

Gender and Agency in Young Adult Fiction

Jodi Weissman and Elizabeth Swanstrom

Department of English

Abstract: This research paper investigated a gender shift in the identity search within Young Adult Fantasy novels between the mid-twentieth century and the contemporary period utilizing an emergent Structuralist pattern of four Emotional Discourses. The author argued that an adolescent's search for identity (within the context of the Young Adult Fantasy genre) during the mid-twentieth century focused on personal reflection and self-realization regardless of gender; whereas, the coming-of-age journey for self-discovery in contemporary novels, or series of novels, (of the same genre) hinged on gender. Applying these discourses, readings from *Earthsea* and *Twilight* series texts analyzed the discourses (challenges and identifications) of both male and female characters to determine how each made decisions. Structuralist analysis showed female teens today gain identity through self-sacrificing means while contemporary male adolescents and both teens of both sexes discovered identity through self-realization in the midtwentieth century. With the inception of the young adult genre in the mid-twentieth century, character identity for both male and female adolescents developed through independent choice and internal consideration. Initially, this genre contrasted the ways women in literature were identified, generally by their relationships to others, such as wife or mother. However, a trend in contemporary young adult fantasy seems to shift the motivation behind adolescent female identity search from self-realization to self-sacrifice. Utilizing a structuralist lens and various psychoanalytical theories, a pattern of emotional discourses emerges in the young adult coming-of-age stories. Close readings and explication of representative texts utilizing this overarching blueprint expose this new trend. As a result of this analysis, I argue that an adolescent's search for identity (within young adult fantasy) during the mid-twentieth century focuses on personal reflection and self-realization regardless of gender; whereas, the coming-of-age journey for self-discovery in contemporary novels (of the same genre) hinges on gender. While boys continue to pursue their identity through internal means, girls' identity decisions center on their relationships with others, specifically romantic interests and familial connections.

Emotional Discourses – From Conception to Utilization

To focus my examination on identity, I studied numerous young adult novels containing searches for identity, tracking the patterns of emotional challenges the characters faced as well as the outcome of these challenges that produced the elements of their personalities, defining their identities upon entering adulthood. These repeated emotional propensities created a structural pattern that can be applied to most literary adolescent searches for identity. This pattern emerged as the emotional discourses that structure my analysis and close readings. These discourses take the form of binary oppositional pairs: Desire-Happiness and Conflict-Peace. These pairs are characterized as “little hierarchies. That is, one term in the pair is always *privileged*, or considered superior to the other” (Tyson 254). These discourses follow a particular pattern that

places the inferior term, or emotional challenge, on the left side and the superior term, or emotional identification, on the right side.

My analysis examines these oppositions – the circumstances by which a character comes upon a challenge and the decisions that character makes to deal with such challenges – not only to bring forth the culminating elements of identification, but also to determine what factors the character prioritizes when making a choice that moves him or her from the “challenge” to the “identification” within the binary pair. Fleshing out the elements of identification provides a framework for whom the character intends to become at the threshold of adulthood; however, determining whether the character deals with challenges through internal resolution or external sacrificial considerations governs the autonomy of the character. The logic behind a character's search

for identity is disclosed through these motivations, independent or codependent, creating a tangible mode of comparison between young adult characters and their identity development.

While definitions provide a foundational understanding, the rationale leading to the development and employment of these discourses to represent the underlying emotions within the text is necessary for a working comprehension of text analysis: "The investigation of the representation of emotions in literary works demands the analysis of [a] multitude [of] aspects, for instance, the author's intention, the reception by the reader guided by his or her perceptions and assumptions, and the literary work's emotional structure" (Kummerling-Meibauer 131). The challenges that the adolescent faces must be overcome, accepted, defeated, achieved or gained. The foundations that the adolescent discovers through facing these challenges become the elements with which the young adult finds happiness and peace. Those elements form his or her identity entering adulthood.

