

**Fairy Tale Narratives & Notions of Gender**  
**in**  
**Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* Saga and E. L. James' *Fifty Shades* Trilogy**

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## Introduction

On October 5, 2005 the first book of the *Twilight* Saga by Stephenie Meyer was published in The United States. By August 2008, *New Moon*, *Eclipse* and *Breaking Dawn* had all been published and one of the greatest literary successes of all times was a fact. By October 2010, the *Twilight* Saga had sold in millions of copies and the series had gained hundreds of thousands of fans all over the world.<sup>1</sup> One of these fans was Erika Leonard James, who after having read the *Twilight* Saga in 2009 felt inspired to start writing online fan fiction. Her stories, based in large on the story of *Twilight*'s protagonists Bella Swan and Edward Cullen, were what would later become the material for the international success of her novel *Fifty Shades of Grey*. The trilogy was first published in 2011, and consists of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, *Fifty Shades Darker* and the final instalment called *Fifty Shades Freed*. Although E. L. James' work was originally based on the pristine love story depicted in *Twilight* Saga, the *Fifty Shades* Trilogy contains plenty of scenes of an explicit sexual nature. It revolves around the development of a romantic relationship between the protagonist Anastasia – or Ana, as she is called - Steele and her lover Christian Grey while dealing with the dominating Christian's preference for sadomasochistic eroticism and Ana's development of a sexual identity. The books are marketed and sold as adult romance or as part of the erotic novel genre, whereas the *Twilight* Saga has mainly been marketed as young adult and fantasy literature. The two series are printed worldwide and their immense popularity has been an important factor in the general surge in sales of literature within the same genres.

However, as the books raise questions on subjects such as gender roles, sadomasochism, abortion laws and sexual fantasies, they have also sparked an intense debate on censorship, feminism and a claimed liberation of female sexuality through the increasing popularity of the erotic novel. Whether the books explore adolescent development and liberate female sexuality through their depictions of sex – or lack thereof as in the *Twilight* Saga - is up for discussion. However, as both novels depict relationships where the woman is in a highly subordinate position and the man seemingly sets the terms, it could be argued that the novels promote conservative or

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<sup>1</sup> According to Publisher's Weekly, the *Twilight* Saga had sold in more than 116 million copies worldwide by October 2010.

even reactionary values. Why such a conventional literary concept would be as popular with modern women as it has proven to be is the question which was the starting point for this study. One reason for the novels' immense success could be Meyer's and James' successful attempts in creating novels that function as modern fairy tales. Several elements within the books can be traced to the fairy tale genre, such as the battle between good and evil, the protagonist's personal development, and the existence of magic. By investigating how the texts relate to the classic fairy tale, this essay argues that the *Twilight* Saga and the *Fifty Shades* Trilogy may have reached their immense popularity by following the literary pattern of a fairy tale narrative and in the process adhered to the often conventional gender roles depicted within the fairy tale genre.

### **The History of Fairy Tales or How the Glass Slipper Came to Rule the Kingdom**

The fairy tale is one of the most prolific genres in literary history and it has its origin in the ancient tradition of the oral folk tale. Folk tales are often defined as stories of a fantastic nature, spread by word of mouth, which contain elements of the supernatural and often carry an underlying message of warning and advice, portrayed with irony and plenty of wit. The definition of a folk tale alters slightly depending on which dictionary one chooses to consult. However, most available resources agree that folk tales are a part of an oral tradition, "a story that parents have passed on to their children through speech over many years" (*Cambridge Online dictionary*), or "a story originating in popular culture, typically passed on by word of mouth" (*Oxford Online dictionary*).

Although the history of folk tales can be traced back hundreds, maybe thousands of years, the fairy tale genre as a literary concept was extensively developed and characterised during its transition from an oral to a predominantly written form. In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, published works by Italian authors such as Giovanni Francesco Straparola and Giambattista Basile played an important role in the increasing popularity of the genre and would come to influence the writing of French authors like Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy and Charles Perrault at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* 13).

Throughout the late Middle Ages, the imposition of civil behaviour, moral codes and notions of gender roles through literature had a large effect on the fairy tale genre (8-9). Authors like Perrault wrote fairy tales much inspired by folk tales but with a narrative perspective that represented the morals of the bourgeois elite and not, as the folk tales did, the peasantry. Thus many published fairy tales became “manuals” for how young people should act and behave as well as being sources of amusement and entertainment (43).

Some of Perrault’s best known and loved stories such as *Red Riding Hood*, *Bluebeard* and *Puss in Boots* are tales which advocate a certain code of conduct, for men as well as for women (39-41). They suggest character traits such as patience, self-constraint and modesty in women, intelligence, strength and ambition in men. Today, these notions of gender can seem conservative, yet in his time Perrault was considered to be in favour of female authorship as well as “the necessity of assuming an enlightened moral attitude towards women” (Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick* 72). He did, however, also maintain that women’s intelligence and capabilities should be put to use primarily within the home or in social matters rather than elsewhere in society (72). This message, which today can be seen as one of female submission to a patriarchal structure, is explored in much of Perrault’s work.

