

# Exploring Gender in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* (2005) through the Lens of *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949)

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## Abstract

This article examines gender roles and relations in the young adult novel *Twilight* (2005) by Stephenie Meyer, utilizing the structuralist anthropological theory of the exchange of women as the basis of kinship introduced by Claude Lévi-Strauss in 1949. This theory with regards to its implications about gender is first analyzed through a feminist perspective and then applied to *Twilight*, focusing primarily on the protagonist and her love interest. Finding that what is presented in the novel in terms of gender is almost analogous to the Lévi-Strauss's ideas, this article argues that Meyer perpetuates archaic hetero-patriarchal gender relations in her work. This conclusion is given weight by framing it through Judith Butler's theory about the repetitive nature of gender performance.

## Keywords

*Twilight* – Feminist Studies – Gender Studies – Young Adult Fiction

## Introduction

When talking about contemporary young adult literature, no book series is as inescapable as Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight Saga*. The saga, consisting of *Twilight* (2005), *New Moon* (2006), *Eclipse* (2007) and *Breaking Dawn* (2008), has sold over 100 million copies worldwide and has been adapted into a movie franchise spanning five films which made \$3,3 billion in total (Cain). While *Twilight* is more infamous than famous, having for instance inspired the phrase "still a better love story than *Twilight*," its influence and popularity are undeniable. *Twilight* and its sequels tell the story of 17-year-old Isabella "Bella" Swan, who moves from sunny Phoenix, Arizona to her self-imposed exile in gloomy Forks, Washington. Here, she lives with her father while her mother travels with her new husband, the coach of a minor league baseball team. In Forks, Bella meets the Cullen family (which consists of Carlisle and Esme as the quasi parents, and Rosalie, Emmett, Edward, Alice, and Jasper as the adopted children) and quickly falls in love with their youngest member Edward Cullen. The Cullens are vampires with superhuman strength, though Meyer's vampires eschew several popular vampire tropes: they do not burn in the sun (their hardened skin sparkles like diamonds instead), they do not sleep at all, and a wooden stake is not enough to kill them. Some of them even have special powers, such as Edward, who can read minds, and Alice, who has the

gift of clairvoyance. The Cullens live a different lifestyle from the majority of vampires because they do not drink human blood. They live on a strict diet of animal blood, and refer to themselves as “vegetarians” as an inside joke (Meyer 164). The main plot of the first novel follows the rapid blossoming of Bella’s relationship to Edward and culminates in her being severely wounded and almost turned into a vampire by an evil vampire who becomes obsessed with hunting her. In the end, she is rescued by Edward and the rest of the Cullen clan – just in time to attend the junior prom in the epilogue.

The aim of this article is to examine one of the most frequently criticized aspects of *Twilight*: its strict and outdated representation of gender roles. I will draw on the anthropological theory of the exchange of women as the driving force of kinship that Claude Lévi-Strauss put forward in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949). Despite the fact that this book was published almost 70 years ago, Lévi-Strauss’s central arguments can be found in *Twilight*, as I will elaborate in the next section. I will first focus on analyzing the dynamics of Bella and Edward’s relationship and then on finding instances of exchange, both with Bella and other female characters as the objects of exchange. Creating a link between the presentation of gender in *Twilight* and Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990), the final section briefly examines what vampires can represent in literature as opposed to their use in *Twilight*. This then leads into a brief discussion of why a feminist critique of contemporary young adult literature matters.

