

## Is the *Twilight* Saga a Modern-Time Fairy Tale? A Study of Stephenie Meyer's Source Material from Folklore and Canonical Narratives

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**Abstract:** The article presents an analysis of Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* novels as modern literary fairy-tales. To this end, the discussion will refer to structuralist critics, and identify "narrative functions" from folktales (stock images and episodes, stock character functions, characteristic sequences of episodes), used by Meyer in her vampire novels. As it turns out, Meyer modified folklore material to sustain a long and variously themed narrative: by embedding numerous subplots, by rearranging functions between characters, and creating composite and collective characters that combine contradictory functions. The author transformed several folktales into a series of four novels about coming of age in the twenty-first-century United States. A detailed analysis of Meyer's modifications of the folktale partially corroborates the feminist critique of Meyer's representation of the protagonists as reinforced versions of cultural stereotypes and gender roles. However, some transformations, especially Meyer's assignment of the hero-function to the female protagonist Bella, seem to suggest just the opposite, thus leading to the conclusion that the *Twilight* novels reflect the confusion caused by contradictory role-models and aspirations, the confusion that seems to be inherent in a coming-of-age novel.

Keywords: Stephanie Meyer, *Twilight*, fairy tale, folklore, structuralism

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"I decided it didn't matter. It doesn't matter to me what you are."  
—Bella Swan in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight*

In his seminal 1977 monograph on the literary fairy tale (*Kunstmärchen*), Jens Tismar set down the principles for a definition of the genre: firstly, it can be differentiated from the oral folk tale (*Volksmärchen*) because it is written by an author, rather than developed as folk tradition. Consequently, it is "synthetic, artificial, and elaborate in comparison to the indigenous formation of the folk tale that emanates from communities and tends to be simple and anonymous" (Zipes, "Introduction" xvi). However, the literary fairy tale is not an independent genre but can only be understood and defined by its relationship to the oral tales that it "uses, adapts, and remodels during the narrative conception of the author" (Zipes, "Introduction" xv).

The present study will discuss Stephenie Meyer's popular novel series as literary fairy tale, focusing on the following questions: what elements of fairy tales can be identified in Meyer's fiction? Did the author modify the elements of the fairy-tale material? If there are modifications introduced by Meyer, what is their meaning? The identification of fairy-tale elements will be based on structural analysis derived from classic studies on the fairy tale in European folklore: the works by Vladimir Propp, Bruno Bettelheim, and Jack Zipes. Modifications and transformations of folklore material will be identified with reference to Meyer's own comments on her work, with reference to scholarly articles on specific images in *Twilight* novels, and through

close reading of selected passages from Meyer's texts. The aim of the interpretative part is to offer a further explanation of the popularity of Meyer's vampire novels, and to demonstrate that Meyer's fiction conveys important values such as female empowerment, the importance of the search for individual identity, and the need to revise or reverse entrenched role models and patterns of individual development.

There is no exhaustive, systematic study of the appropriation of fairy-tales in Meyer's fiction, although most reviews and scholarly articles briefly point out two major skeleton plots used by Meyer (*Beauty and the Beast* and/or *Cinderella*), without mentioning specific versions alluded to (e.g. Sommers; Platt). Even Meyer's text, in one sentence, mentions its own cultural models, which for Bella, the central character and narrator, are frames of reference and sources of personal role models: "Edward had always thought he belonged to the world of horror stories. Of course, I'd known he was dead wrong. It was obvious that he belongs here. In the fairy tale" (*Breaking Dawn* 479).

According to Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*, a folklore tale can be divided into a relatively small number of analyzable chunks (episodes, characters, situations), which he called functions. The well-known conclusion of Propp's study is that the number of functions is small, and the number of their sequences used in folktales is very small, too. Thus, he identified a limited number of narratemes (narrative units or functions) that are present in the structures of the stories he analyzed. Furthermore, all narratemes connect and relate to each other, and thus help build the storyline and create what Peter Brooks called the "masterplot" (Brooks 2).

