

DRAFT

Who We Might Be Performing the Potentialities of Otherness and Selfhood: Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight Saga*

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Abstract

In *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, Nina Auerbach argues that vampires 'can be everything we are, while at the same time, they are fearful reminders of the infinite things we are not'.¹ Auerbach interprets the different vampire mythologies developed through the centuries as both expression and evidence of a specific social and cultural context; she furthermore suggests that, rather than our heroes, our vampires tell us who we are (112).² Disagreeing with her reading, I will show that the Cullen family of vampires in the *Twilight Saga* tells us not who we are, but rather who we might be. Drawing primarily from the writings of Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek, this paper aims to analyse the performance of otherness and selfhood in the *Twilight Saga* and the upshot of such a performance. Slavoj Žižek has widely argued that 'we seem to live more and more with the thing deprived of its substance', where what we get is 'beer without alcohol, meat without fat, coffee without caffeine...and even virtual sex without sex'.³ In Meyer's books the male main character, Edward Cullen, embodies this philosophical premise: although a vampire he defines himself as a vegetarian (since he drinks only animal blood); although he drives potent cars, a clear metaphor of a powerful sexuality, he refrains from any physical involvement with the female main character, the human Bella; although he is 'the bad guy', throughout the saga he acts as Bella's guardian angel. Through the encounter of Edward and Bella the boundaries between selfhood and otherness become more fluid, allowing opposites to merge (i.e. the human-vampire that Bella and Edward's daughter will be). I will conclude my analysis by advancing that it is this renegotiation of otherness and selfhood which has led to the saga's broad popularity.

Key Words: Vampire, Twilight, Stephenie Meyer, Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Lacan, the Real, object petit a, the Thing, Desire, the Other, otherness, selfhood.

1. Introduction

In less than four years Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight Saga*, with its vampires and werewolves, has become a worldwide phenomenon of popular culture. What is the reason for the series' success? Openly targeted for an audience of young female adults, the four books of the Saga, which comprises *Twilight*, *New Moon*, *Eclipse* and *Breaking Dawn* are about the blooming of a peculiar love story between a human and a vampire, between Bella Swan and Edward Cullen. What inspired Meyer to write the series was a dream:

In my dream, two people were having an intense conversation in a meadow in the woods. One of these people was just your average girl. The other person was fantastically beautiful, sparkly, and a vampire. They were discussing the difficulties inherent in the facts that A) they were falling in love with each other while B) the vampire was particularly attracted to the scent of her blood, and was having a difficult time restraining himself from killing her immediately.⁴

Employing Žižek's theory, Meyer's dream, in which the encounter of a human and a vampire happens, can be read as a symbolic place where totally desubjectivised fantasies are staged and performed. Bella and Edward, therefore, can be seen as desubjectivised fantasies, since the subject (in this case both Meyer and the hypothetical reader) will never be able to enact them.⁵

Speaking of the relationship between dreams and fantasy, reality and the Real, Žižek states that what we call and experience as "reality" is actually shaped by fantasy. And, if it is true that fantasy is "the screen that protects us from being directly overwhelmed by the raw Real", as a consequence, we have to admit that "*reality itself can function as an escape from encountering the Real*". Žižek furthermore argues that "in the opposition between dream and reality, fantasy is on the side of reality, and it is in dreams that we encounter the traumatic Real".⁶ Meyer's dream and the story that stemmed from it can be considered a staging of the "traumatic Real" in Lacanian sense.

In this paper I will show that what *Twilight*'s readers find engaging is that the characters are dwellers of the Real. What is so seductive about Edward Cullen is that he belongs to the domain of the Lacanian "sublime Thing". Drawing mainly from the writings of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, in this paper I will highlight the contemporary philosophical relevance of 'vegetarian'

vampires and their ‘performance of excess’ as performance of otherness; advancing that in the Saga we witness a performative fluidity of otherness and selfhood which actualises itself in the character of Renesmee, Bella and Edward’s daughter, half vampire and half human. I will conclude by showing that it is this renegotiation of otherness and selfhood, and the identification of Edward –the vegetarian vampire- with the Lacanian Thing which has led to the Saga’s broad popularity.

2. Žižek reads *Twilight*: “Enjoy”!

