

Gender relations in mainstream teenage films: The Twilight Saga

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Abstract

The vampire-romance novels and films of Stephenie Meyer's The Twilight Saga have triggered a hype not only among teenagers all over the world. The franchise has been equally praised and criticized for its conservative approach to the concepts of love, sexuality, marriage and family. This study explores the gender relations and role models presented in the novels and films. Embedded in the vampire-werewolf genre, values emerging from Victorian literature and Mormon beliefs are used to give a moral framework to first love experience of today's teenagers. Thus, the question to be answered by this analysis is: What do teenagers learn from The Twilight Saga about gender relations and sexuality? The concept of heteronormativity serves as a theoretical approach to the material. First results lead to the conclusion that the saga is an example for the reification of gender as a naturally hierarchical binary based on male domination and male norm.

The topic of the session this paper was presented at was "Learning Gender - Learning Technology: Media as Educational Arenas". Apart from the medium film depending strongly on technology, the focus of this paper lies more on the gender aspect of the session. This is a presentation of work in progress which is part of the preparations for my thesis about how gender is discussed in online platforms – in particular, I will take a look at fan communities of the *Twilight Saga*, a franchise which has been very successful especially among girls and young women. My preparations involve the analysis of the original material of the *Twilight Saga*, consisting of four published novels¹ and an unfinished manuscript² written by Stephenie Meyer, as well as two films³ that have been released so far. It is a high school romance à la Romeo and Juliet between an ordinary human girl (Bella Swan) and a vampire boy (Edward Cullen), their love being challenged over and over again by 'evil' vampires who do not agree to this relationship. In my analysis I examine how gender relations in the *Twilight Saga* are structured, in order to find out what fans potentially learn about gender and sexuality. In reference to Anita Thaler's introduction to this session, learning in this context is to be understood as informal and incidental (Thaler 2010).

As the title of this paper suggests, for now I will mainly refer to the film versions but if necessary I will also relate to the novels. First I am going to say a few words about my theoretical approach, then I will present an overview about what the vampire generally embodies in terms of gender and sexuality, followed by comments on the ideological background of the franchise. In the second half

of this paper I will describe how the relationships between the main characters of *The Twilight Saga* are structured.

My theoretical approach to the material is based on the concept of heteronormativity which originates from Queer Theory. It has been used as a critique of traditional feminist theory, referring to the interdependence between sexuality and gender (Ingraham 1996; Wagenknecht 2007). The term has been used inconsistently, so I currently work with a tentative definition: Heteronormativity is the heterosexual norm framing the construction of gender as a binary category. Heteronormativity is not limited to the sexual dimension but is a structural force throughout social organizations. In order to identify the mechanisms of heteronormativity in a film or in a piece of literature one could, for instance, take a look at how relationships of love are depicted or how social units such as family are constituted. I will get back to these two examples but first I would like to give some basic information on the vampire myth in regard to gender and sexuality.

Historically the vampire is to be seen as the embodiment of many human fears but also of desires based on taboos. Especially in Victorian times the vampire was used as a metaphor for suppressed sexuality (Borrmann 1998) – some beast that cannot be controlled and fights its way to the surface only to violently show itself. The character of the vampire has certain fluidity in regard to gender and sexuality. Vampires are no primitive predators relying solely on physical superiority but seduce their prey by their beauty and refined manners. Thus the act of feeding has a strong sexual connotation – the genital aspect is transferred to an oral fetish. Furthermore, in most stories vampires reproduce by biting: Either the individuals bitten turn immediately or they additionally need to drink the blood of their makers after being bitten or the ritual is a complex combination of biting, blood exchange and killing. In all these cases the mouth of a vampire becomes a sexual organ, combining female and male features: the long teeth and the tongue as phallic equivalents, the mouth itself being a pendant to the vagina (ibid.). This sexual organ is the same with male and female vampires – thus the traditional gender-specific distinction based on reproductive organs is impossible with this species. The binaries are blurred even stronger in stories where the vampires, regardless of their perceived gender, show no preference for one specific gender of their prey. An example would be *Interview with the Vampire* by Anne Rice (Jordan 1994) or more recently the novel-based series *True Blood* (Ball 2008). We could conclude that the vampire embodies the deconstruction of the binaries of gender and sexuality. However, this kind of vampire is the opposite of the '*Twilight* vampires'.

