

Temperance: The Quiet Virtue Finds a Home

A review of the film



Twilight

(2008)

Catherine Hardwicke (Director)

Reviewed by

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Of the six core virtues (wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence) that Peterson and Seligman (2004) used as the basis of their seminal classification system, temperance is the virtue least portrayed in movies. And even in its rare appearances on the silver screen, the portrait of this virtue is one of perversion, as in *The Scarlet Letter's* self-flagellating Reverend Dimmesdale.

There are a number of reasons for this. Temperance is the least glamorous virtue; its expression is a direct contrast with the fast-paced culture of consumerism, and one is hard-pressed to find a film that does not depict a character who has surrendered impulse control and engages in smoking, drinking, drugging, overeating, compulsive sex, or aggressive behavior (Niemiec & Wedding, 2008). This corresponds with data from the VIA Institute on Character that indicate that temperance is the least endorsed virtue of the six, a finding

drawn from data collected from over one million people who have taken the VIA Survey, a measurement tool assessing positive character (see www.viacharacter.org).

It is therefore a surprise to see an extremely popular film break this trend. The vampire drama *Twilight* is based on the best-selling four-part novel series by Stephenie Meyer and is the latest rage in popular books adapted to the screen since the surge of Harry Potter films produced over the last decade. *Twilight* has captured the attention of people of all ages; since it debuted in 2005, the *Twilight* book series has sold over 53 million copies.

In the film, a reserved, 17-year-old girl, Bella, moves to the remote Forks, Washington, to live with her father and attend a new school as a junior. As she acclimates to the school's social structure, she becomes aware of an isolated group of teens whom she discovers are vampires. She becomes intrigued by one of the vampires, Edward Cullen.

Edward is part of a family of "good" vampires who feed off animals and resist human blood (the vampire equivalent of a vegetarian), which is a challenge as vampires crave human blood like addicts crave heroin. Edward displays superhuman qualities: He reads people's minds, and his prowess in leaping, running, and tree climbing allows him to disappear and reappear at will. Bella's interest in him is matched by Edward's attraction to her, in part the result of his inability to read her mind.

As their curiosity about one another deepens, they fall in love, and Edward subsequently uses his powers to save Bella's life on a number of occasions. In light of his desire to feed off her and the consequences of his immortality, he warns her not to get involved with him. However, this attempt at prudence proves futile.

According to Peterson and Seligman (2004), who led a team of 55 scientists to create the first classification of positive character (documenting the six universally recognized virtues mentioned above and 24 additional character strengths), the virtue of temperance consists of the strengths of forgiveness/mercy, modesty/humility, prudence, and self-regulation. While it could be argued that Edward displays strong evidence of all four of these "moderation" strengths, he is a paragon of self-regulation.

Self-regulation (self-control) is a character strength that involves being disciplined and in control of feelings, behaviors, impulses, and thoughts (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). It is an acquired strength that comes with maturation and training. Good self-control has been linked to healthier interpersonal relationships, better mental health, and superior academic performance (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). Indeed, adolescents who score high on self-control measures outperform their more impulsive peers on a number of variables of academic performance such as report card grades, standardized achievement test scores, admission to competitive high schools, and school attendance (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005).

Researchers in the field have developed useful pedagogical models for understanding this character strength. Metcalfe and Mischel (1999) conceptualized self-regulation in the context of delayed gratification, stating that there are "hot" and "cool" systems—a hot, emotional system of reactivity and a cool, thinking system of reflection. The "hot" system

signals *go*, and the cool system signals *slow*; individuals who plan and distract themselves at the right time are able to cool their system down and exhibit good self-control.

A second model, developed by Roy Baumeister and his colleagues, maintained that self-regulation functions like a muscle in that an individual's self-control can be strengthened through practice or deliberate intervention (Baumeister, Gailliot, DeWall, & Oaten, 2006) and, like muscles, consumes a limited resource that can be depleted or overexerted through use (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). A prime example is the practice of mindfulness, in which the meditator brings deliberate attention and curiosity to the present moment (e.g., the breath) so that when negative emotions arise to threaten self-control, there is in place a formidable strength to manage emotions (Masicampo & Baumeister, 2007).

As a vampire, Edward has heightened sensory perception. In an early scene, he covers his nose when he is around Bella, limits his eye contact with her, and, upon learning he cannot drop out of biology class with her, exclaims, "I'll just have to endure it." Here, evidence of admirable self-control begins to mount. Bella, of course, takes personal offense, perceiving these behaviors as disgust and repulsion. She does not see that Edward's self-regulation resource is being depleted, which would result in a much greater chance that he might act upon his desire (and potentially "consume" her). Edward skips class for two days—this wise decision gives him a chance to build up his self-regulation resource, as he returns refreshed and ready to engage in healthy interpersonal communication.