The background for the structural analysis rests within a psychoanalytical lens in literary theory. The idea of identity formation as a series of challenges comes from Erik Erikson's Theory on Psychosocial Stages: "Ego identification is considered as the construction of a synthesis of opposing issues and attitudes... all the 'negative' senses are and remain the dynamic counterpoint of the 'positive' ones throughout life" (Erikson 273). The pairing of challenge and result provides a groundwork to study young adult identity search. "If Erikson's descriptions of identity and intimacy in adolescence are to be understood in the context of life-course development, and not merely as descriptions of isolated crises," then this emotional blueprint offers a method to compare trends in motivations for the determination of how young adult characters deal with challenges as well as from where (internal or ex-

ternal) these decisions come (Meachem 1466).

Desire-Happiness

During the tumultuous adolescent years, literary characters' desires range from compulsive participation in hobbies to obsessive yearning for the object of one's affection. The desire itself does not factor into the pattern, only that the young adult experiences one or more desires that need rectification in order to transgress this discourse. Jacques Lacan provides the model for desire and the truth behind the inability to fulfill it: "Human desire is carried by signifiers which stand in for a lack that can never be filled in... Processes of signification of the kind that are frozen temporarily in works of literature constitute the human subject and determine the shape of its life" (Rivkin 395). Lacan describes an individual's pursuit of desire as an endless chain of substitutes for what is actually desired because if desire fulfillment occurs, happiness rarely follows. The unconscious determines that wholeness be consistently sought although it can never be achieved, creating the binary opposition between desire, to always be in a state of lacking or loss, and happiness (Lacan 445). Therefore, happiness occurs when desire resolves through other means – the acceptance of nonfulfillment, the perpetual substitution of desires, or the ability to overcome the obsessive desire present; however, within literature, characters can and do obtain their desires which may result in happiness. When a young adult recognizes the facets of life that bring true joy, those elements of identity can be determined.

Conflict-Peace

Carl Jung examines conflict in his theory on the collective unconscious: "The tension that can develop between our old, socially adapted self and the developing new identities [likens to] 'crucifixion' between opposites. Enduring the conflict leads to a birth of a new, enlarged identity that reconciles in the unconscious" (Jung 382). This concept examines the movement from conflict to peace within the unconscious mind to create identity. Conflict in literature applies to both internal and external struggles a character undergoes; furthermore, as an adolescent enters adulthood, the features of his or her personality that

"[A discourse] is not a slender surface of contact, or confrontation, between a reality and a language (langue)... Of course discourses are composed of signs; but what they do is more than use these signs to designate things. It is this more that renders them irreducible to the language (langue) and to speech. It is this 'more' that we must reveal and describe" (Foucault 96).

Emergent research reveals the possibility of dividing the discourses into more specific binary pairs with the addition of Isolation-Affiliation and Weakness-Strength currently encompassed or implied within the Desire-Happiness and Conflict-Peace discourses, respectively. Further research will provide insight into the benefit of a more in depth examination of young adult identity development in terms of four instead of two discourses.

All terminology used in these discourses are defined according to the latest version of the Oxford English Dictionary.

bring peace to his or her existence will define a portion of his or her identity.

The Discourses at Work: Evidentiary Support through Structural Analysis

In order to explore this shift, I selected representative texts from each time period within the genre. For contemporary texts, I chose *The Twilight Series* by Stephenie Meyer due to its popularity both in print and film. Comprised of four novels; *Twilight* (2005), *New Moon* (2006), *Eclipse* (2007) and *Breaking Dawn* (2008), this series journeys with Bella Swan as she moves to Forks, WA to live with her father. A clumsy, awkward teen, uncomfortable with herself and others, Bella agrees to live in a place she hates to give her mother a chance to travel with her new husband. Bella falls in love with Edward, a vampire over one hundred years old (frozen at seventeen), and his “family” coven. The story revolves around their love and her unwillingness to accept anything other than a life of vampirism with Edward. A love triangle forms with Bella’s best friend Jacob, a werewolf (the vampires’ enemy), whose story forms an integral part of the narrative. In the end, Bella and Jacob shape their identities through their individual choices and motivations behind them.