More specifically, Propp identified 31 elements (functions) of stories and provided their brief symbolic interpretation. In typical narrative sequences identified by Propp, functions generally occur in pairs, such as Departure and Return, or in threes, such as Test (of protagonist's good intentions) repeated three times by various Helpers (another function, a type of character). According to Propp, only a few stories contain all 31 functional elements. When they do, or when the number of functions is close to 31, the functions usually occur in one and the same sequence, the general sequence of a folk tale from the Russian corpus analyzed by Propp. This was the general conclusion drawn in *Morphology* (115-118). Numerous scholars have recently provided a reappraisal of his study, stating that Propp's work is not just a showcase piece of structuralist criticism, but a flexible and useful tool, applicable to non-Russian material, and still useful in analysis of new material. For instance, Rethowati and Ernawati (2017) have combined Propp's narratology with new-historicist interpretation of Javanese folklore, and Gubrium (2005) provided a narratological framework for "narrative environments" that can create and solve social problems. Gaffney and Lahel have even applied Propp's framework to an analysis of British political discourse (2013).

In particular, Propp's approach seems relevant for an analysis of Meyer's fiction, since she appropriated fairy-tale material. Propp's interpretative procedure starts with the listing of the smallest units, which are single images or motifs. Motifs can reoccur, in modified forms, as functional units, performing the same function in various tales; they are then called functions. According to Propp, "[o]ne might note that many functions logically join together into certain spheres" (79), which are defined

thematically, functionally, and correspond to certain elements of the setting. Based on Propp's discussion of narrative functions, especially in chapter nine (92-115) and Appendix III on themes (135-149), the distribution of functions among spheres can be arranged as follows.

The first sphere is introduction, and this sphere corresponds to the home and the immediate social circle, which introduces a conflict or a problem that will trigger events in the second sphere; this sphere sometimes includes first encounters between the protagonist and the antagonist (villain); in Propp's analysis, this sphere includes numerous functions which initiate subsequent action, such as Violation of Interdiction, or Trickery.

The second sphere contains the body of the story, or the initial episodes of a tale. This is a real opening of most fairy tales, when an inopportune action by the protagonist or villain creates a lack or damage that must be undone by the protagonist; this sphere includes the protagonist's departure from home. The third sphere consists of "the donor sequence" (i.e. encounters between the protagonist and one or more helpers), as well as the quest and struggle sequence: this sphere corresponds to a new geographical and social setting, and includes much of the action, and the interaction between the protagonist, the antagonist and the helpers. Propp's catalogue of functions in this sphere includes Test, Challenge, Acquisition, Struggle, Victory, and Branding of the hero.

The fourth sphere consists of the hero's return, and usually includes a secondary struggle at home. This sequence tends to be complicated, including functions such as Pursuit, Arrival, Claim, Task, Recognition, Recognition, Transfiguration, and Wedding. In general, the protagonist asserts his/her new and better social position at home, which amounts to another sequence of the struggle and victory.

While examining the *Twilight* saga it appears that each of the four *Twilight* novels corresponds to a different sphere in Propp's morphology. This means that the four novels actually constitute a single plot, as if they were parts of a single folktale. On the other hand, Propp observed that folktale plots could be embedded one into the another, so a single tale could include one or more sub-tales (Propp 93-94). Thus, *Twilight* consists of a single master-plot, extending over the four spheres defined by Propp, and numerous embedded plots, which could theoretically extend over the four spheres as well, but usually do not follow the pattern completely. Most often, an incomplete folktale could be embedded between narrative "moves" (episodes) of the structurally "higher" tale, as a subplot; Propp called this an interruption by an episodic move. This interruption, however, can be interrupted by another interruption, which leads to complex narrative patterns, with digressions, comic interludes or moral fables embedded into a general plotline (93). The main plotline and the embedded subplot can converge and share the same continuation and ending. In less common examples, an interruption can form a complete parallel folktale (94). An important consequence of embedding is a relative freedom and the flexibility that a folktale offers to the modifications: each teller can add a set of embedded episodes. In a modern context, the use of folklore material enables people (both professional authors and fans) to create prequels and sequels, alternative endings, extensions in fan fiction etc.

Propp also observes that embedded "moves" retain their sequence, so that

embedding does not seem to influence the embedded sequence of episodes. This conclusion anticipates Propp's general conclusion (115) that a general plot of the folktale is based on a single, very stable and repetitive sequence of narrative functions. Variety can be introduced by embedding, multiplication and repetition of functions, but rearrangement of the sequence seems very rare. The same seems to be the case in Meyer's texts about vampires: although the four *Twilight* novels include embedded quest plots, their overall narrative structure follows the sequence of the four spheres delineated above. This can be interpreted in terms of the protagonist's personal development, so that Bella's coming of age becomes the central theme of the tetralogy; this possibility will be elaborated upon below.