Interestingly, there are strong similarities of Stephenie Meyer's novels and the novels by Charlaine Harris, known as *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* (2001-2010), and J. L. Smith's *The Vampire Diaries* (1991-2010).⁴ Considering that Harris' and Smith's first novels were published long time before Meyer wrote *Twilight*, one could assume that *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* and *The*

Vampire Diaries may have served as hypotexts to *The Twilight Saga*. However, Meyer draws a clear line between the 'good' and the 'bad' vampires – a line that is more blurred in the presumptive hypotexts (especially in *The Southern Vampire Mysteries/True Blood*). As I will show, in *Twilight* the 'good' vampires represent heteronormativity, whereas the 'bad' ones resemble the vampires I have described above. Assuming that Meyer was inspired by Harris and Smith, why are her vampires less ambivalent? Taking this question one step further, one could ask: What kind of ideology is backing up the heteronormative structure in *Twilight*?

Stephenie Meyer is a self-confessing Mormon and has confirmed in interviews that her belief has had great influence on her world view and thus on her writing (Meyer 2008b; Meyer n.d.). John Krakauer writes in his quite populist book on Mormonism that it is "the fastest growing faith in the Western Hemisphere" and "widely considered to be the quintessential American religion" (2004, 3f.). It would be certainly unsound to equal Mormon ideology to *the* American system of values but especially powerful conservative Christian communities do have a lot in common with it. The Mormon Church is a patriarchally structured society with family as the basic unit. And the only way to get there is marriage. In *Twilight* both themes are closely linked to the idea of 'true' and 'eternal' love. Krakauer writes that the Church "forbids abortions, frowns on contraception, and teaches that Mormon couples have a sacred duty to give birth to as many children as they can support" (ibid. 80). As I will show in the following examples, Edward's huge family lives up to this ideal, in contrast to Bella's and Jacob's families. In the course of the story all action is working towards Bella and Edward marrying and having a child – this is their (Mormon) destiny. One could say that none of the characters have any alternative options but to fulfill their destiny and their role in a patriarchal heteronormative system, where gender roles are based on biological grounds or divine will – depending whether one believes in evolution or God.

I would like to start the discussion of findings by introducing Bella's heroes: Edward and his fellow vampires form a model family of parents and five children: the Cullens. They are not tied by blood bond in the traditional sense, so Edward's brothers and sisters do not violate the taboo of incest when they form couples – a first hint to the heteronormativity structuring the world of the saga. They are able to live among humans since they decided to feed upon animal blood rather than humans (they call themselves 'vegetarians'). And then there is Jacob Black, Bella's best friend, who turns into a werewolf⁵ in *New Moon* (Weitz 2009), the second part of the story. When Edward is not available Jacob is a stand-in as a protector and lover to Bella. The three of them form a dramatic *menage á trois* which is only solved in the fourth part of the saga when Jacob finds his 'true love'.

In *Twilight*, as in many mainstream films, gender is displayed as a binary, complementary category: Each character has a pendant of the 'opposite' gender. Apart from only very few exceptions those

characters who do not find such a pendant experience violent fate in the course of the story. An individual can only survive (or is only complete) with its complementary part. Thus the idea of 'true' and 'eternal' love takes a central position in the story, it even seems to be a declared natural law, which refers to some kind of biological origin. The relationship between Bella and Edward, for instance, is founded in the attraction between prey and predator. Some predators lure their prey by audible, visual or olfactory signals. According to Edward vampires have all these effects on humans: "I'm the world's most dangerous predator. Everything about me invites you in – my voice, my face, even my smell." (Hardwicke 2008, 50). The predator theme is brought up in the same conversation when he confesses to Bella: "And so the lion fell in love with the lamb" (ibid. 53), triggering a biblical notion of Eden, the peaceful paradise where the wolves and lions mean no harm to lambs and calves (Isaiah 11:6; 65:25). Considering that the author is a self-confessed Mormon, the relationship of these two characters can be seen to be founded on divine will additionally to the biological grounds previously described.

