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Gender Stereotypes and Identity in *Midnight Sun* by Stephenie Meyer

Estereotipos de género e identidad en *Midnight Sun* de Stephenie Meyer

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Resumen: Los estereotipos de género y la identidad son temas complejos explorados en la literatura durante siglos. Este artículo analiza cómo *Midnight Sun* (2020) de Stephenie Meyer, narrado desde la perspectiva de Edward Cullen, representa y subvierte los roles de género tradicionales. A través de un análisis crítico e integrando fuentes como "Review of Literature on Gender in the Family" y artículos periodísticos de *The Guardian*, el estudio no solo explora la dinámica de poder, la autonomía y la formación de la identidad en la novela, sino que también evalúa su impacto social a través de su recepción. Para este propósito, también se ha llevado a cabo un estudio en las redes sociales. Los resultados muestran que, aunque Meyer refuerza algunos estereotipos tradicionales, también ofrece una exploración matizada de la identidad de género, desafiando las normas convencionales. Estos hallazgos resaltan la contribución de la novela a los debates actuales sobre la representación de género en la literatura contemporánea y su resonancia en la cultura popular.

Palabras clave: estereotipos de género, identidad, Stephenie Meyer, redes sociales, literatura, roles de género, dinámica de poder, impacto social, cultura popular.

Abstract: Gender stereotypes and identity are intricate themes explored in literature over centuries. This article examines how Stephenie Meyer's *Midnight Sun*, through Edward Cullen's perspective, portrays and subverts traditional gender roles. By employing critical analysis and integrating

sources such as "Review of Literature on Gender in the Family" and journalistic articles from *The Guardian*, this article not only delves into the novel's depiction of power dynamics, autonomy, and identity formation but also evaluates its societal impact through its reception. For this purpose, a social media study has also been conducted. Results reveal that while Meyer reinforces some traditional stereotypes, she simultaneously offers a nuanced exploration of gender identity, challenging conventional norms. These findings underscore the novel's contribution to ongoing dialogues about gender representation in contemporaneous literature and its resonance in popular culture.

Keywords: gender stereotypes, identity, Stephenie Meyer, social media, literature, gender roles, power dynamics, societal impact, popular culture.

Stephenie Meyer is an American author best known for her *Twilight* series, which has sold over one hundred million copies worldwide. The *Twilight* books have been adapted into successful film adaptations by Summit Entertainment, and Meyer has become a prominent figure in young adult literature. Also, her works have been praised for their romantic themes and compelling characters, as well as their popularity among readers of all ages. Her latest novel, *Midnight Sun*, retells the story of *Twilight* (2005)—the first book of the saga—this time from the perspective of the vampire protagonist Edward Cullen. The novel was published in August 2020, over a decade after the release of the original series. Since its release, *Midnight Sun* has been praised for its fresh take on the story, as well as its exploration of Edward's inner thoughts and emotions; in fact, "[it] shot straight to the top of the charts in both the UK and US, where it has sold more than 1m copies in a week" (Cain, 2020). This commercial success highlights its ongoing cultural relevance and the continued appeal of Stephenie Meyer's narrative.

This article employs a qualitative methodology to explore the themes of gender stereotypes and identity in *Midnight Sun* by Stephenie Meyer. The analysis draws on primary and secondary sources, including Meyer's text, literary criticism, and journalistic articles from *The Guardian* and *Los Angeles Review of Books*. The study combines close reading of the novel with a critical review of existing literature on gender roles and power dynamics. Furthermore, the reception of *Midnight Sun* by audiences and critics is examined through the lens of cultural studies to contextualise its societal impact. This multidisciplinary approach aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how Meyer navigates and challenges traditional gender norms within a contemporary framework. Additionally, the methodology employs comparative literary analysis to situate *Midnight Sun* within a broader tradition of vampire narratives. This approach not only highlights the evolution of the genre but also underscores how Meyer's work interacts with ongoing cultural discourses about gender and power. Textual analysis was supported by a review of critical receptions in media outlets such as *The Guardian*, which provided insights into public and scholarly debates.