Women writers, who were contemporaries with Perrault, also wrote stories adhering to his notions of gender. But while recognizing the conventions of their times, many female writers, such as d’Aulnoy, also used the fairy tale to question gender roles and the choices available to women in society at the time.<sup>2</sup> The bulk of fairy tales published in France during the 18<sup>th</sup> century were produced by women. However, the tales of these talented female writers have not the greatest influence on the canon of fairy tales as we know it today. Instead the focus has been on what Elizabeth Wanning Harries calls *compact fairy tales*, tales in which “carefully constructed simplicity works as an implicit guarantee of their traditional and authentic status” (*Twice upon a time* 17). Compact tales, in other words, are tales that due to their simplistic narrative pattern, predictable plots and regular opening lines of “Once upon a time...” create an illusion of a folkloristic and timeless message. The familiarity of the tales’ literary structure also satisfies a desire to be comforted by the well-known in the reader. Examples of compact

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<sup>2</sup> For a deeper analysis of some of d’Aulnoy’s work, see page 52-53 in Jack Zipe’s *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*.

fairy tales would be tales like Perrault's *Cinderella* and *Red Riding Hood*, written in a simplistic style which in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was much appreciated by the Grimm Brothers for its connection to oral storytelling and its romantic, nationalistic notion of inherited wisdom (24).

The opposite of this, Elizabeth Wanning Harries explains, is the *complex tale*, “[tales that] work to reveal the stories behind other stories, the unvoiced possibilities that tell a different tale” (17). Many of the complex fairy tales, produced by female authors in France in the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century, were tales based on the same folk tales that Perrault used but written in more elaborate and decorative language. The authors, writers of *contes de fées*, used a style which was inspired by conversations in the French upper class salons rather than the peasant oral tales and their tales were written for an adult audience. Their intricate plots often dealt with romance and the institution of marriage, and stressed the importance of natural love and tenderness. These tales were part of the discussion of the role and rights of women, “Querelle de femmes” which took place in various parts of French culture during the latter part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The tales often commented on social and political issues such as war and court society as well as love and gender relations (Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick* 68-70). However, as time went by and the concept of the “classic fairy tale” started to take shape, the complex tales gave way to the simplistic narratives which the compact tales favoured (69).

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, H. C. Andersen and the Brothers Grimm greatly influenced the fairy tale genre and helped to conceptualize the so called classic fairy tale, much through their prolific work and research. Like many earlier authors of fairy tales, the Brothers Grimm drew heavily on traditional oral stories as well as Medieval Latin manuscripts, adapting characters and plots to suit their audience (Ziolkowski 4). The tales of the Brothers Grimm became a part of what can be called the core of the fairy tale genre and through their immense popularity in Europe they played a significant part in the lives of both adults and children in the western world.

The sheer flexibility of the fairy tale genre and its many adaptations within popular media can be seen as one of the reasons behind the genre's survival through time. According to Ziolkowski, the elasticity of the fairy tale genre is indeed one of its greatest assets, lending it an ability to adapt to different interpretations and readings (9).

Walt Disney's success with motion pictures is a given proof that the form of the fairy tale indeed adapts easily to different modes of communication. It could be argued that with the arrival of Walt Disney's adaptations of fairy tales into motion pictures in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the fairy tale genre expanded and reached its position as an oral, written and visual form of popular culture.

Several re-written versions of the traditional fairy tale have emerged over the years, and there are a multitude of authors who have successfully managed to invert the classic tales so that they convey a different message than the compact tales. Jack Zipes states that:

Almost all the rewritings of the traditional fairy tales have a greater awareness of the complexities of sexuality and gender roles and have sought to explore traditional fairy tales with a social consciousness and awareness in keeping with and critical of our changing times. (*Why fairy Tales Stick* 103)

However, emerging manifestations of the "classic fairy tale", such as Hollywood's many rag-to-riches tales, as well as novels within the Harlequin series, still seem to carry the moral message of Perrault in terms of gender, one of female submission and male authority. You could argue that today, the idea of happy-ever-after equates to winning the man, the riches and hopefully an expanded (glass) shoe collection, or as Harries suggests, "Perrault's version has become ours" (34). To a great many, it is indeed the glass slipper and all that it entails that often functions as a symbol for the fairy tale genre rather than the long gone female tellers of fairy tales who once told a different story.<sup>3</sup>

## Defining a Fairy Tale

One of the reasons for the survival and success of the fairy tale genre, and one of the possible reasons behind the astounding success of the *Twilight* Saga and the *Fifty Shades* Trilogy is the familiarity of the narrative pattern and plots used in fairy tales. To describe the recognisable plots of fairy tales and why many of them stay in memory, Jack Zipes uses the expression *functions*, from Vladimir Propp's 1928 study, *The*

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<sup>3</sup> The (most likely very uncomfortable) glass slipper originates from Perrault's tale *Cendrillon* or *Cinderella*. In d'Aulnoy's *Finette Cendron*, the shoe is an elegant slipper made of velvet and embroidered with pearls (Harries 34). Perrault's glass slipper later re-appeared in the Walt Disney version of *Cinderella* which was released on 15 February, 1950 (Disney Insider). It is fair to say that the glass slipper has become one of the best known symbols of fairy tales in the public mind.

*Morphology of the Folk Tale*. He describes these functions as “[C]onstant components... that are the acts of a character and necessary for driving the action forward” (*Why Fairy Tales Stick* 49).

Elizabeth Wanning Harries argues that the narrative pattern can be seen as a sequence of different states, **stability, disruption, intervention** and **stability**, where the states form a frame for the tale (10). The concept suggests that a fairy tale starts with a seemingly stable environment where the protagonist is introduced to the reader. This state is followed by a disruption: a threat or an antagonist, or possibly an impending change in the life of the protagonist. The narrative then introduces the intervention, sometimes in the form of a saviour, but also, as Zipes suggests, in the form of advice from a fairy or a magical gift bestowed on the protagonist which solves the disruption or helps the protagonist to achieve his or her goals (*Why Fairy Tales Stick* 50). This is followed by a state of stability again which often mirrors the stability in the beginning but where characters have matured and developed through their adventures and hardships. The stable state at the end, perhaps the basis of the so called fairy tale ending, is often seen as more secure than the stability at the beginning of the tale, as the threat has been cleared and the protagonist has reached a new maturity.

