AN ANALYSIS OF STEPHENIE MEYER'S TWILIGHT NOVELS AS MODERN LITERARY FAIRY-TALES

Ergasheva Nilufar Baxodir qizi,
Researcher of Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages
Telephone number:+998997784877
Ergashevanilufar030@gmail.com

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.

Key words:. *Stephanie Meyer, Twilight, fairy tale, folklore, structuralism*

Jens Tismar set down the principles for a definition of the genre: firstly, it can be differentiated from the oral folk tale 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". 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".

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 102 Shiri Rosenberg 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. 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". 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 folk tales 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".

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.

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" 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.

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. 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 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 vampires) 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 pact 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: "and then we continued blissfully into this small but perfect piece of our forever". 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.

Conclusion

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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