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Online fan discussions, particularly on Reddit and Tumblr, were qualitatively examined to understand how contemporary readers engage with themes of agency and autonomy. These platforms highlight diverse perspectives, which were integrated to offer a comprehensive analysis of the novel's societal and literary impact. Social media, as recent studies suggest, provides a space for fans to critique and reinterpret popular narratives. Johnson (2021) highlights this, observing, "TikTok hashtags such as #MidnightSunAnalysis have transformed Meyer's work into a subject of critical discourse, where younger audiences interrogate themes of gender, power, and control." These hashtags represent the democratisation of literary analysis, enabling younger audiences to engage critically with the text outside of traditional academic settings. TikTok's influence on contemporary literary criticism is particularly noteworthy. Hashtags like #MidnightSunAnalysis and #EdwardCullenPOV have generated millions of views, displaying a collective interest in dissecting the novel's treatment of gender and power dynamics. These discussions often extend beyond literary critique, touching on broader social themes such as consent, autonomy, and toxic relationships. By allowing fans to share perspectives and critiques on a global scale, platforms like TikTok blur the lines between academic and popular discourse, ensuring that texts like *Midnight Sun* remain part of larger societal conversations. Therefore, through examination of fan discussions, this article contextualises the cultural resonance of *Midnight Sun* and its ability to bridge literary themes with contemporary social issues. This trend highlights how digital platforms can amplify the cultural relevance of literature, ensuring its themes remain part of larger societal conversations.

The vampire genre has a long history in literature, often serving as a mirror for societal anxieties and desires. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), for instance, epitomised Victorian fears surrounding sexuality and the unknown. Stoker's vampire embodies predatory masculinity, using his supernatural allure to manipulate and dominate women. In contrast, Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) shifted the focus towards the internal struggles of vampires, exploring themes of existentialism and moral ambiguity. Stephenie Meyer builds on these traditions in *Midnight Sun*, reimagining the vampire not only as a complex and introspective figure but also as a lens to examine gender dynamics in a modern context. Edward Cullen's characterisation reflects both his supernatural power and his vulnerability, marking a departure from Stoker's hyper-masculine Dracula. This evolution demonstrates how the vampire archetype continues to adapt, reflecting contemporary cultural shifts and values.

Nevertheless, the novel has also sparked critical debates regarding its portrayal of gender roles. As noted in *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, "Edward's obsessive monitoring of Bella, framed as romantic devotion, may inadvertently romanticize possessive behaviours that align with traditional gendered power imbalances" (Blackwood, 2020). Such critiques point to the tension between the novel's depiction of protective love and its potential reinforcement of gender stereotypes. On the other hand, some defenders

argue that *Midnight Sun* offers a more nuanced exploration of Edward's psychology. As Blackwood (2020) observes, "the narrative provides an intimate view of Edward's internal struggles, complicating his portrayal and deepening the reader's understanding of the central relationship." This duality in the reception of *Midnight Sun* reflects broader societal conversations about gender representation in young adult literature. Taking on account this context of contemporary literature, *Midnight Sun* resonates with ongoing discussions about the portrayal of relationships marked by power imbalances. Critics have drawn parallels between Edward's protective behaviour and modern debates surrounding consent and autonomy in romantic narratives. As Blackwood (2020) argues, "Edward's actions, while framed as protective, often border on surveillance, raising questions about the romanticization of control".

It is imperative to define concepts such as gender and gender roles to understand how deeply they affect literature, especially in the case of *Midnight Sun*. Gender is "the symbolic role definition attributed to members of a sex on the basis of historically constructed interpretations of the nature, disposition, and role of members of that sex" (Gentry et al., 2003, p. 2). These symbolic roles are not merely abstract ideas; they manifest in tangible ways, shaping societal expectations and influencing individual identity formation. These expectations or roles can profoundly affect a person's behaviour, attitudes, and relationships with others, reinforcing cultural norms that are often embedded in literary works. Be that as it may, gender plays a pivotal role in shaping narratives, character development, and thematic exploration in literature. By examining how gender roles are represented in texts, readers gain insight into the broader societal structures that authors either reflect or challenge through their work. As *Midnight Sun* demonstrates, gender dynamics can influence how power, agency, and relationships are portrayed, making the interrogation of these roles crucial to understanding the text's deeper meanings. That said, gender roles also refer to "the expectations and behaviours associated with these symbolic roles, which are often socially enforced rather than biologically inevitable" (Gentry et al., 2003, p.3). These roles are inherently performative, as Judith Butler (1990) explains: "Gender is not something that one is, it is something one does, an act, or more precisely, a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun" (p. 25). Constructed through repeated social practices, these roles sustain normative ideals of masculinity and femininity. While sexual differences may appear to be biologically determined, gendered differences are shaped by sociological and cultural frameworks, making them fluid and subject to reinterpretation. This distinction is particularly relevant in *Midnight Sun*, where Stephenie Meyer navigates and occasionally subverts traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, as seen in the dynamic between Edward and Isabella —Bella— Swan. Consequently, the analysis is grounded in these definitions, and it is explored how *Midnight Sun* both adheres to, and challenges established gender norms, highlighting the broader implications of gender in literature and society. Such an approach not only enhances our understanding of the novel but also situates it within the ongoing discourse on gender identity and representation.