To represent the mid-twentieth century, I elected the first two books in *The Earthsea Cycle* by Ursula K. Le Guin. *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968) tells the coming-of-age tale of a motherless child, Ged. His aunt recognizes inherent magic within him, and he becomes apprentice to the mage (learned wizard), Ogion. During his early teens, Ged’s impetuosity causes him to lose patience with Ogion’s teachings, triggering him to uncover a shadow yet lacking understanding of its nature. Ogion sends him to study at a wizard’s school where he continues to battle arrogance and impatience with his tremendous gift. He allows these emotions to control his magic and unleashes the dark shadow into this world. As Ged learns, travels, protects others, performs magic and discovers the world, he finds the truth he needs to comprehend the shadow and gain his identity.

(1970) follows the female protagonist, Tenar. At a young age, Tenar is chosen to be the High Priestess of the Nameless Ones, stripped of her

identity, removed from her home and family, taken to the city of Atuan (to live amongst the other priestesses, girls training to be priestesses and eunuch slaves), and renamed Arha (the Eaten One). She learns the traditions and faith of her people. She grows to believe in this faith and accept her fate as Arha. As the highest of the High Priestesses, an isolated Tenar rules over the underground tombs of the city, including a dark labyrinth forbidden to all but her. At age fourteen, Tenar catches Ged in the labyrinth. She must make difficult choices that will define who she chooses to become instead of who she is forced to be. These decisions determine her identity.

Each series provides a strong protagonist experiencing a definitive search for identity, giving ample opportunity for analysis within the emotional discourses as well as additional evidence from critical literary sources.

Desire-Happiness

Ged faces dangerous desires and must learn how to overcome them to achieve his self-identifying happiness. Power and the knowledge to exercise it over others speak within Ged as his driving desire from the onset of adolescence. As the novel describes, “Yet other cravings were in him that would not be stilled, the wish for glory, the will to act” (Le Guin, “Wizard” 33). In order to achieve happiness, Ged discovers, through his triumphs and mistakes at school and then through his early travels as Mage, that acquiring the knowledge to control his extraordinary power is the true key to happiness. Trying to fulfill his adolescent desire unleashes the evil, the shadow, which Ged must overcome to find his happiness and complete his search for identity. In examining the true purpose of the shadow, Elizabeth Cummins recognizes that “The adolescent has a frightening confrontation with the dark side of self” (28). In this respect, desire drives Ged’s search for identity, only ceasing when he overcomes the consequence of youthful desire fulfillment: “Their hearts were very light as they entered into the firelight and warmth under the roof...” (Le Guin, “Wizard” 255). Ged resolves desires through self-awareness, a trait shared with Jacob.

Jacob’s desires include cars, friends and an unrequited love in Bella. When Jacob faces the reality that he will not be Bella’s choice, he chooses to

deal with his disappointment and find happiness in his wolf pack: "I had four legs now, and I was flying. The trees blurred into a sea of black flowing around me... But I wasn't alone" (Meyer, "Eclipse" 628). Eventually, Jacob reconciles his desire for Bella through animal imprinting (instinctual lifelong pairing) with her daughter, Renesmee, creating a new happiness for Jacob free of want for Bella. Internal reflection and patience provide Jacob, like Ged, with the solution to his desires, reinforcing the consistency of male identity resolution regardless of the text's publication date. Females, however, do not share this consistency. Only Tenar deals with desire fulfillment internally.

Serving her Masters becomes Tenar's desire once she is named Arha and continues throughout her early teens: "Arha liked this game in the dark, she wanted a greater puzzle to be set her" (Le Guin, "Tombs" 45). Tenar wants and enjoys the fear and reverence of the other priestesses because of her position among them. Although her identity as Arha had been forced on her as a child, by fourteen Tenar assumes the traditions, rituals and beliefs of her faith. Her adolescent desire to serve initiates her search for identity when Ged (her captive within the labyrinth) forces her to face the truth: "But they are not your Masters. They never were. You are free, Tenar. You were taught to be a slave, but you have broken free" (Le Guin, "Tombs" 154). Just like Ged, Tenar's desire becomes the framework of her identity search as she sheds her forced identity as Arha and reclaims her individuality as Tenar. She must make her choices based on what she believes to be true of her faith, Masters and herself. Only by rejecting her adolescent desires and reclaiming her name can Tenar begin to make decisions toward happiness: "I am Tenar," she said, not aloud, and she shook with cold, and terror, and exultation, there under the open, sun-washed sky. 'I have my name back. I am Tenar!'" (Le Guin, "Tomb" 140). She moves toward finding her self-realized individuality; however, Bella's desires move her away from an independent identity.

