

# **The Gothic Heroine's Independence and Family Situation**

The evolution of the gothic heroines Adeline in *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) to Bella Swan in the *Twilight Saga* (2005-2008)

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### Disclaimer

First, I want to make a disclaimer on how the books are cited in this paper. This is necessary as the main point of the paper is to contrast and compare two gothic heroines set more than 200 years apart. However, the citations will make it appear like the oldest book came out after the modern book. Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* was first published in 1791, while the edition used for this paper is Oxford World's Classics published in 2009 and will therefore be cited as 2009. Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight Saga* consists of four books first published yearly from 2005 to 2008. The books used for this paper are the first book, *Twilight*, and the last book, *Breaking Dawn*, both published by Atom. My edition of *Twilight* was published in 2007, and the final book, *Breaking Dawn*, was published in 2010. Again, these books will be cited to the editions used instead of the original publication year.

### Introduction

*In my dream it was very dark, and what dim light there was seemed to be radiating from Edward's skin. I couldn't see his face, just his back as he walked away from me, leaving me into the blackness. No matter how fast I ran I couldn't catch up to him.*

(*Twilight*, 2007, p. 58)

This was the first time Bella Swan dreamt about a mysterious boy named Edward. Ever since Bella first saw Edward, she also noticed him whenever he was close by. Bella felt an "overwhelming sense of safety [...] in his presence", and she was saved from dangerous incidents by him on several occasions (2007, p. 152). However, the hero of the story is not the rescuer, Edward, but in fact the seemingly fragile and weak Bella. Another story that depicts a fragile heroine is *The Romance of the Forest* where we find Adeline who is rescued by strangers and therefore dependent on them for her safety:

*Adeline felt the forlornness of her condition with energy; she reflected upon the past with astonishment, and anticipated the future with fear. She found herself wholly dependent upon strangers, with no other claim than what distress demands from the common sympathy of kindred beings.*

(*The Romance of the Forest*, 2009, p. 21)

These two characters are examples of gothic heroines from different eras. From the excerpts above they can seem similar, both being dependent on others and insecure in a way. As will be discovered throughout this thesis, however, is that these two heroines are in fact quite separable. In this thesis I will take a closer look at the two gothic heroines set approximately 200 years apart. The first heroine is Adeline from *The Romance of the Forest* (2009) by Ann Radcliffe, originally published in 1791. The second heroine is Bella Swan from the *Twilight Saga* written by Stephanie Meyer. The saga was first published yearly from 2005 to 2008 and includes vampires, werewolves, and other gothic elements. Both books have been very popular and can be seen as important books in the gothic genre, especially female gothic, which will be explored more further along. I will base my analysis and discussion of the two heroines on two different critical viewpoints. Ellen Moers theory depicts the heroine as powerless and at the mercy of her persecutor, but who will ultimately get a happy ending (Corson, 2010, p. 2). Corson criticizes Moers, arguing that it her idea of a heroine is not modern or feminist and therefore not a suitable description of heroines in modern stories (2010).

Both excerpts from the introduction show characteristics of a gothic heroine. The word *Gothic* has been used as a description of a group of people, a type of architecture and a genre of fiction, to name some. Gothic fiction is said to have its beginning in 1764 with Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, whose title later received the subtitle *A gothic story* for its second edition, and having its boom in the 1790s (Wright, 2007, p. 1). Gothic fiction is characterized by being set in gothic surroundings and including elements of horror and terror. In *The Romance of the Forest* (2009) we find Adeline and the other characters living in a deserted and dusty abbey, with typical gothic traits like dungeons, coffins, and a dark forest. In *Twilight*, these typical gothic objects have been omitted, but the town where the story is set, Forks, is seen to be gothic in itself with all the moss-covered trees and grey weather. Also, *Twilight* has the elements of supernatural beings, like vampires, which is not the case in *The Romance of the Forest*.

Gothic fiction can also be in combination with other genres, where Ann Radcliffe is an example of blending the Gothic with romance. Some also argue that Radcliffe prioritized romance over gothic especially in her earlier works. Novak (1979) claims that Radcliffe's "work is dominated by the typical romance plot rather than by Gothic effects" (p.54). Meyer is following Radcliffe's example by making the romantic storyline the most prominent. The love story between the two main characters, Bella and Edward, is the main story of the saga, and Edward being a vampire is just an addition to the story.

