Fairy Tale and Popular Media: A Study of *Twilight*

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Courtesy: http://www.stepheniemeyer.com/twilight.html

Abstract

The present paper aims to foreground the ways in which the 'fairy tale tradition' has merged with the popular media and a different genre has been created. This modern day "fairy tale tradition" which is predicated upon the bringing together

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of human emotions, knowledge, memory and values has resulted in a new genre of "filmo-literature" wherein the ordinary life stories of the characters are resplendent with magical elements.

Based on observations from Stephanie Meyer's novel *Twilight* and its filmic version by Catherine Hardwicke, this paper analyzes the phenomenon within a pragmatic framework of Relevance Theory (Wilson and Sperber, 2002:249) and attempts to explicate the creation of the 'fairy tale'. Further, the paper contends that the present day 'fairy tale' has adapted itself to the technologically informed complex cultural and social environment from which explicitly or implicitly, the new text forms ensue and with which they interact.

Keywords: Fairy Tale, Popular Media, Relevance Theory, Ostensive Inferential Communication, Ostensive Stimulus

1. Introduction

Stephanie Meyer
Courtesy: http://www.stepheniemeyer.com/bio.html

Fairy tales can come true; it can happen to you. The fairy tale genre is a specific form of storytelling. To define fairy tale MacDonald in his "The Fantastic Imagination" said,

> "Were I asked, what is a fairy tale? I should reply…that I should as soon think of describing the abstract human face, or stating what must go to constitute a human being. A fairy tale is just a fairy-tale, as a face is just a face…." (1890.Web)

Nevertheless, for the purpose of the paper, a fairy tale can be defined as a genre featuring characters with magical powers and in it, the narration ends in a happy note. In addition, they usually contain superficial references to actual places, persons and events.[1]

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In the last decade, a small number of fairy tales in the form of literary texts and movies have been created which convey the fact that one does not need to be perfect to live happily ever after.

This study presents a pragmatic critique of Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* (2005) and its filmic version by Catherine Hardwicke (2008) as an example of this new genre "filmo-literature" explicated with Wilson and Sperber's Relevance Theory (2002:249) which assumes that every discourse is an act of Ostensive Inferential Communication. The paper also attempts to foreground how an author applies pragmatic strategies to follow the rules of communication and then the director of the film in the process of making the film follows the same rules, which in turn are influenced by the norms of inferential communication.

We establish the usage of pragmatic strategies with the help of Relevance Theory, which assumes that human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance, and that every act of ostensive inferential communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance. According to the theory, the writer/director wants the reader/audience to consider what is being communicated as the most relevant, which constitutes "cognitive effects" and which may be applied for interpreting any communicative event. Therefore, both the author and the director follow the RT assumptions for making effective communication.

Moreover, the paper follows Angela Carter (1991:20) views where she stresses the continuing significance of fairy tales by pointing out the existing link between fairy tales with the works of romance and other contemporary commercialised demotic forms, such as horror movies, pulp novels or soap operas. She also says:

> "Now we have machines to do our dreaming for us. But within that 'video gadgetry' might lay the source of continuation, even a transformation, of storytelling and story performance." (1991:12)

Thus, the study contends that the contemporary fairy tale effect is generated by convincing the reader/audience that "ugly ducklings" can find love and success in today's predominately-digitalized society.

2. Relevance Theory as a Theoretical Tool

The theory applied to the analysis of the *Twilight* in the present paper is Relevance Theory by Sperber and Wilson (1995). As we know, the process of communication encompasses a vast

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array of human activities and has many facets and manifestations. Therefore, the creation of a literary text and directing of a film can be considered as a form of communication taking place between author-reader and director-audience. The most comprehensive contribution to theorizing on relevance in a communication framework was made by Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995), with the latest synthesis by Wilson and Sperber (2002:249).

Relevance Theory was originally associated with everyday speech or verbal communication, but later was extended to cover wider cognitive processes. Scholars now consider it a cognitive psychological theory. It claims to be a theory of cognition and of communication, combining them together based on relevance. However, the basic problem addressed in the theory is how relevance is created in dialogs between persons. It explains, "What makes an input worth picking up from the mass of competing stimuli" (Wilson and Sperber, 2002:252). In simple language, they argue about ostensive behaviour, manifestations, and presumptions of relevance. Simply put, out of many stimuli, we pay attention only to information, which seems relevant to us. Furthermore, to communicate is to claim someone's attention, and hence to imply that the information communicated is relevant.

At the centre of their theory, they postulate two principles, which according to them are a reflection of universal tendencies:

> 1. The cognitive principle of relevance which states that, "Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance." (Sperber and Wilson, 2002: 251)

> 2. The communicative principle of relevance which states that, "Every act of ostensive inferential communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance." (Sperber and Wilson, 2002:256)

In other words, human cognition is considered relevance-oriented, and so is human communication. The two principles lead to the specification of how relevance may be assessed in terms of two components: cognitive effects and processing effort:

Relevance to an individual

> 3. Other things being equal, the greater the positive cognitive effects achieved by processing an input, the greater the relevance of input to the individual at that time. (Wilson and Sperber, 2002:252)

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4. Other things being equal, the greater the processing effort expended, the lower the relevance of the input to the individual at that time." (Wilson and Sperber, 2002:253)

Application of Relevance Theory helps us to understand creation of the contemporary fairy tale with the help of 'cognitive effects' it has upon a reader/audience. The second principle is the one that operates in the creation of contemporary 'fairy tale' seeing that a literary text and its filmic adaptation may be viewed as a form of communication. According to the theory, the writer/director wants the reader/audience to consider what is being communicated as the most relevant, which constitutes "cognitive effects" and which may be applied for interpreting any communicative event. Thus, this paper contends that Relevance Theory can be regarded as a potent tool for analyzing how a new genre of filmo-literature is formed in the present day world.