Beyond its narrative, *Midnight Sun* has sparked significant cultural and critical discourse, as mentioned before. While some readers celebrate Meyer's nuanced exploration of Edward's perspective, others criticise the novel for perpetuating unhealthy relationship dynamics. As Cain (2020) from *The Guardian* notes, "*Midnight Sun's* success is a testament to the enduring appeal of Meyer's storytelling, even as it reignites debates about the portrayal of romance in literature". Fan communities on platforms like Reddit and Tumblr have dissected the novel's themes, reflecting a generational shift in how young readers engage with media. Additionally, scholars have drawn comparisons between *Midnight Sun* and its cinematic adaptations, analysing how the visual medium amplifies or mitigates the book's treatment of gender and power. These discussions underscore the novel's cultural resonance, illustrating how it continues to shape conversations about literature, identity, and societal norms.

Meyer delves into the intricate dynamics of gender roles, stereotypes, and identity, as seen through the perspectives of her male and female characters. This article critically argues that, while Meyer challenges certain traditional gender norms, she simultaneously reinforces specific gendered expectations. Due to the scrutinising of the power dynamics between male and female characters, the novel raises compelling questions about the significance of gender in shaping relationships and society at large. The narrative revolves around two primary characters: Edward Cullen, a 107-year-old vampire, and Bella Swan, a 17-year-old human girl. Edward is consistently portrayed as a figure of masculinity—strong, authoritative, and protective. Conversely, Bella embodies a traditionally feminine archetype: vulnerable, dependent, and in need of safeguarding. These roles are overtly evident throughout the novel, as illustrated when Edward reflects on his transformation from a predator to a guardian: "I had transformed from killer to protector" (Meyer, 2020, p. 66).

Bella's role is primarily constructed around her relationship with Edward, emphasising her dependence on him for both guidance and protection. Her fragility and delicacy are recurrent themes, as demonstrated in the school parking lot scene where Edward intervenes to save her from an imminent collision: "As if something about the tire was making her...emotional?" (Meyer, 2020, p. 57). This portrayal reinforces stereotypical notions of women as emotionally volatile and reliant on male intervention. Edward's narrative voice often reflects his internalised perceptions of masculinity and control. For instance, his description of Bella frequently centres on her fragility: "Vulnerable, weak. Even more than usual for a human" (Meyer, 2020, p. 10). Additionally, Edward's use of language serves to reinforce his perception of himself as a protector and Bella as inherently fragile. This framing is evident in his choice of words when observing her actions or emotions, often portraying her as "delicate" or "in need of protection" (Meyer, 2020, p. 10). Such language not only reflects Edward's perspective but also perpetuates traditional gender dichotomies, where strength is associated with men and vulnerability with women. Furthermore, Edward's language often reveals his internal conflict between

his vampiric instincts and his romantic ideals. For instance, he frequently describes Bella in possessive terms, referring to her as “mine” or “my reason for existing” (Meyer, 2020, p. 152). While these phrases may seem romantic, they also reinforce power imbalances in their relationship by positioning Bella as an object of Edward’s protection rather than an equal partner. Additionally, Edward’s narrative voice frequently infantilises Bella, as he describes her emotions as “irrational” or “inexplicable”. This language reinforces gendered stereotypes of women as overly emotional and in need of rational male guidance. Such linguistic patterns highlight how *Midnight Sun* engages with, and at times challenges, traditional representations of gendered power dynamics in romantic relationships.