Within the narrative frame, several literary elements can be used to identify a fairy tale. It is important to note that not all fairy tales abide by the narrative pattern outlined above or consist of concrete fairy tale traits. Some well-known classic fairy tales adhere to entirely different narrative structures, and as the canon of fairy tales has grown over time, the idea of what constitutes a classic fairy tale has diversified. But for the purpose of this essay, certain key elements within the fairy tale genre are referred to when analysing the primary source material. The key elements referred to are: The protagonist’s quest, a love story, the existence of magic and the battle between good and evil. Finally, the protagonist’s development and the moral message within the tales will be discussed in terms of gender.

Both Meyers and James have chosen a female protagonist for their novels and tell the story of a young woman who has just or is just about to enter a new phase in her life.<sup>4</sup> Natalie Wilson, author of *Seduced by Twilight: The Allure and Contradictory Messages of the Popular Saga*, states that female protagonists are common in tales such

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<sup>4</sup> Several characters as well as part of plot in *Fifty Shades of Grey* are based on those of the *Twilight* Saga.

as *Twilight* which deal with the subject of love. She further suggests that such protagonists are often ordinary, making them easy for readers to identify with (63). Bella Swan and Anastasia Steele are both young women who like many adolescent girls growing up in a society concerned with the perfection of looks and appearance, would describe themselves as absolutely ordinary. They both suffer from clumsiness which makes them self-conscious in social situations. The clumsiness and the plain looks have had the effect of making the girls shy, referring to themselves as “misfits”<sup>5</sup> (*T* 9 and *FSG* 5). Both protagonists have chosen to immerse themselves in their studies and their love of English literature. Whereas Ana interacts more with her social surroundings and has at least two dear friends at the beginning of the story, Bella has none apart from the close relationship she shares with her mother.

The reader first meets Bella just as she has decided to leave her home in the city of Phoenix to go to live with her father. At the beginning of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Anastasia is at the point of graduating from Washington State University Vancouver and is moving to Seattle with her best friend. These changes to the protagonists’ lives can be seen to contradict the aforementioned narrative pattern of stability. However, the **stability** in *Twilight* can be seen in Bella’s expectancy of things being the way they always have been in the town of Forks, where she was born and where her father still lives. Prior to meeting Edward everything is just as she expected it to be, her room looks the same, her father is the same as he has always been (*T* 8). Meeting and falling in love with Edward is a major change to the tedious life Bella was expecting when she moved to Forks. When she realises that Edward is in fact a vampire and when she gradually becomes a part of his supernatural world, it is the starting point of a chain of events that will eventually lead to Bella’s development into an adult, rather than being the adolescent she is at the beginning of the story.

The stability in the beginning of *Fifty Shades of Grey* can be seen in Ana’s resolution to shape her life according to her own goals. Her move to Seattle is a part of her plans for her own future and an indicator of Ana’s independence. Meeting Christian Grey and the profound emotional and physical effect he has on her is something that throws the inexperienced Ana completely off her course. As she and Christian become

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<sup>5</sup> The primary sources are hereon after referred to as: *Twilight* (*T*), *New Moon* (*NM*), *Eclipse* (*E*), *Breaking Dawn* (*BD*), *Fifty Shades of Grey* (*FSG*), *Fifty Shades Darker* (*FSD*), and *Fifty Shades Freed* (*FSF*), when citing page numbers.

more involved, Ana continuously struggles to maintain a grip on her own role and identity in relation to her role as Christian's potential submissive: "I feel lonely and uncomfortable here, unhappy with my own company. Have I strayed so far from who I am? I know that lurking, not very far under my rather numb exterior, is a well of tears. What am I doing?" (*FSG* 278). As a single woman, Ana had only her own goals to aim for but as Christian Grey's girlfriend are her actions directly linked to whether Christian will treat her with fondness or if he will want to punish her for disobeying him (*FSG* 346).

As the young women's relationships develop, they go through the emotional and physical experience of falling in love for the very first time. Therefore, the **disruption** in both novels can be seen as the protagonist's first time experiences of interacting intimately with a man. Both protagonists are completely un-expecting of the attention they receive and initially, neither of them can really believe that they have attracted the attention of their "gloriously good-looking" boyfriends (*FSG* 53). The lack of romantic as well as sexual experience, and the relatively low self-esteem of both protagonists, contributes in creating love stories that seem to be of a fantastic and unbelievable nature, the extraordinary beauty and wealth of Edward and Christian make the women ask themselves "what did I do to win such a prize?" (*FSF* 539).

To the reader, the magic of both stories is invoked by what Christina Bacchilega in her book *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, refers to as "our suspension of disbelief" – meaning that we do not need nor expect the events of the tale to be realistic (28). Ana's Cinderella story and social climb into wealth is not realistic in its practical sense – falling for the prince of the corporate kingdom and having him fall for you cannot be said to be everyday occurrences for most people – nor does it have to be. It is rather the unrealistic and therefore magical character of the love story within these both tales that attracts the reader. Millions of fans of the series will, and have, attested to their fascination with the romantic connections between Bella and Edward and Ana and Christian<sup>6</sup>. It could therefore be argued that it is the nature of the magical appearance of the love stories depicted within the novels that has contributed greatly to the addictive reading experience which have resulted in the success of the novels.