### *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949)

In his 1949 survey of kinship, published as *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté* (*The Elementary Structures of Kinship*), structuralist anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss claims that the system of kinship across cultures is based on one cardinal principle: the exchange of women. Going even further to establish a link between language and exchange, Lévi-Strauss supposes that “the emergence of the symbolic thought must have required that women, like words, should be exchanged” (*Kinship* 496). This principle of kinship pertains to marriage first and foremost as its fundamental basis and is universally applicable to many systems of marriage (480). Serving as the driving forces behind the exchange of women between patrilineal clans are the incest taboo and the rules of exogamy. The incest taboo, or “the prohibition of the sexual use of a daughter or a sister,” is said to enforce the behavior of a man giving his daughter to another man in order to secure a right to the daughter or sister of another man (51), while the rules of exogamy simply refer to the rules compelling marriage outside the immediate group. Seeing as Lévi-Strauss talks about sisters and daughters, the immediate group here is assumed to be the immediate family. In addition to establishing kinship, he assigns a certain social value to the exchange of women, namely to “provide means of binding men together” (*Structural Anthropology* 480), the homoerotic undertones of which seem to be unintentional.

However, kinship does not only apply to marriage. Different examples of kinship and of exchange can be found in a variety of human interactions. Cultural anthropologist Gayle Rubin summarizes that “[t]he exchange of goods and services, production and distribution [...] ritual and ceremony all takes places within the organizational structure of kinship” (170). In *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Lévi-Strauss gives several examples of exchange and reciprocity outside the context of marriage, ranging from the exchange of non-utilitarian objects such as painted bowls between Native Alaskans to Christmas gifts in Northern American society, or the act of sharing wine when seated next to a stranger in close proximity for an extended period, for instance at a restaurant (cf. 57-59). Once again drawing on Rubin, the pervasiveness of kinship and exchange appears rather immense, which “has led many anthropologists to consider its invention [...] to

have been the development which decidedly marked the discontinuity between semi-hominids and humans” (170). Therefore, considering the rules of the exchange of women and of kinship is relevant when analyzing any type of human relations.

## The Implications of Exchange

More relevant for this article than kinship or exchange themselves are their implications, specifically concerning the status of women and what these social principles say about gender. Lévi-Strauss himself appears to have been slightly troubled by this, since one of the final chapters of *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* concludes with a short paragraph mentioning that “each woman preserves a particular value arising from her talent before and after marriage,” as well as praising the “affective richness, ardour and mystery” of heteronormative relations between the sexes (496). This sense of attempted appeasement appears again in *Structural Anthropology* (first published as *Anthropologie structurale* in 1958), where Lévi-Strauss ostensibly concedes that “it may be disturbing to some to have women conceived as mere parts of a meaningful system,” and that women, unlike words, are not reduced to symbols within the structure of exchange (61). In spite of this, Lévi-Strauss does not reach the essence of the trouble of kinship systems, as they both create and naturalize a theory of oppression. Saying that “in human society, it is the men who exchange the women, and not vice versa” (47), implies that men are to be the agent enacting the exchange as well as the beneficiaries, while women – as the gift that is given – appear to not have a say in the exchange, and have no rights to themselves on the whole (Rubin 177). In linking the emergence of language and culture to the exchange of women, Lévi-Strauss suggests that “the world historical defeat of women occurred with the origin of culture and is a prerequisite of culture” (Rubin 176). Seeing as Lévi-Strauss does not confer the agency to women, it can be said that the origin of culture, according to him, is based not only on the defeat of women but also on the suppression of their desires and their personhood. As Judith Butler writes, “[t]he naturalization of both heterosexuality and masculine agency are discursive constructions nowhere accounted for [...] within this founding structuralist frame” (58).