In *Literary Women* (1976) Ellen Moers discusses the female gothic, which she defines as “the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that [...] we have called the Gothic” (p. 90). Throughout Moers’ chapter about the gothic heroine, she mentions Ann Radcliffe several times, and depicts her as one of the greatest and most popular female gothic writers of her time (1976, p. 126). Radcliffe published several Gothic novels in the last decades of the 1700s, and with these she became a popular gothic author. Moers argues that the gothic heroine is important, and that Radcliffe’s heroines are serving as desirable models of this kind of character. Moers is seen as a feminist literary criticizer, and therefore her beliefs on gothic heroines are again criticized for not being very feminist (Corson, 2010, p. 3). Corson argues that there is a difference between the gothic heroine in Radcliffe’s novels that Moers regards as ideal, and the contemporary heroine. Corson states that “the contemporary heroine breaks away from the mold used by Radcliffe, so Moers’s model would not be useful [...]” when looking at gothic heroines such as Bella Swan from the *Twilight Saga* (2010, p. 3). In order to examine the differences in the two heroines I will focus the comparisons on two elements: the heroine’s characterizations regarding decisiveness, and their need of and role in a family.

### The heroines’ independency

From the two quotes at the start of the text we see both heroines as dependent on others. Bella dreams of her love interest early on after meeting him, and she is already very drawn and attached to him. “What dim light there was seemed to be radiating from Edward’s skin” shows how he is the light to her life, and he is “leaving [Bella] into the blackness” (2007, p. 58). I read this as Bella quickly attaching herself to Edward and her being afraid of being abandoned by him and left in the darkness of a world without him in it. Ernst also analyzes Bella before and after her meeting with Edward saying that “the moment Edward enters her life [...] she attaches all her dreams and aspirations to him” (2012, p. 10). This shows Bella as a very dependent character; however, she matures and grows a lot throughout the story. Already throughout the first book Bella is characterized as someone decisive and with a strong will. By the end of the first book a conflict rises between the villain on one side and Bella, Edward, and the rest of his vampire family on the other side. Bella is expected to stay behind her vampire-protectors, so they can keep her safe. However, like the stubborn and proud character she is by the end of the first novel, Bella decides to go meet the villain all alone, despite Edward and his family, telling her not to do so. Bella thinks to herself; “I pushed the terror back as well as I could. My decision was made”, before she walks into what

she feels is her own death all by herself (2007, p. 375). Even though she is urged to stay close to those who can protect her she still makes up her mind in secret and approaches a situation where she is going to be overpowered by the villain. Here we can see Bella as someone stubborn, proud, and independent, and this evolution happened already in the first of four books and continues to be typical characterizations of Bella throughout the saga. With this said, it is still important to note that Bella's security in herself evolved after, and likely because of, her meeting with Edward and his supernatural world. Bella's strong will stands in contrast to Adeline's indecisiveness.

In contrast to the decisive, and at times, stubborn Bella we find Radcliffe's heroines. Corson explains how Radcliffe is more interested in the plot development than character development (2010, p. 19). In *The Romance of the Forest* (2009) we find Adeline as quite cautious and indecisive. Adeline very often cries and faints and hides away in her room as can be seen throughout the entire book; "the frequent tear started to her eye" (p. 21), "she wept" (p. 46), "her oppressed heart found relief in tears, in which she freely indulged" (p. 112). These are only a few examples of descriptions of Adeline weeping, crying, and feeling sorry for herself. Crying is not necessarily a sign of weakness; however, I find Adeline's repeatedly crying as a sign of her not being emotionally strong or confident. Adeline is described as dependent on others, and not only close and trusted people, but complete strangers which can be seen in the excerpt presented at the beginning: "She found herself wholly dependent upon stranger" (p. 21). From the examples shown above, I see Bella as a generally more decisive character than Adeline, and she drives the plot to a much higher degree than Adeline. In the final book we see Bella, still as a human, pregnant with a half human half vampire. The fetus is slowly killing Bella, and everyone around her wants her to get rid of the fetus to save herself. However, Bella is determined to keep the baby and try to stay alive as well. She decides that she will keep the baby and that decision steers the direction of the rest of the story. We can see Bella's stubbornness through a conversation she is having with a close friend:

*"You're dying for nothing, Bella! Nothing!"*

*[...] "I'm not going to die. I will keep my heart beating. I'm strong enough for that."*

*[...] "That's a load of crap Bella [...] You're not strong enough."*

*[...] "I can do this. I can do this".* (2007, pp. 174-175)

As we can see Bella is stubborn, and when her mind is made up no one can change her mind. Even though she is risking her own life, she still stays true to her decision regardless of everyone trying to convince her to do otherwise. This is a huge contrast to Adeline, who is not

a plot driver in the same way Bella is. The next excerpt shows Adeline's uncertainty of the future. Again, she cries over not knowing where she will be taken the following day, and she is worried she will be in misery. Adeline uses words like *probably* and *perhaps* which amplifies her uncertainty.