Bella expresses desire through a lack of concern for her own safety, resulting in many instances where she faces mortal danger. However, unlike the moments of fatal reality she encounters by being involved with vampires, her desires

push her to self-exhibitions that put her in danger. Her reckless attitude stems from her desire for Edward and his family. During her self-imposed isolation (when Edward leaves her at the beginning of *New Moon*), Bella's desire for Edward manifests in her imagination as his voice and image, specifically when she is in danger, reminiscent of his overly-protective nature: "I knew this was the stupidest, most reckless thing I had done yet. The thought made me smile. The pain already easing, as if my body knew that Edward's voice was just seconds away" (Meyer, "New Moon" 358). In the months apart, Bella falls into a pattern of engaging in reckless activities to invoke Edward's disapproval in her mind. At the epitome of desire to be with him, if only in her mind, Bella intends to cliff dive: "My toes felt ahead blindly, caressing the edge of the rock when they encountered it. I drew in a deep breath and held it ...waiting. 'Bella.' I smiled and exhaled" (Meyer, "New Moon" 358). As with all her emotional crossroads, Bella faces her desire with actions for another. She does not choose to act on her desires through self-reflection as to whether her delusions of Edward are healthy for her growth or her identity; she acts solely on the desire to be with him, regardless of the consequences to her body, her mental state. In contrast, Tenar chooses to break free of her youthful desire to serve her masters and escape her labyrinth because she sees the truth of her options. Leaving the Tombs with Ged provides the better option for her health and well-being regardless of the consequences those she leaves behind might face. Tenar's happiness blooms from free choice unlike the reckless happiness Bella experiences through connecting herself to an aberration of love and family. This change in desire resolution highlights the differences between contemporary and mid-twentieth century adolescent female identity development; whereas, male characters incorporate the resultant elements of happiness into their identities by analogous means in both time periods.

Conflict-Peace

Ged's fear begins and remains with the shadow he releases. His internal battle with his fear of this shadow commences when he speaks an unknown incantation without Ogion's consent: "Looking over his shoulder, he saw that something was crouching beside the closed door, a shapeless clot of shadow darker than the dark-

ness" (Le Guin, "Wizard" 30). Once the shadow knows Ged, he feels its presence even before he allows it to crossover into the realm of light when it becomes a tangible evil, an external conflict for Ged. His fear of this shadow and his eventual need to face it present focal conflicts Ged must resolve to find his identity. Ged's gradual understanding that he must face the shadow, not run from it, allows him to resolve and conquer his fear: "I must go where I am bound to go... I was in too much haste, and now I have no time left. I traded all the sunlight and the cities and the distant lands for a handful of power, for a shadow, for the dark" (Le Guin, "Wizard" 235). This realization does not eliminate his fear, but it allows him to embrace the anxiety inherent in this confrontation and gain the strength to complete this battle and his search for identity. Ged decides to seek out the shadow; furthermore, Ged owns his fear and takes responsibility for his actions due to his fear. Ged resolves his fears through individual choice and agency, allowing him to progress in a similar manner as Jacob many decades later.

Jacob faces several conflicts: his ongoing fight for Bella's love, his struggle to make Bella see that she loves him, and his internal collision between man and werewolf. During the final battle of *Eclipse*, the werewolves and vampires of Edward's clan band together to combat a larger threat. Out of fear for his life, Bella asks Edward to stay out of the fight and remain at her side (which he does). Jacob teases Bella about this, but he makes it clear that he would not do the same. Jacob sees this battle as something in which he must take part. Only by being true to the werewolf inside can he forge that part of his identity. Facing the battle instead of fleeing, just as Ged faces his shadow to merge the parts of himself, resolves Jacob's inner conflict. Both Ged and Jacob face conflict and find peace through self-defining choices and actions, discoveries also made by Tenar but not Bella.