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<sup>6</sup> Numerous sites are available to Twilight fans online, such as *Twilightersanonymous.com*, *Twilighters.org* as well as Stephanie Meyer's official web site.

As there are no elements of traditional fairy tale magic in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, it is therefore plausible that it is in the love (and lovemaking) between Ana and Christian that the real magic within the story occurs. By simply falling in love, Ana manages to climb the class ladder and by becoming Christian's girlfriend, Ana is introduced to a world of physical pleasure, intimacy and incredible wealth. Christian is equally as enchanted with Ana as she is with him: "You completely beguile me Ana. You weave some powerful magic" (*FSG* 372). In the novel, Christian is depicted as a personification of everything aspired by Western modern society, confidence, physical health, good looks, professional success and extraordinary wealth. Ana, on the other hand, is an ambitious, yet shy, young woman who has chosen to work part-time to support herself while at university. Ana has not grown up lavished with money and so she is impressed and overwhelmed by Christian's complex persona as well as his wealth. But however hard their journey together is, mostly due to Christian's dominating, even abusive behaviour, Ana is still convinced of the magical quality of their relationship and the love she and Christian share.

The *Twilight* Saga, in contrast to the *Fifty Shades* Trilogy, offers a multitude of magic elements. With vampires, werewolves, myths and immortal children, the novels truly deserve to be called fantasy or even a form of fairy tale. As Bella is drawn into Edward's supernatural world, she learns that she has powers that do not belong in the human world, powers that she develops in her role as a mother and wife. Apart from its obvious magic elements of vampires and extraordinary powers, the *Twilight* Saga also depicts the extraordinary connection between Bella and Edward and the developing bond between the two.

In both novels, disruption and danger are combined in the one character, that of the husband-to-be. It is an interesting twist on character expectations which gives both tales a Beauty-and-Beast character, a truly popular concept within the fairy tale genre. Zipes states that several versions of the Beauty-and-the-Beast tale have been published since the 17th century, originating from folklore tales on the beast-bridegroom subject (*Why Fairy Tales Stick* 139). The original folk tales, stemming as many of them did from matriarchal societies, portrayed women as the instigators of human integration and behaviour, as role models of behaviour for men to imitate. However, due to cultural development, the moral message of the literary Beauty-and-Beast-tales is decidedly

different from that of the original folk tales. Rather than women being the true source of strength and human wisdom, the tale suggests that a woman can “find her own ‘true’ salvation only by sacrificing herself to a man in his house or castle, symbolical of submission to patriarchal rule” (Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* 49). The over-all message of the tales seems to express a message of female endurance and how female patience and kindness will bring out goodness in the most grotesque of (male) characters.

To a modern-day reader, the message of a female “duty” to release the good man inside the beast can seem highly provocative. Yet, in both *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the female protagonists are depicted to firmly believe that by loving and supporting their boyfriends truthfully and with patience, they will indeed rescue them from their internal (and external, as in Bella’s case<sup>7</sup>) manifestations of evil. Both Christian and Edward repeatedly refer to themselves as highly dangerous, urging the young women on several occasions to stay away (*T* 72 and *FSG* 49). Even if Bella senses Edward’s vampire instincts, she trusts him completely to be able to control his need to consume her. When Bella tells Edward: “... it doesn’t matter what you are. It’s too late” (*T* 166), she has already decided to risk her own safety if it means that she can stay close to him.

In *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the perceived danger differs to that of the danger in *Twilight*. Whereas the danger to Bella’s life is mainly physical because of the blood thirst of Edward and his entire vampire family, the danger to Ana’s life is the seclusion from the rest of the world that being with Christian seems to equal. The violent undercurrents of their sexual relationship is not what endangers Ana’s life, rather the way Christian tries to dominate her world completely. In the beginning of their relationship, Ana decides not to confide in the few friends she has as she fears that doing so will jeopardise her connection to Christian. To Ana, just like it is to Bella, the pursuit of the possible relationship becomes more important than any other social connections, or personal goals, she might have. When Ana desperately thinks “Can I show him the light?” it is clear that she sees her love for Christian as a possible solution to his self-hatred and inability to engage in a loving relationship. Christian eventually

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<sup>7</sup> In *Eclipse*, Bella cuts her own arm open with a stone to draw the attention of the vampire Victoria who is fighting Edward nearby (E 488).

loses the desire to “whip little brown-haired girls [who] all look like [his] birth mother” (*FSD* 329), seemingly as a result of Ana’s trust and affection,

As both young women have fallen in love with men who pose some kind of threat to them, the quests of these tales involve finding a way to develop a romantic relationship without being consumed (literally in Bella’s case, psychologically in Ana’s) in the process. It could be argued that both quest and **intervention** in *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* are neatly entwined as the solution to the quest is the intervention itself, the man or rather, the experience of being loved by him. This is an inversion of the often occurring fairy tale pattern where the quest – or disruption – is often characterized by an external enemy and the prince – or the gift of a fairy – is often the intervention in his/its role as saviour. In Meyer’s and James’ novels, it is instead the female protagonists who “save” themselves and their men by facing the danger the relationship involves. Ana and Bella feel that they are fulfilled in the relationship with their loved ones and that they have found their place in the world by his side. The strength and patience to tame the beastly boyfriend come from the love within the relationship to said boyfriend, in other words, the love feeds the desire to continue the taming. Hence the quest is won by facing the danger the man personifies and to let love intervene, thus saving both the protagonist from being consumed as well as her man from the darkness and possible evil inside him.

