

Twilight, a Popular Culture Product

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Abstract

The purpose of the article is to identify the elements which created the success registered by Stephenie Meyer's Twilight series. Through text analysis, I have come to the conclusion that the main sources of this popularity are the the following three specific features of popular culture: 1) its conservative and repetitive nature, with a typical form, primary intertextuality; 2) its performative and ritual nature; and also 3) a particular relationship established between text and context and also the popular culture phenomenon.

Keywords

popular culture, intertextuality, conservative and repetitive nature, performative and ritual nature

In the last few years, the discussions about vampires became an issue that has fascinated readers worldwide. But not many people truly know what lies behind this international success. The vampires' representation in books, films, press articles and numerous television shows have made an emblem of the society in which we live.

These issues are causing vehement criticism and controversy in thousands of volumes concerning this subject, but few are those who have asked what the real reason for this change is. Even so, my purpose in this presentation is not to find the answer to this question, because this will be the topic of my future research, but by bringing to the forefront a precise case, I tend to think that we could at least partially elucidate this mystery.

In order to understand the context in which books like Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* became examples of this phenomenon, we must talk about *popular culture*.

Before the mid twentieth century *popular culture* was a peripheral area of the residual culture, covering everything that was rejected by the canons of the elite culture. The reinterpretation given to the term increased the importance of *popular culture* in relation with canons of the elite, so that *popular culture* has come to be understood as a paradigm of variable geometry, oscillating between extremes: large or small, overlapping or not.

It was Fiske who defined *popular culture* as a set of meanings and consumer behavior, produced by the audience in the media consumption culture, this being a reality built from a stock culture represented by the media culture, as an active manifestation of cultural industry products [4, 99]. *Popular culture* is the most interesting dimension to the study of media culture; it is a product of media culture that extends over a wide range of cultural practices.

Stephenie Meyer's books and films can be included in this category and interpreted as media products in which we can recognize *popular culture* clues. So far the first three books of the series have been filmed, and in the autumn of this year the second part of the fourth book known as *Breaking Dawn* is going to be released.

The media products that I have chosen for this analysis are characterized by the following three specific features of *popular culture*: 1) its *conservative and repetitive nature*, with a typical form, *primary intertextuality*; 2) its *performative and ritual nature*; and also 3) a particular *relationship established between text and context* [4, 105].

1) *Primary or horizontal intertextuality* is encountered especially in the sphere of television and enjoys a privileged position. It marks a structural and functional form of contamination between different media contexts submitted on the same channel. It can be said that the products support each other, establishing a sort of solidarity. Some of the theorists who have examined the concept of *intertextuality* are Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva. They have examined specific aspects of the concept, stressing the textuality can not be confused with the literary text, but it includes the text as productivity, the employment, the continuous structure, the tendency to use very broad and extensive (holistic) new concepts (<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/visualarts/r4100/inter.html>).

2) In the terms of the *performative and ritual nature of popular culture* the focus of these works is on the existence of supernatural beings with human forms, characters endowed with supernatural powers, the action being placed in the contemporary world, in a small town in Washington where the interference between the real and the supernatural world can be seen.

3) As regards the third feature, namely the *relationship between text and context*, it should be placed in the wider sphere of postmodernism. The media text has an interesting relationship with the context, both reflecting it and shaping it.

Regarding the first feature, the *repetitiveness and conservative nature of popular culture* we can say that the author has inserted her novels in the already known patterns, easily recognizable and accepted by the public. The author

starts by telling a story, normally a horror one, but which she turns into a contemporary love story.

The *repetitive* and *conservative nature* lies in the fact that, as Fiske noted, that there is a standardization, a stereotyping, a rather *formulaic nature*, a specific rapport built on the line of classic works of this type, starting from an initial situation, apparently calm, inserting text after the conflicting elements that create narrative suspense, to overcome differences and fight to protect the protagonists' love story together with a happy ending that caps the final novel in the series, titled *Breaking Dawn*. The series' novels are focused on *repetition* and *predictability*, leaving a smaller place for innovation. It relies on creating a predictable story.

