal person was subsumed or “covered” by that of her husband. Only he could sue or be sued, draft wills, make contracts, and buy or sell property, including property that had original belonged to his wife. (p. 147). See M. Yalom, *The history of the wife*, Harper Collins, New York, 2001
16 For the full text, see L. Apuleius, *The golden ass*, P. Walsh, (trans). Oxford University Press, 1994
17 See E. Nelson ‘Conflict as a creative act’ in *Spring* 77, New Orleans, 2006
18 Many depth psychologists including Freud (1933), Jung (1933, 1966), Spielrein (1911/1994), von Franz (1970), Edinger (1985), Hillman (1972), and Haule (1992), have spoken directly about, or at least alluded to, the individual meaning of this cosmological pattern.
20 See the discussion of domesticated vampires in J. Gordon and V. Hollinger (eds), *Blood read*. 1997
21 For further discussion on femininity’s roving home, see N. Hall, *The moon and the virgin*, Harper & Row, New York, 1980
23 The unequal distribution of power in male-female relationships is fully discussed by Vandiver (2000) in “The Reign of the Olympians”. She observes that Artemis, a lunar goddess of wildness and protector of the young, remains virgin because she refuses to be tamed in marriage or in sexual relationship with a male.
24 *Breaking dawn*, 2008, p. 595
25 *Breaking dawn*, 2008, pp. 690-691
26 R. Lane and S. Chazan, ‘Symbols of terror: The witch/vampire, the spider, and the shark’ in *Psychoanalytic psychology, 6*(3), 1989, p. 330
27 S. Charnas quoted in *Blood read*, 1997, p. 62
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