In both tales, the battle between good and evil takes place on two levels, internally and externally. The narrative in *Twilight* frequently introduces external enemies, evil characters that need to be defeated such as the Volturi vampires and Victoria, the vampire with a personal vendetta against Bella. In the *Fifty Shades* Trilogy, Christian and Ana face the anger and hostility from Christian’s ex-submissives as well as Ana’s abusive boss and the novels are ripe with car chases, threats of kidnapping and fistfights. Both these tales also deal with the internal battle of good and evil, the question of judging what is right and what is wrong in one’s actions towards others and one’s own integrity. This struggle is mostly poignant in the depictions of Edward and Christian. They are both young men who are acutely aware of their own desire to perform “dark” deeds but have chosen to deal with them in different ways. Edward, who “[does not] *want* to be a monster” (*T* 163), worked hard for decades before he met Bella to contain his lust for human blood. Just as his adoptive father Carlisle believes that

vampires are “damned regardless... but [will] get some measure of credit for trying”, Edward believes in doing good even if the doors of heaven are closed to the likes of him (*NM* 33). Edward has chosen to fight what he sees as his internal evil side prior to meeting Bella, which indicates that he has agency in his own transformation.

Christian, on the other hand, has developed a system where he finds women who share his preferences for BDSM and who are more than willing to let him act out his disappointment in his birthmother on them, whip in hand. It is not until he meets and falls in love with Ana that Christian realises to a full extent how he has deprived himself of an emotional life. That Ana is not as submissive as he wants her to be forces him to re-assess his own situation and his own sexual and emotional needs.

However, it is Ana’s love for Christian and the fact that she stays with him, even after he has shown her the Red Room of Pain,<sup>8</sup> beaten her with a belt and has on a number of occasions invaded her privacy, that is depicted as the reason for Christian’s transformation and for him “join[ing Ana] in the light” (*FSD* 312). The message of female endurance is here particularly clear; whereas Ana is absolutely convinced that Christian is not at all evil, but emotionally broken and twisted due to his troublesome childhood, Christian is not convinced at all. He believes himself to be a sadist and even if towards the end of the story he starts to see himself as worthy of being loved, Ana is still credited with being the one who instigates the beginning of his personal development. The novels seem to suggest that had it not been for Anna’s patience and the loving relationship they share, Christian might never have changed his ways and had stayed emotionally deprived.

In both tales, both couples get married long before the end of the story. These days, when the traditional fairy tale ending within popular culture often involves a wedding and a happy-ever-after scenario at the end of a book or a motion picture, the structure of the novels can seem to deviate from the traditional form. But their structure can also be seen as a clever way of adapting the fairy tale to the voyeuristic nature of our modern-day culture in terms of entertainment. By allowing the reader to follow

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<sup>8</sup> Several literary connections can be made to Christian’s playroom. The red room at the Reeds’ house in *Jane Eyre* is one of them, as it holds the secret to Mrs Reed’s anger towards Jane. However, the most prominent connection **could be** that of Bluebeard’s chamber of secrets. Christian, as well as Bluebeard’s room can be said to hold the key to a secret but unlike Bluebeard’s chamber, the Red Room of Pain is a place for sexual activities and it is also where some of the most erotic passages of the *Fifty Shades* Trilogy occur.

Bella and Ana into their lives as married women, the authors graciously give the reader the go-ahead to play “Peeping Tom”. Modern-day readers of novels, blogs and celebrity magazines (as well as the audience of reality TV shows) are used to being told what happens after the “I do”. By letting their protagonist get married long before the end of the story, both Meyers and James are showing an awareness of popular culture of today while still adhering to the fairy tale tradition of a (mostly) happily-ever-after.

A final state of **stability** reigns at the end of both the *Twilight* Saga and the *Fifty Shades* Trilogy. New family connections are formed and both young women have defeated their external enemies. Ana and Bella have succeeded in their quests by turning their beasts into caring husbands, without being consumed in the process. At the end of the *Twilight* Saga, Bella has reached a sense of maturity as a wife and a mother and she will live forever as a part of a large, loving vampire family. Ana has developed a sexual identity as well as become a wife, a mother and a successful publisher. As the inspiration to her husband’s transformation, she has also supported Christian in becoming a devoted husband and a father.

### **Fairy Tales and Gender or Good Things Come to Those Who Wait (on a Man)**

The literary traits discussed above show that even if the *Twilight* Saga and the *Fifty Shades* Trilogy have been marketed as fantasy and erotic literature, respectively, both tales revolve around the subject of love, the roles within a romantic relationship and personal development. These are popular themes within the fairy tale genre where traditionally a moral message is tied in with the story. As mentioned previously, classic fairy tales also tend to depict certain character traits as distinctly male and female, and this pattern can be distinguished in the *Twilight* Saga as well as the *Fifty Shades* Trilogy.

In many classic fairy tales, published in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and onwards, female protagonists are depicted to have strong domestic capabilities and a lack of coquettishness. One example is the dwarf-serving Snow White, who unlike her wicked step-mother does not care whom the mirror adores the most. Like H. C. Andersen’s Little Mermaid, who endured a pain as if she was walking on knives and sacrificed herself to save her beloved prince’s life, the fairy tales’ female protagonists are

generous and self-sacrificing. Fairy tales often suggest that women should have a kindness of heart and just as Cinderella accepts her place in the world until her prince finds her, so should a woman be content with the situation she is born into. As Zipes puts it, “she must be passive until the right man comes along... and marr[ies] her” (41).