An analog example for naturalizing love can be found with the werewolves. Werewolves 'imprint' on their counterparts. This is described in *Eclipse*, the third novel. Jacob explains to Bella "... we find our mates that way" (Meyer 2009/2007, 109), meaning that 'imprinting' is in the nature of being a werewolf. In another context he tells her: "There are no rules that can bind you when you find your other half" (ibid. 110), stating that true love is when the two individuals exclusively designed for each other meet. It seems as if in this moment gravity moves: "When you see her, suddenly it's not the earth holding you here anymore. She does." (ibid. 156). In *The Twilight Saga* love is described as mutual attraction between predator and prey, as addiction (Schneidewind & Zahnweh 2009) and naturalized dependency. Its absence is perilous: At the beginning of *New Moon* Edward leaves Bella 'for her own good' which in the course of this sequel almost kills both of them and they conclude that they cannot live without each other.

Naturalization of love is one aspect constituting a heterosexual norm. Generally quite some effort is made to reconcile paranormal elements like vampires and werewolves with the reality shared by the audience and Bella, who is the narrator and consequently the character the audience identifies with. Pseudo-biological explanations are created to convey a sense of normality especially when it comes to the construction of gender relations. This effort can be found at its best when Bella becomes pregnant by Edward. To explain the details of this event would go beyond the scope of this paper but this much can be said: The creativity employed to come up with a biological explanation for how a human woman actually can become pregnant by a vampire man, is extraordinary.

Another instance of naturalization is the construction of gender differences by assigning the characters to different species: the humans, the werewolves and the vampires. The pseudo-

biological distinction between the species justifies the differences between the female and male protagonists: Bella as the female character belongs to the weakest species, whereas the male protagonists are, or turn into, creatures with superhuman powers. Among these two superior species Edward represents the male norm – Jacob is physically on a par but he is not the one 'winning' the female protagonist. Table 1 is an attempt to visualize how species related oppositions are used to structure gender as a binary category and to construct a male norm.

Bella is in a much weaker position in relation to the two male protagonists: "Vulnerable, weak. Even more than usual for a human" – this is how Edward perceives her (Meyer 2008a, 10).⁶ When it comes to control emotional or sexual arousal, she is not able to hold back whereas Edward and Jacob have to, and to a certain degree, manage to do so – their loss of control would be fatal for the girl. Another aspect that separates humans and monsters is aging: Neither vampires nor werewolves, in their active period of constant shape shifting, age, whereas humans naturally get older. Thus, Bella's destiny is to become one of them in order to live 'happily ever after'. As already pointed out, Edward represents the norm among the male protagonists. He is superior to Jacob because he is white (a crucial element in the history of Mormon belief), he is very well educated (he holds two graduate degrees in medicine (Meyer 2008a)), he is wealthy and his family lives up to an ideal of a social unit, headed by a doctor, whereas Jacob is a relatively poor Native American half orphan with a wheelchair bound father.

	Bella (human)	Edward (vampire)	Jacob (werewolf)
gender	female	male	
'biological' relation	prey	predators (dangerous)	
	weak, clumsy cannot control herself	superhuman powers (protectors) have to control themselves (dangerous to humans)	
physical appearance	aging	static	shape-shifting
		cold	hot
		hard	soft
		pale (Caucasian)	tanned (Native American)
character		undead	alive
		intellectual	physical
		brooding loner	sociable sunny boy
socioeconomic status	working class	upper middle class	poor
family structure	broken family	model family	motherless
	only child	siblings	only child
status of the father	chief of police	doctor	handicapped father