In Meyer’s *Twilight* Saga there is a Manichean division between humans and vampires. In the beginning of *Twilight* we encounter Bella when she is moving from Phoenix (Arizona) to the small rainy town of Forks (Washington), after her mother re-marries a minor-league baseball player. Bella, from then on, lives with her single father Charlie, an introverted and lonely character. The other people that she meets in Forks are mainly her classmates: narrow-minded characters with very little personality. On the other side of Meyer’s imagery there are the vampires. Edward and his adoptive family composed of his ‘parents’ Dr. Carlisle and Esme Cullens, and by two couples of ‘siblings/soul-mates’, Alice and Jasper, Rosalie and Emmett. We know very little about Bella’s past. On the contrary, we know numerous details about the Cullens’ past. About Edward, for example, we know that he “was born in Chicago in 1901” and that during the summer of 1918 he was dying with the Spanish influenza. We learn that it was in that occasion that Dr. Carlisle turned Edward into a vampire, ‘saving’ his life.⁷

The Cullens are quite unique within the literary and cinematic vampire landscape. First of all they are myth-busters. They can safely walk into the sunlight without being burned by it, they do not sleep in coffins (actually they do not sleep at all),⁸ they do not become bats or wolves; and they lack vampire fangs. They cast their reflection on mirrors and their image can be captured in photographs. But what makes the Cullens even more extraordinary is their ethical stand in relation to their family.

In our shared imagination vampires are usually lonely figures. If they live with other vampires, they do so by creating a sort of dysfunctional family, as it happens, for instance, in Anne Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire* where the homoerotic vampire couple Luis and Lestat lives with the child/spouse Claudia. The Cullens, on the contrary, seem to embody the functional family *par excellence*. First of all they love each other and respect each other very deeply. They understand and sustain each other’s choices to the point that they even accept Bella - a human - as a new member of their family. The Cullens, in other words, represent what humans are not but should be if only they still had strong enough values and ideals. Over all, the Cullens are heroic figures who have values and ideals they are ready to die

for. This is described on several occasions throughout the Saga, for instance when they risk everything to save Bella, to rescue Edward, to protect Renesmee. To a certain degree, the Cullens epitomise the other side of our shared ethical dimension, according to which terrorists and fundamentalists are sadly the only people who believe that it is still worth dying for something. In the past these people probably would have been called idealists, visionaries, heroes.

Certainly I am not implying that terrorists are heroes, quite the opposite. What I am aiming at here is to analyse the Cullens' performance as a 'performance of excess'. The Cullens 'exceed' humanity in their integrity, and I would argue that it is this 'performance of excess' that makes them seductive and heroic at the same time. Despite his progressive philosophical views, Žižek is, as he admits himself, "quite a traditional ethical figure". He believes, in fact, that there should still be something that is worth dying for, "things like honour, shame, freedom". This is the "excess" that I recognise in the Cullens' performance of otherness. Žižek argues that "life is not merely life. Life is always accompanied by a certain excess; something for which one can put at stake life itself"⁹ and that "one should today more than ever rehabilitate terms like eternity, decision, valour and heroism".¹⁰

3. Vegetarian Vampires & Ethical Heroes: a Žižekian Paradigm

The Cullens rehabilitate these terms by embodying them and fighting for them. Edward, an un-dead vampire, once he learns that Bella is dead, is ready to seek death. In doing so, he shows how that his 'performance of excess' seamlessly results in a performance of the Lacanian ethical hero. Lacan, when analysing the ethical hero which he sees embedded in the figure of Antigone, identifies two kinds of deaths: the physical/biological death and what he refers to as "the second death". This concept of "second death" is related, according to him, to the action of transgressing the threshold between life and death. The ethical hero, then, is the one who dwells in a dimension that hovers between life and death.¹¹ While talking about the ethical hero Lacan also addresses to the Thing as being "both living and dead".¹² Edward, therefore, can seemingly be identified with both the ethical hero and the Lacanian Thing, since he is also a character which hovers between life and death in his human feelings trapped into a vampire body. Lacan explains the relationship between the Thing and its excessive nature as follows:

The Thing is that which in the real, the primordial real, I will say, suffers from the signifier-and you should understand that it is a real that we do not yet have to limit,

the real in its totality, both the real of the subject and the real that he has to deal with as exterior to him.¹³

The Thing, thus, is the Real in all its excess; that real that we cannot grasp because it exceeds us while being part of us. Consequently, we can never know the Thing because it escapes our symbolisation. The Thing, in fact, is ungraspable, it is always veiled, says Lacan and 'impossible for us to imagine'.¹⁴ It is an unknowable x which inhabits a zone beyond symbolisation.¹⁵

Edward as the Other, Edward as the Thing, bears within itself a productive performativity for it is an otherness that does not generate fear but rather attraction; it is an otherness that, charged with an "excess", attracts and mesmerises. Meyer is able to render Edward's "excess" and our "impossibility to imagine it" via a self-explanatory visual metaphor: Edward's skin, once he steps into the sunlight, sparkles as if "thousands of tiny diamonds were embedded in [its] surface", dazzling Bella and attracting her desire. Edward appears to her like "a perfect statue, carved in some unknown stone, smooth like marble, glittering like crystal".¹⁶ Moreover, Edward - a vampire - is described over and over again like an angel. "I couldn't imagine how an angel could be more glorious. There was nothing about him that could be improved upon".¹⁷ As Žižek would say we are facing a vampire without its malignant property and a vampire who has been turned into an angel.