And, because Edward, the main male character, is a creature of the forces of the darkness that would run counter to some ideal model of the hero, Stephenie Meyer gives him human characteristics as a result of her desire to create a pattern which meets the requirements, the moral values and the general expectations of the public. Thus, Edward, even if he is a vampire, belongs to the judiciary, he fights against crime, and he fights to overcome his circumstances. He doesn't want to become a monster which attacks human beings to consume their blood, his family being catalogued in the text as *vegetarian* because they consume only animal blood. He is an example of stoicism that resists to the physiological unbearable desire (thirst) of attacking Bella. Placed among the vampire characters, he has all the positive attributes of a hero, being characterized by courage, capacity of self-sacrifice, abstinence, moral values, being educated in the late nineteenth century, elegance, sophistication, not to mention the extraordinary natural beauty.

The author relies on predictable in order to retain audiences, using an established recipe that provides her writings a guaranteed success, through familiarity. *Popular culture* can afford little more than a well calculated transformation of the set patterns which relies on moderate variation, by recycling the material previously known. From this point of view, its *repetitive* and *conservative nature* is closely linked to its *performative* and *ritual nature*, where we should mention the rich mythology about vampires.

The vampire is one of the oldest popular myths, with links to many other legends and superstitions. It is a universal myth because it's not a specific to one cultural tradition. All these facts would indicate a mental representation of the myth, the necessary projection and dissemination, which has no representation from the most remote times in the collective mentality which can be regarded as one of the most ancient image we know. A simple look in the past reveals various vampire traits of many gods created by man. We can find all this information in the

legends and mythologies of the Greeks and Romans, as well as in the rest of Europe, Asia and Africa. Various regions of Africa have folkloric tales about beings with vampiric abilities: in West Africa the Ashanti people tell of the iron-toothed and tree-dwelling *asanbosam*, and the Ewe people of the *adze*, which can take the form of a firefly and hunts children. South Asia also developed other vampiric legends.

The vampire, one of the most revealing and fertile myths of our time, makes his first triumphant entry into the European literature in one of Byron's works, and has particularly after Bram Stoker's *Dracula* managed to be one of the most productive sites for media products. Through history numerous books were written and hundreds of films of these myths were made, the vampire characteristics becoming increasingly more complicated from one author to the other or from one director to another. After a period of stagnation of the vampire horror genre, Stephenie Meyer's writings and the stories of other contemporary authors have created a new wave of customers.

The vampire doesn't only inflict terror, but also admiration and envy because it is the possessor of supernatural powers, eternal youth and power to dominate people, to control their physical and mental exercise. The pressure to control and the fear of being controlled, which occur frequently in psychoanalysis, grow in importance if we try to understand not only the vampire myth, but his popularity among audiences of all ages.

Stephenie Meyer's vampires, even if they start from the vampire myths, are distinguished by a multitude of features already ascribed to vampires in the works of other authors in an original synthesis of her own. Thus, *Twilight* vampires have strong teeth rather than fangs, glow in the sunlight and will not burn, can survive on the blood of animals, not only on the human blood. The author herself stated that her vampires are different from other vampires, because she imagined them that way (Meyer, on her website <http://www.stepheniemeyer.com/twilightseries.html>). The recipe of success that the author used for the *Twilight* series is the struggle between good and evil, between the conformists to what it means to be a vampire (the Volturi clan) and the new type of vegetarians (the Cullens) the novels focusing on a beautiful love story. Stephenie Meyer's books are about life and love, with an intentional moral tinge, because of the author's desire to give positive role models to the teenagers of the contemporary society, not just examples of violence and sex.

But there is, as we saw earlier a psychoanalytic motivation that makes vampire stories to enjoy an enormous success. According to psychoanalysis and the

Freudian school, any dreams about vampires or other forms of the undead, are a metaphor for the fascination and fear mankind has with the concepts of death and the dead.

All human experiences of morbid dread signify the presence of repressed sexual and aggressive wishes, and in vampirism we see these repressed wishes becoming plainly visible. (http://vampires.monstrous.com/psychoanalysis_vampire.htm).

The first thing a Freudian will usually comment on in regards to a vampire story is how they are a metaphor for infantile and perverse sexuality. The Jungian interpretation of the vampire assumes that all humans have a vampire inside of them. What this means is that Jungian believe vampires are an intuitive concept to the human psyche. Something we understand in some way, shape or form, from the moment we exist into this world. Vampires reflect significant issues universal to all human life (http://vampires.monstrous.com/psychoanalysis_vampire.htm).

So we have a recipe for success: young characters, beautiful, with age-specific existential enigmas and typical everyday problems, placed in a real space of the society in which we live, all these elements inducing the audience to identify with the characters of the text. Placing these novels in the love story tradition has guaranteed the success of this media product. The interference with the fictional world of fabulous creatures, vampires and werewolves, only meets the collective fantasies of all ages, increasing the mystery which fascinates the readers.