Several female characters within the *Twilight* Saga and the *Fifty Shades* Trilogy are described as competent in domestic areas. Domestic capability also seems to go hand in hand with a positive personality as women in the novels who tend to their homes, husbands and children, are also described as responsible and kind. The division of domestic tasks within the various families in the novels is decidedly traditional; Bella moves in with her father and takes charge of domestic affairs immediately, and in a similar fashion, Ana initially does all the cooking when she visits Christian in his home. Ana quickly adjusts to the role of the cook in the relationship, far quicker than to the role as Christian’s potential submissive (*FSG* 127). However, as the tales develop, the focus on the protagonists’ development into adult women has less to do with traditional domestic chores such as cooking and cleaning but rather their depicted growing desire to become mothers.

Various characters within the *Twilight* Saga personify the female trait of domestic capacity. Edward’s adoptive mother Esme stands out to the reader as almost angelic in her role as a stay-at-home-mother, a devoted wife and home decorator. As her opposite is the self-centred, childless vampire Rosalie, she is cold and, in spite of her beauty, charmless. Her remorse over her loss of a human life is evident when she refuses to help Bella become a vampire (*NM* 471), but this also reinforces Meyer’s portrayal of Rosalie as unkind and selfish, an unkindness that seems to stem from Rosalie’s bitterness over not being able to have children.

In *Fifty Shades of Grey*, women are portrayed in similar ways in terms of domestic capability. What differs greatly from the *Twilight* Saga, where women ultimately find happiness in the role as wives and mothers, is that James continuously highlights the importance of women having a career. Ana is fierce in her struggle to pursue her own career in publishing, despite the fact that Christian wants her “barefoot and pregnant and in [his] kitchen” (*FSF* 541). Equally, Christian’s adoptive mother Grace, a loving mother of three and a splendid hostess at the “colonial style mansion” where she and Christian’s father lives (*FSG* 336), is also a highly successful

paediatrician. Women, it seems, can in fact combine a successful career with a family or should at least aspire to do so.

However, women who do not seem to want “it all”, who choose career over children or succeed in neither area are depicted differently. The childless Mrs Robinson, Christian’s former dominatrix and now business partner, is in Ana’s words nothing but a child molester and a “bitch troll” (*FSF* 509), waiting to get “her evil claws into [Christian] again” (*FSG* 415). Ana’s mother Carla, repeatedly re-married and seemingly unable to even look after her own finances, is described to have “the attention-span of a goldfish” (*FSG* 22), and although it is clear throughout the novels that Ana loves her mother dearly, it is also clear that up until the point of Ana’s own marriage, her mother’s advice on life in general has meant little. Carla’s husband-hopping and “abandonment” of her daughter is depicted as why her role as mother is diminished. It is an ironic paradox then that it is in her role as a married woman that Carla is finally allowed to offer some advice to her daughter. Ana, rather hesitantly, ponders over this advice: “She *is* on her fourth marriage. Maybe she does know something about men after all” (*FSG* 398).

Within both tales, the protagonists are described as a little precocious, and the reason for it seems to be that they have grown up looking after their beloved, but often erratic, mothers (*T* 4 and *FSG* 22). It is only when their mothers are safe in the arms of their new husbands that Ana and Bella feel they can relax their protective attitudes. Thus, both protagonists are, at a fairly young age, fully capable of looking after themselves. However, this capability is overlooked by most male characters within the novels. As Anna Silver points out in her article “*Twilight* is not Good for Maidens: Gender, Sexuality, and the Family in Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* Series”, Bella is “habitually carried around by Edward (and later by Jacob)” (125), as if she is too fragile to walk on her own. Ana is forbidden to drive her old car as it is, according to Christian: “frankly dangerous” (*FSG* 261). Both protagonists might try to maintain their independence but ultimately, in both tales, it is men who make the important decisions, use the power drill, fly the helicopter and rip vampires apart. Or, as Ana puts it: “I’m crap at any DIY. I leave all that to my dad” (*FSG* 19). In one of the novels’ most controversial messages, this conveys an image of women as the ones in need of protection, effectively making men their protectors. Bella and Ana might have looked

after their mothers, and most importantly, themselves but in both tales this capability is treated almost as a temporary state of affairs. When a potential husband tries to take charge of their lives, both protagonists eventually let him.

The argued role for men as protectors of women is supported in the roles that fathers play within the tales. Bella and Ana's fathers, town Chief and ex-army respectively, are both taciturn men who share a loving, yet somewhat distant relationship to their daughters. As Bella is a few years younger than Ana and is still living at home, her father Charlie plays a more authoritative role than Ray, Ana's father, does. The view on father-daughter relationships in the *Twilight* Saga seems to be that a father's role is to look after the safety of his daughter as well as to worry about maintaining her virginity, but preferably not talk about it, or sex, openly. Within the *Twilight* Saga, heart-to-heart-talks are avoided just as emotional tearful situations. When Bella has finally told Jacob that she has chosen Edward over him, she is quick to hide the depth of her misery from Charlie:

I could feel the control slipping. 'I'll be in my room,' I told him, shrugging out from underneath his hands. '[O]kay,' Charlie agreed. He could probably see the waterworks starting to escalate. Nothing scared Charlie worse than tears (*E* 538).