In assuming heterosexuality and a lack of female agency as the status quo, Lévi-Strauss also fails to question the notion of gender at all. The apparatus of exchange is one which creates what ‘woman’ means within its system and this meaning is related to oppression. Despite asserting that women keep their talent before and after marriage, according to him, they only seem to exist in relation to men. Rubin writes that “[a] woman is a human. She only becomes a domestic, a wife, a chattel, a playboy bunny [...] in certain relations” (158). However, based on Lévi-Strauss’s concept of gender the first part of Rubin’s quotation does not apply as women’s existence is based only on their relation to men. They are sisters, daughters, or mothers, not simply subjects on their own. The underlying notion of this is that there can only be the categories of men and women as “in human society a man must obtain a woman from another man who gives him a daughter or a sister” (Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* 46). The category ‘woman’ or ‘female’ in Lévi-Strauss’s system is defined by a lack of identity and agency, seeing how “the bride functions as a relation term between groups of men; she does not have an identity and neither does she exchange one identity from another” (Butler 52). ‘Man’ is then categorized by having an identity and by being a subject. There is no space for any concept of gender differing from the presented binary opposites of man and woman within Lévi-Strauss’s structure of kinship seeing as women are not granted an identity. There cannot be a spectrum if the only ends of it are something and nothing. Women are

the “prey of men” (Rubin 158) within a system which simultaneously denies their right to an identity while being considered as a necessary prerequisite for culture.

As a germinal text in the field of gender studies, Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* serves as the link between the concept of gender present in *Twilight* and *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Butler’s analysis of the structuralist ideas of sex and gender in Lévi-Strauss’s work as “regulatory fictions that consolidate and naturalize the convergent power regimes of masculine and heterosexist oppression” (46) provides the framework for the following analysis. Their idea of gender as a repetitive performance will be introduced in the last chapter as a crucial factor to why a feminist critique of media such as *Twilight* is important.

## The Lion and the Lamb

*“And so the lion fell in love with lamb ...” he murmured.  
I looked away, hiding my eyes as I thrilled to the word.  
“What a stupid lamb,” I sighed.  
“What a sick, masochistic lion.”  
– Meyer, Twilight 240*

Although it might seem far-fetched to apply an anthropological theory from the 1950s to a young adult novel published in 2005, the way gender relations are portrayed in *Twilight* features numerous similarities to the conclusions drawn from Lévi-Strauss’s structures of kinship. This chapter aims to look at the relationship between the titular Lion and Lamb, namely the first-person narrator and protagonist Bella Swan and her vampire boyfriend Edward Cullen, focusing mainly on Bella.

What is most striking in Bella and Edward’s relationship is the overall power imbalance and Bella’s lack of agency. In one of *Twilight*’s iconic scenes, Edward and Bella describe their budding relationship in the following way: “‘And so the lion fell in love with a lamb ...,’ he murmured. ‘What a stupid lamb,’ I sighed. ‘What a sick, masochistic lion’” (Meyer, *Twilight* 240). This perfectly encapsulates their relationship, as Edward, not unlike a lion in direct confrontation with a lamb, is portrayed as superior to Bella in every way. Hanging on to the lion comparison, the imbalance of physical power and Edward’s willingness to exert it upon Bella is startling. The very first depiction of this is when Bella faints at the thought of seeing her classmate’s blood during blood type identification in biology class. Bella is taken to the school nurse’s office by another classmate, only for Edward to find her and lift her up despite Bella yelling “Put me down!” (83). An even more salient example of Edward using his vampiric super strength on Bella follows a few pages later, still a part of the same scene. When Bella tries to go to her own car to drive home, Edward is instead “towing [her] toward his car, pulling [her] by [her] jacket” (89). Bella even remarks how Edward would have most likely dragged her back had she tried to resist (89). Moments like this do not occur in isolation. Later in the novel, Bella describes how Edward’s hands were like shackles around her wrists and when carrying her to safety, Edward tosses her onto the backseat and even orders his older, stronger brother to hold her in place (264, 333). Edward’s use of force is justified by the plot of the novel itself, for instance when he uses it to save Bella from being crushed by a car (48). Just as men in Lévi-Strauss’s structures of kinship, Edward is granted agency both over himself as well as Bella because she is not able to defend herself from his supernatural strength. Edward’s “enormous physical strength not only signifies the supernatural, but also an ideology of hyper masculinity” (Shachar 157). The text appears to imply that Bella is only able to survive the world

due to Edward's preternatural strength. The frequent use of language in relation to anger in order to describe Edward supports this. After rescuing Bella from the potential assault, she describes his voice as furious, noting that "his expression was murderous again," his eyes blazing, and "the fury was plain on his face" (Meyer, *Twilight* 140-41). Just like the men in Lévi-Strauss's system of exchange, Edward is a predator, not only because he is a vampire and Bella his natural prey, but also because of how their dynamic is presented.