*'Never, probably, again shall I see the sun sink below those hills,' said she, 'or illumine this scene! Where shall I be when next it sets – where this time to-morrow? Sunk, perhaps, in misery!' She wept to the thought.* (2009, pp. 152-153)

There is however a similarity between Adeline and Bella, which is that they are both quite dependent on others. Adeline, as we have seen, depends on strangers with her future. I would argue that Bella is also quite dependent on others; others being Edward. Even though I see Bella as more secure than Adeline she often depends on Edward, and he is seemingly the source to her confidence. In the last book, *Breaking Dawn* (2010), Bella is marrying Edward, and here we can also see how much of Bella's calmness is because of Edward. The next excerpt is from Bella's walk down the aisle to finally marry Edward.

*All I really saw was Edward's face; it filled my vision and overwhelmed my mind. [...] Edward held out his hand. [...] I touched the cool miracle of his skin, and I was home.* (2010, p. 44)

Bella on several occasions describes Edward as home, which can be interpreted as her being the most comfortable and the most herself when she is around him. It gives a sense of Bella feeling more secure and homely with Edwards, than by herself.

After seeing the similarities and differences between the two heroines I would argue that Bella is more feminist than Adeline in terms of being a plot driver and making her own decisions. Adeline, on the other hand, lets the male characters decide her future while she waits frightened and unsure. Moers tend to mainly focus on Radcliffe's heroines as representatives for the gothic genre. However, gothic heroines might need to update their representatives to better fit contemporary evolution. I agree with Corson when she argues that Bella breaks from Moers's gothic heroine-mold, and she has a stronger willpower and moves the plot forward more with her decision making.

### The heroines' family-situations

Another way Adeline and Bella can be compared is their role in a family and family situations. Typical features of the old-fashion gothic heroine, encouraged by Moers, is a troubled young lady often being abandoned by her family or having other family issues. This is also the case for Adeline. In *The Romance of the Forest* we learn about Adeline's

upbringing and how she was sent to a convent by her father after her mother's death. She felt abandoned by her family, clearly by her mother's passing, but also by her father who gave away the responsibility of taking care of her. When the La Motte's were given the responsibility over Adeline, they began to see her as a part of the family, and the feelings were reciprocated. Adeline several times shows her gratitude towards the La Mottes, including when Radcliffe writes; "... she turned her regard upon Monsieur and Madam La Motte, to whose tender attentions she owed her life" (2009, p. 13-14). The use of language here, and especially the expression tender attentions, can be in relation to the sentimentality of the genre, but also Adeline. Adeline is very emotional, often seen crying and she uses big, sentimental expressions. The last part of the quote; she owed her life can also help build Adeline's character of someone being emotional and tender-hearted. Pierre La Motte helps and protects Adeline, and she sees him more and more as a father. Perhaps her fondness of the La Mottes is only magnified because she was abandoned by her own family. Adeline "considered him [Monsieur La Motte,] as her only protector, and now felt towards him the affection of a daughter" (2009, p. 44).

When we compare this to our modern-day heroine, Bella, she does not resemble Adeline in this aspect. Bella grew up with her mother but moved to live with her father as a teenager. The dynamic between Bella and her mother is somewhat reversed, and Bella is seen as a motherly figure over her actual mother. Within the first couple of pages Bella's mother is described as *erratic*, *harebrained* and with *childlike eyes*. Bella is worried about leaving her mother. "She had Phil [her new husband] now, so the bills would probably get paid, there would be food in the refrigerator, gas in her car, and someone to call when she got lost, but still..." (2007, p. 4). This shows how Bella was the caretaker of her mother, even though she was still only a teenager. Bella feels okay leaving her mother because she now has a husband to take care of her the same way Bella used to. The quote shows how Bella took care of getting groceries and filling the car up with gas amongst other things. Bella's role as a caretaker also continues after she moves to live with her father. "Last night I'd discovered that Charlie couldn't cook much besides fried eggs and bacon. [...] I also found out that he had no food in the house." (2007, p. 27). It is also clear that Bella is worried about her father when she is not around to care for him; Bella asks her father:

"You'll be okay for dinner, right?"

"Bells, I fed myself for seventeen years before you got here", [her father reminded her].