As the initial part of this enquiry, Meyer's four of the novels will be discussed with reference to Propp's four narrative spheres. The first sphere, which according to Propp is the expository introduction, is related to the first novel, *Twilight* (2005). This is where Meyer introduces the main characters, Bella the protagonist, her father Charlie, and her love interests: Edward Cullen (the vampire) and Jacob Black (the werewolf). The novel introduces social background (school and family), which will gradually be developed in subsequent novels, but subsequent development is rather scant in comparison with the first novel: the other parts of the tetralogy contain few, infrequent descriptive passages, and several brief comments in dialogues. Although the first novel features several confrontations between the protagonist and villains (rogue vampires, criminals), the confrontations do not form a coherent sequence of a quest plot; instead, they seem to be embedded interludes. The central function of *Twilight*, as it seems, is that it sets the scene of the subsequent adventures. The novel has long descriptions of the setting, including the topography of Forks, a small town in Washington state, the surrounding forests and seaside, as well as the protagonist's home and school. Forks is surrounded by forests and other wild scenery; the woods are especially important to the novel as the setting of initiation scenes and quests (which is common in fairy tales). In terms of the plot, the first novel ends with love declaration between Bella and Edward. This ending, however, does not constitute the ending of a quest sequence, but rather its opening, for both protagonists (and Jacob as well) perceive the declaration of love as a breach of an interdiction, the implicit ban on relations between humans and vampires. The breach of an interdiction, in Propp's discussion of the initial folktale sequence, is the key episode, because it triggers the next sequence of episodes in the second sphere.

The second book in the saga, *New Moon* (2006) corresponds to the second sphere in Propp's morphology. The main story continues here: breach of interdiction from the previous novel brings on a crisis and lack, which necessitates the departure of the heroine to her main quest. In *New Moon*, Edward leaves Bella after his brother (one of the villains, a nomad vampire) attacks her. Bella is left heartbroken and goes on her first quest in this specific book, she develops independence and self-reliance; she strives to define herself without her parents and Edward. After a long period of depression and grief, she is rescued by Jacob Black, a werewolf who helps her fight her pain and the one who tells her about the secret world of vampires (there are different vampire clans in various parts of the world). However, a new quest sequence is embedded at this stage, as Bella starts her second quest to save Edward from taking

his own life. In dialogues and secondary episodes, Jacob reveals his true nature as a werewolf, and Alice (Edward's sister) comes to visit Bella and gives her reassurance; this is the second interaction with a helper character. Bella recognizes what is missing in her life and decides to take positive action. Thus, the second novel initiates the main quest sequence, and includes two embedded secondary ones.

The functions from the third sphere are used in the last two books of the saga. This is where Meyer blends the spheres and creates continuity in the plot of the story: the first two novels, as it were, set the stage and anticipate subsequent developments, whereas the third and fourth novels develop a continuity that allows for numerous embedded subplots and episodic interruptions, mostly confrontations with various antagonists. Consequently, the second and third novels provide most ample opportunities for production of sequels, extensions, and fan fiction. The book with most functions from the third sphere is *Eclipse* (2007). This time Bella faces a whole army of rogue vampires, which relates back to a secondary storyline from the first novel. In *Eclipse*, representatives of various clans of vampires are seeking to kill Bella and her relations as a revenge for the nomad vampire's death in the first book. The Cullens seek and find help with other vampire clans, and Bella's situation (friendship between Bella and Jacob) helps the Cullens and werewolves to join forces for the first time. In this sphere, interactions with donors help Bella gain abilities and attributes represented in her behavior and personal development. She no longer appears to be the fragile character from the first novel, and thus, in modern terms, the fairy-tale quest corresponds to a passage from teenagerhood to adulthood.

The last sphere corresponds to *Breaking Dawn* (2008). The sphere is called The Return of the Hero, and includes a complex array of functions performed after the completion of the quest: Pursuit, Arrival, Claim, Task, Recognition, Recognition, Transfiguration, and Wedding. Completion of the quest, as it turns out, is only an initial victory. Thus, in *Breaking Dawn*, Bella marries Edward, loses her virginity and gets pregnant, returns to Forks, and fights off nomad vampires who want to kill her and her unborn baby. Subsequently, she goes through another final initiation, as Edward transforms her into a vampire. Then, admitted into the vampire clan, she gives birth to her daughter, who in turn is also accepted by the werewolf Jacob as a sort of surrogate child of his. In this novel, Meyers additionally creates more connections between different plots in the earlier novels, closing some loose ends, and resolving the conflicts initiated in the first and second novel.