Edward stripping Bella of her agency and controlling her behavior is not only evident in terms of physical force as he often decides things in her stead or orders her to do something, only for the story to prove him right. After saving her from an attempted sexual assault by a group of men, Edward takes Bella to a restaurant, where he orders her to drink. "Obediently" taking a sip, Bella suddenly realizes that she is genuinely thirsty (147). Later in the novel, when Bella wakes up in the hospital after being attacked by the evil vampire James, she notices that she is in pain, her "ribs were throbbing" when she tries to take a deep breath (410). Edward calls for the nurse to administer pain medication to Bella despite her protests: "He reached for the button. 'No!' He ignored me" (416).

Furthermore, Edward also denies Bella her privacy and is rewarded for it. On the evening of the attempted assault in Port Angeles, Edward stalks Bella by looking for her in other people's thoughts as well as secretly following her in his car (153). This is not the only instance of him violating Bella's privacy. When bringing her home after the 'lion and lamb' scene in the meadow, Bella realizes that Edward knows where she keeps her keys and this realization leads to him admitting that he has been climbing into Bella's bedroom every night since a few weeks after their first meeting to watch her sleeping (255-56). After an initial shocked reaction from Bella, this reveal is turned into a seemingly romantic moment with the sleepless vampire admitting that "if [he] could dream, it would all be about [her]" (257). In actuality, this revelation is deeply troubling when considering the fact that Edward has been intruding on and effectively eliminating Bella's privacy, in a way stripping her of rights to herself and her personhood. Not only that, Bella cannot even escape him in her unconscious state. In addition to being physically present while she sleeps, he also constantly appears in her dreams, illustrating Bella's dependence on him (Hawes 168).

Edward is not only in control of Bella's physical well-being but her happiness as well. Taking her to the school prom in the epilogue of the novel, turns out to be a positive experience for Bella despite her dislike for dancing (Meyer, *Twilight* 431). This, and Edward's use of physical force to save her, cause Bella to depend on Edward. Melissa Miller accurately summarizes the couple's dynamic: "Without the Sun, the Earth is annihilated. Without Edward, Bella is annihilated" (167). This lack of agency is similar to the way the exchange plays out for the woman as gift according to Lévi-Strauss.

Another conclusion that Butler draws from Lévi-Strauss is that women "reflect masculine identity through being the site of its absence" (52) within the system of exchange, which can also be seen in Bella and Edward's dynamic. In her internal monologue, Bella is portrayed by what she is characteristically not, most often in relation to Edward. The most surface level illustration of this lies in Bella and Edward's appearances. The very first mention of Bella's appearance describes her as what she is not, namely a "tan, sporty, blond—a volleyball player, or a cheerleader" (Meyer, *Twilight* 9). Instead, Bella is both described as and describes herself as having a "pallid reflection" with white skin with no color (9). Additionally, Bella is extremely clumsy, lacking the "necessary hand-eye coordination to play sports without humiliating [herself]—and harming both [herself] and anyone too close" (9). Bella is portrayed as not elegant, as lacking coordination and not beautiful according to her own beauty standards. Edward, however, stands in direct contrast to this



as he is written to be everything Bella is not. Due to the absence of blood circulating through their veins, Edward and the rest of the Cullens are extremely pale, more so than Bella. Nevertheless, Bella frequently remarks on their beauty, especially Edward's, describing him as "pale [and] dreamlike in his beauty" (255). Through Bella's thoroughly described lack of coordination, the grace and elegance of Edward's movements appear exemplary. One occasion of this is when Bella describes Edward's exit from their biology classroom as swift and, more importantly, graceful (43).