3. *Twilight* as a Fairy Tale

Fairy tales can be distinguished as a distinct genre of literature. In this paper, we analyze these two media based on human cognitive abilities of optimal relevance on the part of the writer/director and reader/audience and their manifestation in pragmatic strategies employed by them with the help of the novel *Twilight* and its filmic adaptation. It is contended that through this novel and film, we learn about different depiction of a magic in ordinary life through story telling by the writer and director making *Twilight* an example of a fairy tale.

Twilight is a universal adolescent story described through suspense in the vein of other popular media texts. Isabella Swan the main character moves to a small town called Forks in Washington and is an ordinary teenage girl without any gift or talent. It is a common activity and could have been boring normal act. However, in that small place there exist characters of alluring and mysterious background. The entry point of our analysis takes into account the various characteristics of fairy tales (Steven Swann Jones, 2002.Web) and analyzes the different strategies used by the author and director with the help of examples:

1) According to the first characteristic of being a fairy tale, the context of the story and the film depict magical or marvellous events and phenomenon as a valid part of human experience. For example, both the text and movie starts with this quote:

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"I'd never given much thought to how I'd die… Surely it was a good way to die, in the place of someone else, someone I loved. Noble, even. That ought to count for something…When life offers you a dream so far beyond any of your expectations, it's not reasonable to grieve when it comes to an end. (Bella Swan, *Twilight*, Preface, 1)

2) The second characteristic of a fairy tale is incorporation of fantasy. It may be regarded as the most salient formal or stylistic feature of this genre. For example, both the text and movie describes the Cullens in the following manner:

"I stared because their faces, so different, so similar, were all devastatingly, inhumanly beautiful." (Bella Swan, *Twilight*, Chapter 1, 19)

"It seemed excessive for them to have both looks and money." (Bella Swan, *Twilight*, Chapter 2, 32)

"Well, you asked if the sun hurt me, and it doesn't. But I can't go out in the sunlight — at least, not where anyone can see." (Edward Cullen, *Twilight*, Chapter 9,189)

"Edward in the sunlight was shocking. I couldn't get used to it, though I'd been staring at him all afternoon. His skin, white despite the faint flush from yesterday's hunting trip, literally sparkled, like thousands of tiny diamonds were embedded in the surface."
(Bella Swan, *Twilight*, Chapter 13, 260)

3)   The third characteristic encourages the reader /audience to identify strongly with the central protagonist Isabella aka Bella, who is presented in an unambiguous way:

"Sometimes I wondered if I was seeing the same things through my eyes that the rest of the world was seeing through theirs. Maybe there was a glitch in my brain." (Bella Swan, *Twilight*, Chapter 1, 11)

4) The fourth characteristic comprises of confronting and resolving of a problem, frequently by the undertaking of a quest. It is an essential factor in a fairy tale and the Meyer and Hardwicke both utilizes this in their discourse.

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> "There are stories of the cold ones as old as the wolf legends, and some much more recent. According to legend, my own great-grandfather knew some of them. He was the one who made the treaty that kept them off our land." (Jacob Black, *Twilight*, Chapter 6, 124)

> "About three things I was absolutely positive. First, Edward was a vampire. Second, there was part of him — and I didn't know how potent that part might be — that thirsted for my blood. And third, I was unconditionally and irrevocably in love with him." (Bella Swan, *Twilight*, Chapter 9, 195)

5) The final characteristic of a fairy tale in the novel as well as the film is that of a happy conclusion (ending). It is such a basic and important aspect of the genre; it may be regarded as a third definitional feature.

> "So ready for this to be the end, for this to be the twilight of your life, though your life has barely started. You're ready to give up everything…Twilight, again. Another ending. No matter how perfect the day is, it always has to end." (Edward Cullen, Twilight, Epilogue, 495)

In these above examples we saw the manner in which an author and the director has employed phrasing and imagery as ostensive stimulus to create nuances of meaning and suspense and how it has portrayed and enhanced the magical quality of each presentation.

4. Fairy Tales as a Genre: Old and New

To conclude, this paper has examined Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* and its filmic adaptation by Catherine Hardwicke in order to explicate and explain the ways in which the 'fairy tale tradition' has merged with the popular media and a different genre has been created. Traditionally fairy tales, were passed on by oral tradition from generation to generation, had anonymous authors, and their landscapes and characters were the dark wood, the handsome prince – which were archetypal rather than individualized. Hans Christian Anderson (1805-1875) followed by Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), C.S Lewis (1898- 1963) in the nineteenth and twentieth century for the first time made this literary art into a distinct genre. By contrast, the new genre fairy tale discussed in this paper is based on our own tales. This has been

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highlighted through the analysis of the novel and film examples with the help of general fairy tale characteristics. The great difference, and their great strength, is the sharp personal tone, the rich, extraordinary detail and the distinct, piquant humour. Stephanie Meyer and Catherine Hardwicke within the realm of their individual discourses have merged the fairy tale genre with the popular media. Their voice is a unique one in storytelling: while capturing the mythic resonance of traditional tales, they transformed popular culture text into a fairy tale.

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Note 1 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fairy_tale 20 September 2012.

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Cinematic Text

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