Bella's father sets and expects boundaries to be followed, but even so, he is an absent-minded paternal character. Charlie, who undoubtedly senses Edward's carnal instincts as well as his obvious attractive appearance, points out that "there are things to be careful about" (*E* 52), to Bella when she starts seeing Edward. In other words, Charlie makes sure to point out the risks which a possible sexual relationship with an older boy could entail. However, the lack of experience Charlie has of actually talking openly to his teenage daughter prevents him from discussing sex with her. Bella, in a constant want-but-cannot-have state of sexual frustration due to her vampire boyfriend's conservative values, recoils from the conversation, pointedly telling her father, "Edward is very old-fashioned" (*E* 52).

In the *Twilight* Saga, it seems, a young, unmarried woman is not considered fit to make decisions about her own safety, nor her own sexual development; these are matters best left to her father or husband. Silver suggests that rather than just being Bella's boyfriend, Edward continuously takes on the role of Bella's father figure (125).

The argument seems poignant as authority in the *Twilight* Saga is ultimately expressed through either fathers or boyfriends. This is evident in Edward's attitude when he, just like Bella's real father, is concerned about the safekeeping of her person and her virginity and refuses to give in to Bella's pleas for independence as well as lovemaking. Not until she is safely married to him does Edward relent in his strict ideas of chastity and indulges her sexual desires (*BD* 78). Bella's development into an adult starts with meeting and falling in love with Edward but it is as his wife that her real transformation begins. As Silver points out, "Meyer ... proposes that marriage and motherhood provide women with equality that they do not possess as single women. Motherhood becomes a location not only of pleasure and satisfaction but also of power" (123). Bella is only depicted as Edward's equal once they are married and as a vampire and a mother, Bella develops not only a protective mental shield, but also her sense of confidence. As a vampire, a wife and a mother, Bella makes decisions on her own and follows them through. Bella is pictured to have developed into her adult self through affiliation, rather than own accomplishment (Silver 124), as it is as a part of the Cullen family her transformation takes place.

The relationship between Ana and Christian is similar to Bella's and Edward. Throughout the novels, Ana's attraction to Christian is often revealed in terms which give him an authoritarian character. The fact that Ana often "grasp[s] his upper arms" (*FSG* 377) for support, and shares happy moments with him that: "remind [her] of the day at Disneyland with Ray. It was a perfect day..." (*FSG* 456) gives the reader the impression of reading about a child, feeling safe with a parent rather than a woman in an adult relationship. It is also evident in Christian's obsessive worry over Ana's safety and wellbeing, he is continuously strapping her into the harnesses of his helicopter, posting security guards at her door and ordering elective caesareans to make sure that Ana, like a fragile princess in a tower, is kept out of danger and is always within his control.

Ana and Bella are drawn into the relationship with their new boyfriends with all the intensity of falling in love for the first time. Edward quickly becomes the centre of Bella's world, as does Christian in Ana's. A splendid bubble of intimacy seems to emerge around both women as their relationships evolve. However, for both women this bubble of intimacy also works as a shield which shuts out friends and family who love

them and which effectively ties them even closer to the object of their infatuation. For Bella, not sharing the astounding news of the vampire-state of her new boyfriend with anyone is a matter of keeping both him and herself safe and the secrecy of the vampire world adds to the sense of mystique the *Twilight* Saga offers its readers.

In *Fifty Shades of Grey*, it is rather the risk of compromising Christian's reputation or the high risk of angering him that keeps Ana to her promise of silence as Christian does not want Ana to talk to anyone about him, nor them:

How do I say this? "I need to talk to Kate. I've so many questions about sex, and you're too involved. If you want me to do all these things, how do I know--?" I pause, struggling to find the right words. "I just don't have any terms of reference." He rolls his eyes at me. "Talk to her if you must." He sounds exasperated (*FSG* 150).

Eventually, Ana does talk to her friend Kate and her mother about the emerging relationship between her and Christian. However, Christian's annoyance in the quote above is a telling example of how he exercises his control over Ana. Moreover, Ana's silence in the beginning of their relationship gives her character traits which could easily place her in several classic fairy tales. Zipes states that "The task confronted by Perrault's model female is to show reserve and patience. [...] If she is allowed to reveal anything, it is to demonstrate how submissive she can be" (*Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* 42). Ana defies Christian on a number of occasions but ultimately, most of the time she surrenders to his will in order to avoid arguments.

The *Fifty Shades* Trilogy has received plenty of criticism due to the sexual acts taking place between Ana and Christian. The erotic parts of the novels have been named as a large reason for their tremendous success but the novels' graphic sexual content with violent undertones has also been said to validate domestic abuse and to portray questionable values in terms of sexuality and notions of gender. Ultimately, Christian's desire to dominate Ana results in her often submissive sexual role, most of the time she passively receives, rather than actively gives pleasure and it is a role Ana is depicted to choose and one which she enjoys. Prior to meeting Christian she has had no sexual experience at all and as they become more intimately involved, Ana discovers and develops her own sexual preferences and desires. Christian's alternative lifestyle forces Ana to explore what it really means to enjoy sexual submission as well her own preconceptions of what is right and wrong in sexual matters. However, throughout this

process, Ana is carefully guided by Christian and his attitude on sexual matters can be said to mould what will eventually become Ana's own preferences. It is also within their sexual interaction that much of Ana's own development process into an adult occurs.