Furthermore, another important aspect is that Bella seems to define her appearance through the male gaze or seems to draw her validation from it, which is only reinforced when Edward's reply to her referring to herself as ordinary is to tell her that she "didn't hear what every human male in [their] school was thinking on her first day" (184). Consequently, it is clear she has "internalized such a gaze as a form of self-criticism" (Shachar 151). This unequal dynamic goes beyond just Bella and Edward's physical qualities. Bella summarizes this rather accurately: "I'm absolutely ordinary – well except for the bad things .... And look at you" (Meyer, *Twilight* 184). In comparison to Edward, who had almost ninety years to study many different fields and get to know the world, Bella is rendered inferior just by virtue of being a 17-year-old human girl and is once again characterized through what she is not. Her non-existent sense of self-preservation in relation to Edward is epitomized when she is "filled with compassion for Edward's suffering [...] as he confessed his craving to take [her] life" (238). Bella does not appear to truly consider the danger her relationship with Edward poses on her life and, instead of worrying for herself and her identity being endangered by him, she feels compassion.

The exchange of women within the kinship system of Lévi-Strauss is, as previously stated, based not only on the denial of the women's identity but also on a suppression of female (sexual) desire. Again, this is also true for Edward and Bella's relationship, with Edward serving as the oppressor. During their first kiss, Bella is overwhelmed by her desire for Edward. She details that "blood boiled under [her] skin, burned in [her] lips," but this is immediately blocked by Edward who "turns to unresponsive stone" and pushes her back with "irresistible force" (247). This is by far not the only instance of Edward policing and blocking Bella's desire as when they kiss a second time, Bella's arms reach out to wrap around Edward's neck which elicits a similar reaction from him (317). It seems that in order for Bella and Edward's relationship to function, Bella must suppress her own desires and be brought back to reason by Edward. She internalizes this very quickly and goes on to ignore what she wants and to police her own behavior in order not to impose on Edward, describing it as being "good for him" (269). Edward's "restraint indicates not only his ability to dominate his relationship with Bella, but also implies that masculine strength is needed to restrain the wild feminine" (Donnelly 181). There is no space for any other version of this dynamic or any way for Bella to express her sexuality as a woman.

## The Exchange of Bella

Having identified the ways in which the relationship of the protagonist and the main love interest reflects the anti-feminist implications of Claude Lévi-Strauss's structures of kinship, this chapter aims to analyze the instances in which exchange takes place with Bella as the gift or the object – albeit not within the context of marriage.

The most obvious instance of such an exchange is the climax of *Twilight*. The vampire James, who considers himself a hunter and dedicates his un-life to the pursuit of his prey, becomes obsessed with tracking Bella after encountering her and the Cullens. Her humanity is revealed to him due to an unfortunate gust of wind, with Edward's possessiveness of her stoking the fire (Meyer, *Twilight* 331). Bella flees Forks and returns to Phoenix along with Edward's siblings Alice

and Jasper, but this proves futile, as James tracks them there despite the other Cullens's attempt to find and then kill him. After staying hidden at a hotel for a few days, James manages to contact Bella and lures her to him by using a recording of her mother's voice on an old home video as bait (387). A confrontation ensues wherein it is made apparent that Bella is only a means to an end for James whose real desire is to fight Edward. During their brief conversation before he attacks Bella and wounds her severely, James is only interested in whether Edward plans to avenge Bella, questioning her further when she admits that she has asked Edward to refrain from it (388). "It was all for him, of course," James outright admits (390). In terms of the kinship system, James wants a connection to Edward, using Bella as the object of exchange. What is most remarkable about this is that Bella is completely willing to give her life to this exchange, quite similar to the lack of female identity and agency in the kinship system presented by Lévi-Strauss. The very preface of the novel, which follows the Bible quote about the lion and the lamb, hints at this with Bella stating that "surely, it was a good way to die, in the place of someone else, someone I loved" (1). This is then taken up again when Bella is on her way to meet James: "I had no choices now but one: to go to the mirrored room and die" (375). It is soon revealed that Bella does not have to sacrifice herself to save her mother, but she is nonetheless the object of exchange between Edward and James, being willing to give up her life for love. Miller reasons that "[b]ecause the Bella/Edward relationship is presented as fated [...] we permit Bella to respond in ways that would concern us if we saw it manifested in others close to us. We condone her continued disregard for her own personal safety" (171).