Edward and the Cullens not only are as beautiful as angels, but they also refrain from human blood by drinking animal blood. As Edward explains to Bella: "we call ourselves *vegetarians*" it is "our little inside joke".¹⁸ The expression vegetarian vampire is openly a contradiction in terms, which once again brings us back to Žižek's philosophy, according to which the 'vegetarian vampire' paradigm is what we experience every day of our life:

In today's market we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant property: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol [...] up to today's tolerant liberal multiculturalism as an experience of Other deprived of its Otherness (the idealised Other who dances fascinating dances and has ecological sound holistic approach to reality, while features like wife-beating remain out of sight...)¹⁹

The idealised Other who falls in love with human girls acting as a guardian angel, while features like blood-socking or people killing remain out of sight. Žižek argues that this approach to reality, to the thing deprived of its most characteristic substance, is nothing but a strategy to overcome the

unthinkable Real, to actually resist the hard kernel of the Real. As if to say “you can enjoy everything, but deprived of the substance which makes it dangerous”.²⁰ It can be argued that this is how the readers of *Twilight* “enjoy” Edward; and that this is one of the reasons that brought such a wide success to the Saga as a whole. The Cullens are vampires deprived of their vampirhood, they are nothing but “de-vamp vampires” as it is with decaf coffee. Since the Real is impossible to be signified, we delude ourselves by inventing things that, deprived of their substance, of their “caffeine”, we believe to be also deprived of the Real, of their unthinkable “excess”. This is an illusion and it is well exemplified in Edward, vegetarian vampire and yet still a vampire, so as to assure us that the Real is unavoidable, that the Real is literally impossible to be voided.

4. Edward: Sublime *objet petit a* & Cause of Desire

In *Midnight Sun*, the unpublished version of *Twilight* narrated from Edward's perspective, we witness Edward's painful awareness of his 'reality', namely his otherness. On several occasions he addresses himself with terms such as “inhuman”, “monster”,²¹ “freak”²². He despises what mainly characterises himself as a vampire: his “white hands, their hardness, their coldness, their inhuman strength”.²³ Edward, although a vegetarian vampire knows that calling himself vegetarian “is a joke”, that it is unfeasible to get rid of the Real, he knows that the Real is embedded in him. There is always something more than what we see, there is always a surplus of meaning in a joke, an “excess” of some sort. This “excess” can be seen as the “otherness of the Other” of which Žižek talks about, an otherness that can never be erased.

Lacan identifies a strong connection between the Other and desire. Evans reminds us that “one of Lacan's most oft-repeated formulas is: ‘man's desire is the desire of the Other’”.²⁴ Central to Lacan's theory of desire is the concept of the Thing or *objet petit a* as Lacan will refer to starting for 1963 (the object small a, where the letter *a* stands for the first letter of the French word *autre*, other). The *objet petit a* is the expression of that fundamental lack that Lacan recognises in every human being. It is because of the perception of our lack that we recognise an excess in the other. And it is by imagining this excess in the other that we are caught in the midst of the desire's dynamic. According to Lacan, in fact, the subject (\$) is a void that looks for subjectivation but can never be completely subjectified,²⁵ it can never become the *objet petit a*. To borrow a Lacanian expression, the *objet*

petit a “is the bone that got stuck in the subject’s throat”²⁶, it is that “excess” that cannot be expressed.