Tenar's fear (of her Masters, the older priestesses, her powers and Ged) rules her actions. Although external conflict sprinkles the road on which she travels, at the heart of all these conflicts, fear flourishes. Even after Ged explains the truth of Tenar's faith, she cannot resolve her fear: "Nothing will [show us the way]. It is lost. We are lost.' The dead silence closed in upon her whisper, ate

it" (Le Guin, "Tombs" 171). Until Tenar releases Arha and all that being "the Eaten One" entails, she cannot find peace; however, once she sheds Arha, Tenar acknowledges her beliefs to be false and discovers peace in the absence of fear: "There was no answer. There had never been an answer" (Le Guin, "Tombs" 175). The unearthing of peace allows Tenar to seek out her strengths just as Ged had before her. Although Ged provides Tenar with information, she must make her decision to release her fear and continue on her path, without considering Ged, the other priestesses or the eunuchs that serve them. "She, for the first time, exerts her *power to* - her freedom of choice," she rids herself of Arha and claims Tenar of her own will and not for or because of anyone else (Le Guin, "Tombs" 219). Unlike Tenar, regardless of the magnitude or type of each conflict she faces, Bella's reactions are universally dependent on how her decision will affect the relationships in her life.

Bella never focuses on the consequences of conflict as an individual or the resultant residue on her identity. Anna Silver notes this as she explores this anti-feminist heroine, noting "the series' persistent theme that identity comes from affliction rather than individual accomplishment" (Silver 126). This reinforces the argument that Bella's identity forms based on decisions made within her relationships; affliction, an all-consuming term for the challenge side of the emotional discourses presented in this argument, allows Bella to hide behind Edward and his family instead of forming an individual identity, separate and autonomously created from her choices like Jacob, her male counterpart, does within the same saga.

Bella's choice of which love her heart should follow remains the undisputed main conflict she faces throughout the series. At seventeen, the impact of the decision between two competing suitors should be small in the scope of life and literature yet a contributing factor to the ultimate identity of the character. However, in Bella's case, becoming a vampire cannot be undone. She decides for life; therefore, shaping her identity involves decisions that will last throughout her adulthood: "...Her transformation into vampirism represents a step into an idealized fantasy adulthood rather than her growth into a mature and confident adult" (Hawes 171). Thus,

Bella makes a decision based on which relationship brings peace to the most people in her life while minimizing the hurt she causes. Yes, she chooses Edward because she loves him, but she loves Jacob as well: "I loved him [Jacob], much more than I should, and yet, still nowhere near enough. I was in love with him. But it was not enough to change anything; it was only enough to hurt us both more" (Meyer, "Eclipse" 528). Ultimately, she stays with Edward to become a vampire because he cannot live without her (which he proves by trying to end his existence in *New Moon* when he believes Bella has committed suicide cliff-diving). Furthermore, the way in which they get married is not for her but for others, specifically, for the sanctity of Edward's soul:

I will not leave Charlie and Renee without the best resolution I can give them. I won't deny Alice her fun, if I'm having a wedding anyway. And I will tie myself to you in every human way, before I ask you to make me immortal. I'm following all the rules, Edward. Your soul is far, far too important to me to take chances with it. (Meyer, "Eclipse" 619)

Unlike Tenar, who decides to escape the life of Arha and find her own peace, Bella bases her peace on what makes others experience peace. By identifying herself as wife, she entangles herself to many others, complicating her life at an age when most teenage girls are developing aspects of identity that provide themselves peace. For this reason, Bella's search for identity reinforces the new trope for adolescent female actualization – identity with and for others, self-sacrificing in nature.

Conclusion

As young adult fantasy grows in popularity, more female characters in search of identity disclose self-sacrificing natures, creating young adult characters defined by others instead of their own agency. "Bella's identity crisis is one to which many teenage girls can relate. The restoration of her identity at the end of the novel as vampire wife and mother provides an image of security and safety that evidently appeals to numerous readers today" (Silver 128). Literary critics, such as Silver, share the thoughts of others concerned

with the possible influence the happily-ever-after ending of Bella Swan Cullen may have on young girls today. These self-sacrificing heroines present a possible future that attracts girls to plausible domestic issues. The correlation between these types of female characters' searches for identities and possible dangerous trends in society may have an effect on society as a whole. Increases in domestic violence in teen relationships and an upswing in teen marriages may be correlated to these new images of female identity.

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