Throughout *Twilight*, Edward displays intense craving and attraction to Bella, but he holds himself back. He describes his attraction and desire for her: "We learn to control our thirst. It's you. Your scent. It's like a drug to me. You're like my own personal brand of heroin."

The viewer sees the anguish and challenge of exerting self-regulation. At one point, Edward exclaims, "I don't have the strength to stay away from you any more," by which he means that he has no choice but to learn to self-regulate. He then builds up his strength of self-regulation by being around her in doses: For example, he watches her sleep at night. This behavior—spending hours directly facing a temptation and monitoring one's thoughts, impulses, and feelings during the activity—is clearly a way to build up this character strength.

Edward tries hard to display self-control as he faces a crescendo of challenges in which he must continue to develop his "muscle" of self-control. Numerous scenes show him resisting. Although he struggles honestly, exclaiming, "I still don't know if I can control myself," he is successful in his efforts. Edward's character strength of self-regulation is symbolized by his calm presentation and suave behavior—he often has his hands in his pocket, walks around casually, and reflects before speaking.

He sometimes walks away in the middle of a conversation so as to not deplete his self-control. After saving Bella from a gang of thugs, he has intense thoughts of wanting to be aggressive toward them, so he asks Bella to distract him from his thoughts—another healthy response to the throes of anger. In an intimate scene, Edward attempts a first kiss (a "self-

regulated kiss”), instructing Bella not to move. Soon she does move; as they continue kissing, he senses his self-control resource being quickly depleted, and he literally throws himself away from her, crashing into the bedroom wall. He realizes, “I’m stronger than I thought,” and then, as if reminding himself, he adds “I can’t ever lose control with you.”

In a dramatic scene, the only way that Edward can save Bella from a quick death is to suck poison out of her blood *and* display tremendous self-control by stopping before sucking away her life. For a vampire, this is the ultimate challenge to self-control because tasting human blood may cause a frenzy such that it is almost impossible to avoid completing the behavior (similar to the point of ejaculatory inevitability that men experience during intercourse).

For decades, clinical psychologists have researched the strategies that one could speculate that Edward may be using when he disappears for two days from biology class or closes his eyes in moments of intense restraint. Following Mischel and Ayduk’s (2004) outline of strategies, one might imagine that kissing Bella represents one of many moments in which he prepares to self-regulate; this technique is known as the alarm clock method.

Further, he may periodically remind himself of all the wonderful reasons not to bite her. Or perhaps he is using an intellectual process known as “picture framing” that would suggest that he think of Bella’s neck not as a warm, succulent piece of flesh but, for instance, as an anatomical part that bridges the head and the chest. Edward repeatedly mentions his desire to have “a normal life with her,” as well as his fear that she might come to suffer the consequences attached to the vampire lifestyle; he is reminding himself of the value of his long-term goal and rewarding himself for not committing to the more impulsive short-term goal, two other clinically useful strategies.

Considering Bella’s innately appealing smell and her passionate self-advocacy to be “vampirized,” Edward’s strength in self-regulation passes rigorous tests and stands in stark contrast with the film’s three vagabond vampires (one of whom endlessly and obsessively tracks his “prey”) and with most classic portrayals of vampires throughout the history of cinema, as seen in *Nosferatu* (Murnau, 1922), *Dracula* (Coppola, 1992), and *Interview With the Vampire* (Jordan, 1994), and as seen in the recent HBO series “True Blood.” Vampires are typically the epitome of unrestrained impulse and pure instinct, lacking the strength of self-control, particularly when in the company of fresh blood.

Twilight meets the criteria for a positive psychology film (Niemic, 2007). It portrays a character strength (self-regulation), obstacles to employing this strength (strong desire and attraction, and love that draws Edward in), successful strategies to overcome challenges and barriers (brief separation from the stimulus, practice of the strength through graduated exposure), and an overall tone/message that is positive. Indeed, teachers and clinicians working to educate students and clients on important concepts in human development, positive psychology, and virtuous behavior will be able to use this film to illustrate the points they are trying to make.

From cinematic standards, *Twilight* is not the best film around (film critics typically rate it in the middle range). However, it does offer some fine teaching points, particularly on the depiction, challenges, and triumphs of applying the character strength of self-regulation, among other temperance strengths. Many people who see the film (or read the book) discuss the film's depiction of adolescent psychology (e.g., school transition, cliques, insecurities, yearnings), the paranormal, and the psychology of love and desire. The film is also an allegory warning teens to delay initiating sexual intercourse and to show restraint as they begin to develop intimate relationships. We assert that the allegory goes even deeper. We propose that Edward is a role model and that *Twilight* represents a call for viewers of all ages to exert self-control and moderation.

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