The *objet petit a*, then, is the fantasmatic excess that we recognise belonging to the Other and that functions as the cause of our desire. This is what Edward embodies in the Saga: he is the unattainable other, he is the cause of desire, Bella’s desire and the readers’ desire alike. What makes us identify the *objet petit a* with the fantasmatic surplus of the object itself is its desirous quality; it is its promise of fulfilment of our unfulfillable desire.²⁷ Edward, by being Bella and the reader’s *objet petit a*, has become the Lacanian Thing that promises total fulfilment. Glyn Daly though reminds us that “if you come too close to the Thing then it either shatters/evaporates (like the frescoes in Fellini’s *Roma*) or it provokes unbearable anxiety and psychical disintegration.”²⁸ Therefore, I would argue that the reason why Bella wants to become a vampire herself is because she wants to belong to the realm of the Other by embracing the “excess” that is the Other’s most intrinsic characteristic. She wants to become a vampire because she wants to possess the Cullens’ “excess”, namely their vampirhood. By turning into the Other, Bella can approach the Thing that belongs to the Other without experiencing the disintegration of it.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, I would advance that it is in the character of Renesmee, Edward and Bella’s daughter, a creature half human and half vampire, that we can see the actualisation of a potential merging of otherness and selfhood. The appeal of the Saga is to be sought, on the one hand, in the depiction of the “performance of excess” – performance of otherness -, and, on the other, in “the performance of lack” – performance of selfhood, enacted respectively by Edward and Bella and merging into Renesmee. Meyer’s Saga draws the readers into the realm of Lacanian desire, where the Other mesmerises and attracts. Desire, Lacan explains, is always enigmatic and fuelled with fantasy. As soon as we know, fantasy vanishes. As long as we do not know we can charge with fantasies what we imagine to be the Other’s surplus. The recognition of the Cullens’ otherness while makes Bella feel “a surge of pity [...] because as beautiful as they were they were outsiders, clearly not accepted”,²⁹ it also makes her recognize that in them there is a “not quite human” ‘excess’ which is extremely seductive:

I stared because their faces, so different, so similar, were all devastatingly, *inhumanly* beautiful. They were faces you never expected to see except perhaps on the airbrushed pages of a fashion magazine. Or painted by an old master as *the face of an angel*. It was hard to decide who was the most beautiful.³⁰

Differences blur and vampires are agelified. Bella becomes a vampire and Edward by loving her becomes more human than human: "I never felt so human in my whole life-not even when I was human" he admits.³¹ Renesmee, thanks to her mixed nature, glows with a beauty that is indescribable. But, since what escapes signification is the Real, therefore Renesmee, and what she represents, is pure Desire. Lacan, once again, reminds us that "when desire appears as pure desire, beauty also lights up" because "beauty has an essentially blinding effect".³² This is the blinding effect of Edward's skin in the sunlight; it is the blinding effect of Renesmee's gift which makes her thoughts visible in the mind of the others just through her touch. A gift that nicely epitomises the *Twilight Saga*'s seductiveness: the impossible and yet so human desire to exceed symbolisation and to grasp some of the sublime "excess" of the other.

Notes

¹ N. Auerbach, *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 6

² *ibid.*, p. 112

³ S. Žižek, 'The One Measure of True Love Is: You Can Insult the Other', in *Spiked*, 15 November 2001 (Interview by Sabine Reul and Thomas Deichman. Available online at: <http://www.lacan.com/zizek-measure.htm>)

⁴ S. Meyer, at <http://www.stepheniemeyer.com/twilight.html>

⁵ S. Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*, London, Granta Books, 2006, p. 57

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ S. Meyer, *Twilight*, London, Atom, 2005, p. 251

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 162

⁹ S. Žižek and G. Daly, *Conversations with Žižek*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2004, p. 107

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ J. Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis- Seminar VII*, London, Routledge, 1992, pp. 270-301

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 300

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 118

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 118 and p. 125

¹⁵ D. Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, London and New York, Routledge, 1996, p. 204

¹⁶ S. Meyer, *Twilight*, p. 228

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 212

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 164 (*emphasis mine*)

¹⁹ S. Žižek and G. Daly, *Conversations with Žižek*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2004, p. 105

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ S. Meyer, *Midnight Sun* (unpublished), p. 202

²² Ibid., p. 161

²³ Ibid., p. 141

²⁴ D. Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, London and New York, Routledge, 1996, p.37-38

²⁵ S. Žižek, “Beyond Discourse Analysis”, in E. Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, London, Verso, 1990, p. 254

²⁶ S. Žižek, “Grimaces of the Real”, in *October* 58, 1991, p. 49

²⁷ S. Žižek and G. Daly, *Conversations with Žižek*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2004, p. 20, note 2

²⁸ Ibid., p. 11

²⁹ S. Meyer, *Twilight*, p. 19

³⁰ S. Meyer, *Twilight*, pp. 16-17 (*emphasis mine*).

³¹ S. Meyer, *Midnight Sun*, p. 141

³² S. Harasym, *Levinas and Lacan: the Missed Encounter*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1998, p. 115

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