Another major conflict that spans the series – although it is only foreshadowed in *Twilight* – centers Bella as the object of exchange. The Cullens are not the only supernatural inhabitants of the area surrounding Forks. There is also the Quileute tribe, which is a Native American Tribe whose culture Meyer appropriates and changes in a highly racist fashion to consist of people who possess the ability to shift into wolves (Wilson 195). Bella only discovers their supernatural powers in the second book, but the dynamic between the Cullens and the Quileutes is revealed to her when she meets Jacob Black, the son of her father's friend Billy Black, on a beach that is located on the reservation (Meyer, *Twilight* 106). Jacob tells Bella that the Quileute are said to descend from wolves and that they have one mortal enemy: "the cold ones" which is their term for vampires. The only "cold ones" who are not immediate enemies of the Quileutes are the Cullens who settled on a truce, which would be violated if the Cullens stepped onto reservation territory or attacked another human (107-8). Due to her relationship to Edward and her family's friendship with the Blacks, Bella is caught in the middle of this conflict of patrilineal clans without knowing why, at least in the first novel, *Twilight*. Bella's status as the object that both the Quileutes and the Cullens want to keep, is hinted at when Billy warns Bella to stay away from the Cullens, telling her she should not "do what [she] is doing," i.e., dating Edward and being in close contact with his vampire family (308). When Bella returns from Phoenix, injured due to an incident that appears to be linked to the Cullens, Billy is worried about Bella and sends his son to tell her to end her relationship with Edward. Jacob emphasizes this by repeating Billy's words "[w]e will be watching," implying that the whole Quileute tribe is involved and marking Bella's part as the object in the exchange and in the conflict between two clans (428).

One other instance of exchange is interesting to examine because it echoes the main form of exchange of women that is part of Lévi-Strauss's structures of kinship, namely marriage. When Edward first meets Bella's father Charlie, the two seem to bond after one crucial interaction: Charlie tells Edward to "take care of [his] girl," to which Edward replies "[s]he'll be safe with me, I promise, sir" (Meyer, *Twilight* 313). Afterwards, Bella narrates that they both laugh, a clear indication

of a bond between the two having been formed (313). This exchange closely resembles the tradition of the father – or whomever is available to step in as patriarch – giving away the bride at the altar, the recipient of her, the gift, being the groom. This exchange crystallizes the bond that is then established between the two clans, and a bond is therefore also established between Charlie and Edward. Just like the bride is given away and is not walking along the aisle by herself to join her groom, Bella meekly protests this interaction by groaning but is ignored by the two men, essentially letting herself and her safety be in the hands of her father and then be given to Edward without so much as a “I can take care of myself, Dad” thrown in for good measure (313). Although this is not a central moment in the plot of the novel, it is the purest incarnation of the system of kinship and the exchange of women, as detailed by Lévi-Strauss.