A form of the *repetitive* and *conservative nature* of these novels or rather romances (according to Frye's definition) is their *intertextuality*, which can be found in all forms of culture. It is a feature of *popular culture*, which is able to invent even special forms of *intertextuality*. Thus, their intertextuality can be of three types: *primary* (horizontal), *secondary* (vertical) or *tertiary* (in the case of interference with daily life) [2, 153]. *Intertextuality* implies the ability of a text to make references to other texts. In *Twilight* we can talk about a *primary intertextuality*, which occupies a privileged position in television. It is a form of contamination between different structural and functional contexts submitted on the same channel.

The *Twilight* series and the films, created in full compliance with the model imposed by the author in the text emphasize the recognition of a preexisting model. The models of the *Twilight* series were: *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, which has served as a model for *Twilight*, the first novel of the author; the well known play, *Romeo and Juliet*, by William Shakespeare which served as a model for *New Moon*; *Wuthering Heights*, by Emily Bronte, which was the model

for *Eclipse*; and *A Midsummer's Night* which was the model for *Breaking Dawn*, the last novel of the series.

The major themes of the four novels include the ability to make appropriate choices and the free will of the characters. This way, the vampires of these books show that in life you can choose something different from what you stated at first sight.

No matter where you get in life or what you think you should do, you can always choose something else. There is always a different way (Meyer, on her website <http://www.stepheniemeyer.com/twilightseries.html>).

Regarding the *relationship between text and context*, we should stress that the moral and religious values of the author highly influenced her volumes. As a representative of the Mormon Church, Stephenie Meyer acknowledged that her work was influenced by a religious belief. Thus, her characters tend to look more carefully than usual where they come and where are they heading to, paying attention to every detail.

Although her work is based on a love story, the sexual abstinence and the purification of the soul are values that are identified as specific to her way of writing is directly influenced by her religious beliefs.

There will always be plenty of light in my stories (Meyer, on her website <http://www.stepheniemeyer.com/twilightseries.html>).

The need to provide a positive example in today's society urged her to write such novels. The author declared that the idea of this book came to her in a dream (cf Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Kubla Khan*, Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, Robert Browning, *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*) on 2 June 2003. Although she had little experience as a writer, she succeeded in only three months to turn that dream into reality. The first book was published in 2005. Based on the *Twilight* book, the story expanded in 2006 with *New Moon*, with *Eclipse* in 2007 and *Breaking Dawn* in 2008.

The books had a huge success, remaining on New York Times best-selling novels top for 143 weeks. At the end of 2008 the four novels were placed on the top four positions in the ranking of best selling books. The prevalence of these writings, the impressive number of fans and the author's popularity made the American writer to be often compared with J. K. Rowling and *Harry Potter*. Although adolescents and young people are the target of these novels, the books have managed to attract both boys and adults of both sexes.

The popularity of the books attracted the media's attention, which led to the production of the first films of the *Twilight* volume, which succeeded in a very

short period of time to become a true *popular culture* phenomenon. Fans began to wear their favorite characters' clothes, they began to write their own stories and post them on the internet, they created rock formations and Forks experienced an impressive economic growth due to the number of 8000 tourists per month. Another consequence of this phenomenon was that many restaurants and shops took the themes of these novels as a marketing strategy to increase sales.

Moreover, representatives of the most important locations mentioned in the text organized city tours including: La Push Beach, the hospital where Dr. Cullen was working and a house similar with the one of Bella Swan. The fans even gathered donations to renovate the high school and to preserve the original rustic appearance.

As regards the first three volumes of the series films, they have tried to be as accurate as possible with the books, even if the director said that it's important to distinguish the movie as a piece of art in its own right, he tried to preserve the story.

Stephenie Meyer has been involved in the project of the film in order to preserve the message which the author tried to transmit to the public. The collaboration was unusual, the director allowing her to intervene in the script. She struggled in particular for a certain cue to be used in the film: *so the lion fell in love with the lamb*, which became a leitmotif of the series worldwide. Despite the small differences, the line of the story has been strictly preserved. All these features have made *Twilight* a *popular culture* product, with extraordinary box success and an impressive number of fans, creating what has been called by literary and film critics a phenomenon comparable with that created by *Harry Potter*.

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