However, it is not in their sexual encounters that Christian's dominating behaviour is mostly evident but rather in his role as Ana's boyfriend and later husband. Christian expects to be the one who makes decisions on day-to-day matters such as Ana's clothing, diet and social interaction with her friends and heated arguments follow if he feels that Ana questions his authority. Ana struggles against Christian's controlling behaviour but as their relationship evolves, her dependence on him is evident. Her self-confidence in sexual matters might have developed but rather than becoming more independent as his wife, Ana's own actions start to circle around how Christian feels and what his reactions might be to what she does. This is particularly evident when Ana, after she has been assaulted by a drunken man in a club, muses,

My hand is throbbing. I have never slapped anyone before. What possessed me? Touching me wasn't the worst crime against humanity. Was it? Yet deep down I know why I hit him. It's because I instinctively knew how Christian would react to seeing some stranger pawing me. I knew he'd lose his precious self-control (*FSF* 304-305).

Rather than acting to protect her own integrity, Ana's reaction to the assault is to make sure that Christian is not "derail[ed]" (*FSF* 305). According to Zipes, Perrault's fairy tales often suggest that it is in fact women who need to be civilised by men (*Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* 49) and this episode can initially be seen to contradict this pattern. However, even if it is Ana who calms Christian's temper after this particular incident, who civilizes him, it is still Ana who eventually transforms under Christian's authority. As Ana is continuously depicted to calculate how her actions will affect Christian's mood, and as she starts to ask for his permission to go to work and wear particular clothing, the picture of her submission becomes more and more evident throughout the novels (*FSF* 292).

The patriarchal structure their relationship is based upon is arguably evident; as the man of the relationship, it is Christian who chooses when to give pleasure and when to make decisions, while Ana is the receiver and adheres to his command. The fact that Ana argues her point and disobeys Christian frequently fades to the background when

compared to the many times throughout the tale where Christian's controlling behaviour and efficient manner are praised as part of his manly and composed character. On the one hand his dominating behaviour is as overly controlling; on the other hand it is also depicted as a major part of the attraction he holds in Ana's eyes. In similar ways to how "[Bella's] strength comes through her attachment to men and her acceptance of the patriarchal norms of family" (Wilson 65), so does Ana ultimately develop the strength to handle Christian's controlling manner as his wife. It could therefore be argued that by becoming Christian's wife and altering her own behaviour to serve his need of control, the female protagonist of this particular story does characterise the fairy tale's female traits; Ana eventually finds her sense of self and reach a sense of maturity in her role as Christian's submissive wife and as a mother to their child.

Several classic fairy tales have emerged over time which depict men as strong, ambitious and brave. The vampire Edward is a character who enacts these values to the point of absurdity, yet as a literary character, he has won worldwide fame and followers in abundance. White, hetero-sexual, beautiful, physically strong and intelligent, Edward is the archetype of Western ideas of masculinity. But as he falls in love with Bella, more and more of the "good", emotionally connected man inside him is visible to the reader, the same type of man that Ana is so certain is hiding underneath Christian's dominating surface. It could be argued that in these particular modern fairy tales, men are to abide by traditional masculine character traits yet learn emotional capacity from a woman. Wilson questions this viewpoint, as "in so doing, such narratives fail to question current constructions of masculinity, instead suggesting that that beneath the 'tough' guy exterior lies a [...] man, that requires the 'right' woman to bring [him] out" (85). The fact that both Edward and Christian are depicted as externally perfect and internally flawed seems to concur with the Beauty-and-Beast concept; only with the love (and submission) of their wives to be can they get in touch with their true emotional/human side. Moreover, this concept seems to argue that not only are men incapable of personal development on their own (a questionable accusation) but also that it lies on a woman to endure the dominance and abusive behaviour from a man prior to his "transformation" has taken place.

## Conclusion

Several literary traits within the *Twilight* Saga and the *Fifty Shades* Trilogy can be traced to the fairy tale genre. Most noteworthy are perhaps the battle between good and evil and the depiction of the protagonists' quests as well as their personal development. Of course, there are several aspects of Meyer's and James' books that contradict this analysis. The lack of traditional magic and the obvious erotic character of the *Fifty Shades* Trilogy is one of them and the length of both series another. Neither James nor Meyer have used the shorter format of Perrault's and the Brother Grimm's fairy tales but rather prolonged their tales over several volumes. But Meyer and James have both succeeded in creating stories that portray the experience of the extraordinary joy of falling in love for the first time, the experience of falling out with a parent and the sometimes bewildering experience of discovering one's own sexual identity. These are all events that most readers will recognise as part of the process that becoming an adult is and by setting these events within the narrative structure of the fairy tale, the authors seem to have enchanted millions of readers all over the world.

However, as the analysis in this essay shows, the gender roles depicted in these tales are decidedly conservative, suggesting that only as married can women develop their full capacities and become truly happy. Bella only reaches her equal status to Edward as his wife and as a mother. Ana develops a sexual identity under the authority of her dominant husband. Arguably, a book can never be said to portray the opinions of the author, nor the opinions of a society as a whole. But just as fairy tales have always been a record of the time in which they were written (despite the proclaimed ageless message of "once upon a time...") these tales mirror the society in which they were created. Arguably, there are few people in the world today that believe in fairy tales or in vampires. There are, however, plenty of those who have been enchanted by Edward's love for Bella, or aroused by Christian's (G)rey tie. And with that fascination the reader can be said to be faced with a choice: to simply see the fairy tale as a form of entertainment or, while embracing the enchantment, be wary of the message between the lines. If, as Meyer herself once stated, "feminism is a woman's right to choose" (Meyer), then it must be said to be surprising that female fairy tellers of today should choose to convey gender roles which in many ways echo the patriarchal voices of a distant 17<sup>th</sup> century.

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