## Exchange within the Cullens

As Edward’s clan is the only family other than Bella’s own family whose dynamics are described in the novel, it is worth taking a brief look at parallels to the structures Lévi-Strauss discusses in *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, and examine how the characterization of the women of the Cullen clan relate to what Lévi-Strauss’s theory implies for women. The character Esme, Edward’s adoptive mother, is a clear example Lévi-Strauss’s theory as her only defining character trait is that of motherhood. When Bella first meets Esme, she describes her as having “pale, beautiful features” and a “heart-shaped face [with] [...] billows of soft, caramel-colored hair,” and – perhaps most noteworthy – a body that is “less angular, more rounded than the others” (Meyer, *Twilight* 282). It is abundantly clear that Esme’s appearance is as motherly as possible, due to the emphasis on her softness and roundness. Her personality is much the same, especially because the only thing known about her is motherhood. Despite not being the Cullen “children’s” biological mother, she treats them as if they were her biological children, stating “[w]ell, I do think of them as my children in most ways. I could never get over my mothering instincts” (321). She then adds that she committed suicide after losing her first and only child which led to her being found and turned into a vampire by Carlisle (321). In life and in her un-life, Esme “retains her core sense of herself as a mother” (Kane 111) and as it is her only defining trait throughout the book, for she exists only in relation with no true identity of her own<sup>8</sup> with Carlisle “[denying] her both agency and choice” by turning her (Torkelson 217). Esme’s identity is thus always tied to other people: the child without whom her life is so meaningless that she takes her own life, and then Carlisle who claims her, and the Cullen ‘children’ she adopts. It seems that even death or un-life is not an escape from the system of exchange.

Moreover, Esme is not the only Cullen woman who can be analyzed through the lens of the anthropological system brought forward by Lévi-Strauss. The purpose of Rosalie’s entire un-life is based on the premise of exchange. In the same chapter where Bella is introduced to Edward’s “parents,” he tells her the story of how each family member was brought into the Cullen clan. The Cullen patriarch Carlisle had sired Rosalie “hoping she would be to [Edward] what Esme was to him,” which means that Rosalie was created to be a gift for Edward (Meyer, *Twilight* 252). Although Rosalie later chooses Emmett as her own partner, this does not negate the fact that her existence in the vampire clan was originally based on her serving as a gift from Carlisle to Edward in order to ensure that Edward can properly adhere to the hetero-patriarchal values they share. The most

<sup>8</sup> What is most worrying about this, though it is beyond the scope of this article, is the fact that Esme is the direct opposite of Bella’s own mother, who does not adhere to the standards of a traditional family by being divorced for example. Bella’s mother is punished by the story Bella describes her as “erratic [and] harebrained” (Meyer, *Twilight* 4), which implies that following Esme’s model is the ideal for any woman.



insidious aspect of Rosalie's creation as a gift for Edward is made apparent in the third novel of the series, when Rosalie tells Bella what led her to end her mortal life: she was first raped and then mortally wounded by her own fiancé and his friends (Meyer, *Eclipse* 143). After her consent is violated by this sexual assault, it is again breached when Carlisle turns her both into a vampire and into an object of exchange who, just as the women in the structuralist critical exchange, has no agency in the matter. Though Rosalie is shown to be unhappy with the circumstances of her immortal life, Carlisle, the kind and gentle patriarch, is still written as someone who knowingly turned a rape victim into a gift for his son (Meyer, *Twilight* 286).

### *Twilight and Gender Trouble*

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler sets out to examine and dismantle many different concepts of how gender is created, and comes to the conclusion that both biological sex and gender are constructed and reinforced through repetitive performances. According to Butler, "the subject is not determined by the rules through which it is generated because signification is not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition that both conceals and reinforces its rules," and these rules are said to govern along the principles of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality (198). These performative practices are observed, internalized and then repeated which leads them to be naturalized, just as the very concept of sex, as fact. The only solution Butler sees for this cyclical nature of these repetitive performances to be broken is to engage in more subversive acts of repetition. The critical task is to "repeat and, through radical proliferation of gender, to displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself" which would then lead to a world in which "a new configuration of politics" could emerge that would no longer be based on fixed identities (203). Butler ends their book with an open-ended question: "What other local strategies for engaging the 'unnatural' might lead to the denaturalization of gender itself?" (203). I would argue that writing and reading *Twilight* – at least without engaging critically with the book – is the exact answer of what not to do in order to denaturalize gender.