"I don't know how you survived", [Bella] muttered. (2007, pp. 129-130)

Meyer also mentions several times that Bella cooks dinners for her father and prepares him with sandwiches and shops for groceries. At only 17 years old Bella is the maternal figure in the house. Instead of the heroine being left by her family, Bella is the motherly figure that is needed by her parents.

From these close readings we can see how Adeline needs others to take care of her, while Bella is the one to take care of those around her, especially her parents. Both heroines lack in a sense a family. The gothic trope of an absent mother is explicitly seen in Radcliffe's novel, and it can also be argued to be seen in the story of Bella (Corson, 2010, p. 8). Adeline, whose mother died when she was only seven years old and at the same time was sent to a convent by her father, was "abandoned to strangers" (2009, p. 36). This could be a reason for Adeline's characteristics of trusting and being dependent on strangers. Adeline is left with the La Motte's at 18 years old and "considered him [Pierre de La Motte] as her only protector" after staying with them for a month. These two observations tell me that Adeline is often looking at those around her for protection, both in the convent and also from the La Mottes. It strengthens my perception of Adeline as very dependent on others, which might not be unusual when a girl is first left to strangers by her family at seven years old, and then passed along to different strangers at 18. Our other heroine, Bella, on the other hand is even younger than Adeline at the beginning of the story, but her independence is completely different from Adeline's. Bella can also be said to lack a family in the sense that she, as a teenager, is taking care of groceries and cooking for her parents, instead of the other way around. Bella does not have a maternal figure to look up to in her mother, seeing as her mother has acted more childlike than Bella herself. Bella was forced to become independent, since she lacked parental support (Navas, 2019, p. 9).

### Conclusion

Through close readings of the two gothic stories, I have found both similarities and great differences in the two heroines. Moers sees Radcliffe as one of the pioneers of female gothic, and therefore Adeline can be seen as a model for how a gothic heroine is or should be. I can agree with Moers in that Radcliffe created a mold for the gothic heroine, but that mold is not necessarily as suitable today as it was in 1791 when *The Romance of the Forest* first was published. In the 1700's a woman was expected to marry and become a mother, and not until then was she accomplished. Through this sentiment I can see Bella fitting the mold, since she does not reach her full potential until she is married to Edward, turned into a vampire and a mother. In this sense Bella fits the patriarchal and old-fashion mold of gothic heroines.



However, I do believe current times calls for a more progressive heroine. Even though Bella stumbles upon misfortunes and in the need of Edwards protection and saving I still consider her as progressive. Bella is decisive and strong willed, and she shows masculine features as well as feminine. At the end of the fourth book, Bella is now a vampire with supernatural abilities of projecting a protective shield over those close to her. She is physically strong and mentally able to overpower the villains on behalf of herself and her family. The final book ends in a big fight between the good side and the bad side, and eventually Bella's protective shield is what ends up giving the good side the upper hand resulting in them winning and getting their happy ending. In the final chapter Edward retells the final fight and says: "So it was a combination of things there at the end, but what it really boiled down to was ... Bella" (2010, p. 688). Moers who is considered a feminist might appreciate Bella's ability to be the hero who saved them all at the end of the story, rather than the heroine who after many misfortunes happens to get a happy ending because of actions done by male characters.

This paper has focused on the evolvement of the gothic heroine by looking at Ann Radcliffe's heroine from *The Romance of the Forest* (2009), Adeline, and comparing her to Bella, the heroine of Stephanie Meyers *Twilight Saga* (2007, 2010). Critics, like Ellen Moers (1976), have seen Radcliffe as the originator of the female gothic and gothic heroines. Typical characterizations of Radcliffe's heroine, Adeline, is her dependency on others, her involvement in misfortunes, her frequent weeping, and her accomplishment of getting a happy ending after all. Jamie T. Corson (2010) criticizes Moers fascination of Radcliffe's heroines arguing that the evolution through time requires an evolved gothic heroine as well. Corson contrasts Radcliffe's heroines with Meyer's heroine, Bella. Bella is similar to Adeline in the way that they are both dependent on others to some degree, and Bella also finds herself in some unfortunate events and accidents where she is saved by the male protagonist. The difference between Adeline and Bella, however, is remarkable. Bella is more progressive and feminist in her ability to speak her mind and to make decisions contrary to what her 'protectors' want her to do. She shows signs of a typical gothic heroine through her dependency and engrossment in Edward, but she is also a strong individual who ends up protecting her family who at the beginning were way more powerful than herself.

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