However, in the third section of *Breaking Dawn*, Meyer interrupts the plot again to complicate the pattern of the tale, and the story shifts back to Bella's perspective, describing Bella's painful transformation and the eventual acceptance of her new identity as a vampire. Another complication arises when her daughter Renesmee is misidentified as an "immortal child," a special and vicious type of vampire. Since "immortal children" are uncontrollable, creating them has been outlawed by the Volturi (a villain-vampire group from the second novel). The Volturi plan to kill Renesmee and the Cullens. With an attempt to survive, the Cullens gather other vampire clans from all around the world to stand as witnesses and to prove to the Volturi that Renesmee is not an immortal child. Now, Jacob the werewolf helps to identify the baby as a "good vampire," and to forge the new family connection, an unbreakable bond and mutual

part of protection between the Cullens and the werewolves, ending the traditional hatred between the two races. And as in fairy tale, at this stage the heroine reveals her true potential and assumes a new, happier way of life, which in this case will go on forever: “[a]nd then we continued blissfully into this small but perfect piece of our forever” (*Breaking Dawn* 479).

Overall, Meyer’s appropriation and modification of folktale material seems to consist in adding a series of embedded subplots to the general quest sequence of narrative functions known from Russian folktales. The themes of the general plot can be identified as coming of age and (in the fourth sphere) social reconciliation. Certain elements of this plot (especially the material from the first novel) suggest that Meyer’s source was the Cinderella story, but the author only uses the story as an embedded subplot, discarding most of the material that defines the story in its various versions known from Aarne-Thomson index (cf. Dundes), or from cinematic versions (stepmother, three stepsisters, recognition, sorceress as helper). More importantly, the Beauty-and-the-Beast material is embedded in a truncated and reversed form, as it is Bella, rather than Edward, who is eventually transformed. Here, Meyer’s use of folktale material is not superficial, but somehow revisionary, as she reverses and reassigns the functions of characters: Bella, the Beauty, is also a quest heroine, and her quest consists in getting transformed into the Beast, rather than the reverse. Many critics found this reversal controversial in its implied acceptance of violence and exploitation, the generally recognized connotative meanings of the vampire in cultural history (e.g. Gelder 108-123). Finally, most embedded subplots are confrontations with villains who are identified as collective heroes. Paradoxically, while Bella fulfills her quest of personal development (and of becoming a vampire), the vampires try to protect her from external threats, rogues, nomads, and foreigners. This modification, too, can be seen as controversial, perhaps related to American perception of many foreign countries as terrorist threats, axes of evil and such (Punter and Byron 268-272). In what follows, the discussion will attempt to interpret the three major modifications of folktale material in Meyer’s *Twilight* novels: reversal of functions between Beauty and Beast, numerous embedded confrontations between Cullens and foreigners, and the adoption of the quest for personal-development as the main plot sequence.

To begin the interpretation, the present discussion will approach the vampire as the motif and the narrateme, a more detailed functional pattern from Propp’s analysis. According to Propp’s methodology Edward, the vampire who is the love interest, seems to be one of the simplest narrative units, which Propp calls the motif. Motifs in various folktales can have very different descriptions and attributes, but they retain the same function: “the dragon may be replaced by Koscej, a whirlwind, a devil or a falcon. Abduction can be replaced by vampirism or various other acts by which disappearance effected in tales” (Propp 13). This, accidentally, is the only moment when Propp himself mentions the vampire in his analysis. The vampire typically performs the functions of the villain and the antagonist in scenes of test and struggle. Among the many possible appearances for these functions, Meyer chooses the vampire, although she could use more realistic motifs, such as criminals, for the same functions. Why does she choose the vampire? How does it relate to the study of the modern fairy tale? For one thing, the popularity of the vampire in pop culture turned it into a very flexible

and multi-faceted character. “Vampires have dominated print literature since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, eventually becoming more visible as they crossed mediated boundaries and genre divides” (Ames 37). Thus, while modernizing the tale of Beauty and the Beast, Meyer could easily identify the Beast with the vampire and change his nature to fit the twenty-first-century USA:

Meyer recuperates the vampire mythos from even the steamy, seedy world of Anne Rice’s *Vampire Chronicles* where it has been argued that ‘the kill is sexual.’ She locates her vampires to the cold, perennially damp state of Washington where lust appears to boil both Bella and Edward’s blood, but even the most intense passion during a kiss is enough to chill Edward’s already cold lips to ‘unresponsive stones.’ (Sommers and Lume)