Due to its immense popularity, it is fair to consider the *Twilight* saga a piece of literature that contributes to mass culture. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall says that "we give things meaning by how we represent them" and that "culture [...] permeates all of society" (3). The dominant reading of those pieces of mass media where meaning is being represented is said to be assumed as true, though the nuance may depend on the audiences' own beliefs (Modleski xi). What is being represented and given meaning in *Twilight* is a hetero-patriarchal system of gender roles as shown in the previous chapters. The novel creates a world wherein any character straying from these norms is punished, for example Bella's father who is still unhappy and unfulfilled after his divorce from Bella's mother, and Bella's mother who is almost unfit to care for her daughter, reversing the parent-child dynamic (Meyer, *Twilight* 4, 10). Any hint at not exhibiting heterosexual desire is deemed as a violation, most saliently summarized when Edward tells Bella that his adoptive mother thought "there was something missing from his essential makeup" when he did not show interest in finding a female mate before he met Bella (286). The women in *Twilight* that fit into the gender hierarchy are soft and beautiful, unlike for example James's mate Victoria, who is described as wild and feline (329), her alienness apparent. Considering *Twilight's* target audience, it is not far-fetched to think that young readers without the tools to read critically might accept *Twilight's* messages as gospel and "take on Meyer's ideals of heteronormative patriarchal dominance" during a critical phase in the development of their own gender identity and sexuality (Donnelly 183). Instead of

creating a space in which its young teen audiences could explore subversive acts and perhaps question systems of exchange they might find themselves a part of, *Twilight* reinforces the opposite

What is most disheartening about this is the potential of what could have been when writing a novel about vampires. As supernatural creatures, they exist on the fringes of society: they are “invaders of the normal” who can be “everything we are, while at the same time they are fearful reminders of the infinite things we are not” (Auerbach 6). Nina Auerbach goes on to say that vampires matter because “when properly understood, they make us see that our lives are implicated in theirs” (9). One of the uses of vampires in literature is an allegory for queerness. Not in the sense that queer people are monsters but rather because vampires are the ‘Other’ due to their nature. Vampires disrupt the natural order, as they are neither alive nor dead, and neither entirely divorced from humanity nor regular humans, just as “queer disrupts the order by evoking an identity that refuses and exceeds the binary system” (Kane 109). A book about vampires, even one intended for a teen audience, can very well be used to explore practices of subversive performative acts and to engage with the ‘unnatural,’ seeing as they are already supernatural and exist beyond societal constraints.

## Conclusion

Stephenie Meyer’s novel *Twilight* presents a world in which hetero-patriarchal gender norms co-exist with vampires. This has become apparent through this article’s analysis of the novel’s female protagonist, the main relationship and other supporting female characters through the lens of the system of kinship introduced by Claude Lévi-Strauss. The exchange of women – which lies at the basis of the structuralist kinship – takes place with both Bella as the object as well as other women of the Cullen clan. Along with this, the novel is permeated by unsavory implications about female agency and identity, which are erased in both Lévi-Strauss’s kinship system and *Twilight*. The women in the novel appear to be at the mercy of the men, and every character straying from this norm is portrayed in a negative light. Additionally, Edward’s authority over Bella is proven as right because his dominating behavior constantly saves or benefits her. *Twilight* does not provide any alternative to this dynamic and there is no space provided for different gender norms. The same is true for female desire which is ignored (or even prohibited and policed) in both Lévi-Strauss’s work and the novel. When looking at the fact that *Twilight* was published 15 years after *Gender Trouble* and by a former student of literature nonetheless, it is unfortunate that none of its ideas can be found in the novel. Instead, it functions as the direct opposite of the ideas that Butler concludes their work with, serving repetitive performative actions to its primarily teen audience in Edward Cullen-sized bites.

## Author Biography

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