Table 1: a first draft of how the protagonists are characterized in opposition to each other

The Cullens as a model family represent the norm, being the good guys in the story and the only ones really able to protect the female protagonist. The pack of werewolves constitutes an analog social unit but cannot welcome Bella to fully be part of it because she does not have the genetic disposition to become a shape shifter. Furthermore, as the example of another werewolf-human relationship shows, werewolves always are at risk to hurt non-werewolves – just as the vampires are always a latent danger to humans. As representatives of maleness, both Edward and Jacob seem to have a natural disposition to aggression or physical violence. Bella's only chance to be saved with one of them is assimilation which is only possible with Edward's kind, enforcing the normative power of the Cullens.

However, not all 'Twilight-vampires' represent the norm: There are nomadic vampires who feed upon the blood of humans. They are very much like the traditional vampires described above. In the films they are visually contrasted to the Cullens by having red eyes (the Cullens have golden eyes due to their 'vegetarian' diet) and by their clothing. The Cullens are dressed in designer clothes whereas the three nomads appear like leftover hippies and rockers, barefoot and in loose fitting garment. Hippies and vampires have one thing in common: They both are embodiments of rebellion. With their unconventional bond (two men and one woman), their original predatory lifestyle and thus their fluidity in gender and sexuality, they represent the enemy in *The Twilight Saga*. Consequently they are all killed in the course of the story.⁷

To conclude, I would like to return to the question that is to be answered by the analysis of the material of *The Twilight Saga*: What is the message of the story in terms of gender and sexuality? The saga is no exception to mainstream productions presenting gender as a binary category organized in heterosexual relationships. Women and men fall in love with each other – anything deviating to this natural law is doomed. One is not supposed to stay alone nor to have sexual and/or love relationships other than marriage. The most disturbing messages, however, are related to the nature of the relationship between women and men: It is structured as a hierarchy, men being superior over women and men having a natural disposition to violence towards women. I would like to give one final example to underline this conclusion: When Bella, still human, wakes up after their wedding night, covered with bruises, she finds Edward devastated because of the violence of their first intercourse. *She* tries to comfort *him*: "I'm not sorry, Edward. I'm... I can't even tell you. I'm so happy. That doesn't cover it. Don't be angry. Don't." (2009/2008, 82). The situation strongly bears the notion of the vicious circle of domestic violence: the violator in remorse and the victim ready to forgive, even begging for forgiveness herself. Another disturbing message of *The Twilight Saga* for girls is embedded in Bella's metamorphosis: As a human girl she is clumsy and weak – only when she assimilates to Edward's species (when she becomes a vampire herself) she becomes equally strong and independent. Translated to the reality of the audience this would

mean that in order to be together with the man she loves a woman has to leave her world behind and enter his.

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- 1 *Twilight* (Meyer 2009/2005), *New Moon* (Meyer 2009/2006), *Eclipse* (Meyer 2009/2007), and *Breaking Dawn* (Meyer 2009/2008)
 - 2 *Midnight Sun* (Meyer 2008a)
 - 3 *Twilight* (Hardwicke 2008), *New Moon* (Weitz 2009)
 - 4 Both novel series have been put into TV series: *The Vampire Diaries* are published under the same title (Williamson & Plec 2009) and *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* are now known as *True Blood* (Ball 2008).
 - 5 Technically, Jacob and his kind are shape-shifters because they can change their form anytime, whereas in most myths on werewolves they only turn at full moon.
 - 6 Again, assuming that Meyer used *The Southern Vampire Mysteries/True Blood* and *The Vampire Diaries* as hypotexts, she chose to contrast fragile Bella to the female protagonists Sookie Stackhouse and Elena Gilbert who are displayed as strong, at times even powerful women who stand up to their male counterparts and other characters supposedly superior to them.
 - 7 In contrast, productions like *True Blood* or the Swedish production *Låt den rätte komma in* (*Let the right one in*, Alfredson 2008) stresses the queerness of the vampire.

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