Meyer’s ambiguous representation of vampire sexuality, as both hot and puritanically cold, can be interpreted in terms of feminist discussions of vampire narratives as metaphors of hostility towards female sexuality (Doane and Hodges; Ruth; Siering). Writing about Anne Rice’s vampire novels, Doane and Hodges noticed that women characters, represented as innocent victims of vampire lust, or as corrupted products of vampire lust, are essentially passive objects, with very few attributes of human characters (such as psychological depth or self-determination). Thus, with reference to *Twilight*, the question which arises is whether Bella is a Gothic damsel in distress, pursued by a vampire. Given the reversal of functions between the Beauty and the Beast, discussed above, the answer seems to be paradoxical. According to Mann, “Meyers sorts the paradoxical narratives of female passivity and power, purity and desire, innocence and responsibility, dependence and autonomy, into a story where one leads, finally, to the other” (123). Similar observations on the composite and contradictory nature of gender representation in vampire narratives were made by Auerbach, in *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, where the critic compared vampire characters to stereotypical images and paralogical plots generally used to reinforce gender stereotypes among young women, readers of popular fiction. Bella’s behavior, her being “fragile,” influences all other male characters around her:

In spite of the bravery and the emotional strength that she exhibits at various points in the series, Bella’s dominant characteristics are her physical weakness and the need to be protected from danger all the time. The characterization of Bella as a vulnerable innocent does the ideological work of transforming the overprotective thoughts of the men in her life—particularly Edward’s and Jacob’s—into perfectly reasonable, and almost endearing impulses. (Platt 148)

Platt’s conclusion, that Bella interacts with overprotective and possessive males, helps to interpret the importance of embedded confrontation episodes, where the Cullens and Jacob protect Bella against foreign or rogue vampires.

Meyer’s use of folktale material is related to the general critical debate among the feminist scholars who wanted to determine whether folktales support or subvert the patriarchal gender stereotypes (Keithley 5). This is related to the general statement by Bettelheim (45-58) that fairy tales teach children to follow the presuppositions and implicitly accepted behavior patterns of a given culture. However,

with a little irony, they can do the opposite: for instance, Alison Laurie argued that fairy tales taught women (and girls) to develop into powerful, independent individuals in a world dominated by patriarchal order. She describes many fairy tales as feminist works (Laurie). On the other hand, Marcia R. Lieberman presents an opposite view, pointing out the gender stereotypes fostered by many variants of the Cinderella story (385). Another example is Karen Rowe, who wrote that “romantic tales factor into female attitudes towards marriage, love, men, and society and states that fairy tales idealize romantic patterns and cause disappointment later in life” (235).

By combining Propp’s formalist apparatus with the feminist approach to the fairy-tale, it is possible to interpret the vampire in Meyers’s fiction as a motif that combines three quite different functions: Edward Cullen is initially defined as a villain in the first novel, where he describes himself as a seducer and Bella as a victim. Their mutual attraction leads to breach of interdiction, which in Propp’s view is a function usually performed by the protagonist (Bella) at the instigation of the villain (Edward). Soon enough, however, Edward starts to perform the function of the donor, as other vampires do from the Cullen family, especially in the second and the third books. Together, the Cullen vampires support Bella’s quest for adulthood and a fulfillment in life. Finally, and perhaps ironically, Edward also performs the function of the princess, or the reward offered to the protagonist (Bella) in the final sections of the fairy tale. In a reversal of the folktale functions, Edward also performs the function of the Beauty, who transforms the protagonist (Bella) into his/her own likeness (the vampire).

This analysis leads to two conclusions: one is that Meyer introduced gender-role reversal in her treatment of the folklore narrative, so that Bella is a hero(ine) performing the quest, and Edward is a prince(ss) offered to Bella when the quest was completed. At the same time, however, Meyer also performed the role reversal in the embedded subplot of the Beauty and the Beast, which leads to the ambiguity of the entire general quest plot, and to critical controversy over Bella’s character. The controversy springs, according to the present analysis, from the implicit meanings of Meyer’s reversal of functions between the characters. The other conclusion is that the motif of the vampire in Meyer’s novels is developed through numerous embedded subplots, as a device that has three contradictory narrative functions: the villain, the donor, and the princess. Thus, the embedding of subplots not only leads to the expansion of folktale narrative into a series of novels, but also to a complicated development of the protagonists into ambiguous, contradictory, and perhaps implicitly disturbing juvenile characters. Their entry into adulthood is marred by ubiquitous and oppressive violence, contradicting role models, and seemingly insurmountable social divisions.

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