In stark contrast, Edward’s gender role aligns with his vampiric nature, characterised by physical dominance and emotional restraint. For instance, his struggle to control his instincts upon first encountering Bella’s scent is vividly depicted: “My hand gripped under the edge of the table as I tried to hold myself in my chair. The wood was not up to the task” (Meyer, 2020, p. 11). Nonetheless, Edward’s masculinity is tempered by his vulnerability, especially as his affection for Bella develops, complicating his characterisation: “I can’t even describe it, Emmett. Suddenly, this girl’s the whole world to me. I don’t see the point of the rest of the world without her anymore” (Meyer, 2020, p. 152). Thus, the interplay of gender roles between Bella and Edward significantly drives the plot. Bella’s emotional intensity and vulnerability heighten the tension in their relationship, as Edward grapples with reconciling his protective instincts with his internal fears and insecurities. While these dynamics often conform to traditional stereotypes of women as dependent and men as dominant, Meyer introduces complexity to these roles, challenging readers to consider their nuances.

Comparatively, *Midnight Sun* echoes themes present in classic romantic literature, such as the protector-protected dynamic seen in *Jane Eyre* (1847). However, Meyer’s exploration of Edward’s internal conflict offers a modern twist, where the hero’s masculinity is intertwined with vulnerability, presenting a shift from traditional portrayals of stoicism in male protagonists. Similarly, Bella’s evolution from passivity to moments of defiance recalls Elizabeth Bennet’s determination in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), though adapted to the supernatural context of *Midnight Sun*. In addition to these literary classics, *Midnight Sun* can also be compared to contemporary young adult series, such as Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* (2008-2010) and Veronica Roth’s *Divergent* (2011). In *The Hunger Games*, Katniss Everdeen’s role as a provider and protector subverts traditional notions of femininity, as she assumes responsibilities typically associated with male protagonists. Similarly, in *Divergent*, Tris Prior challenges gender expectations by demonstrating strength and resilience in the face of societal constraints. Unlike Bella, who often depends on Edward for protection, Katniss and Tris assert their agency, taking control of their destinies. These contrasts emphasise how Meyer’s work, while adhering to certain romantic tropes, also engages with broader conversations about

gender and power in young adult fiction. This highlights how the genre provides a space for diverse explorations of identity and agency, resonating with readers navigating comparable questions in their own lives. Expanding on these comparisons, *Midnight Sun* also echoes themes present in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). Much like Victor Frankenstein's internal struggles with morality and ambition, Edward's introspection reveals a conflict between his vampiric instincts and his desire to protect Bella. These parallels emphasise the duality of power and vulnerability in both characters, suggesting that Meyer draws from Gothic traditions to enrich her narrative. Additionally, *Midnight Sun* resonates with the introspective male protagonists in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), whose obsessive love and idealisation of women highlight themes of control and unfulfilled longing.

Notably, Meyer's exploration of gender is multifaceted. Although certain stereotypes are reinforced, the narrative also subverts others. Edward's vulnerability contrasts with conventional expectations of male stoicism, and Bella's occasional defiance—such as asserting her own desires—disrupts her otherwise submissive portrayal. Furthermore, the portrayal of Bella's friendships, particularly with Alice Cullen, offers a richer depiction of female solidarity, as seen in Alice's defence of Bella: "I'm going to love her someday, Jazz. I'll be very put out with you if you don't let her be" (Meyer, 2020, p. 85). Additionally, Alice Cullen emerges as a strong counterpoint to Bella's vulnerability. Her ability to foresee the future positions her as a crucial figure in the narrative, challenging traditional depictions of female passivity. "I knew that Alice would see me coming home, that she would tell the others" (Meyer, 2020, p. 27). Similarly, Rosalie Hale's initial animosity towards Bella, rooted in jealousy, underscores the layered representation of women in the novel, revealing complex motivations beneath apparent hostility. As Edward reflects, "Having just discovered the potency of jealousy for myself, I had a small amount of pity for her" (Meyer, 2020, p. 146). Bella's evolving agency is further complicated by her relationship with her mother, Renee. Unlike the traditional nurturing maternal figure, Renee is portrayed as carefree and dependent, often relying on Bella for emotional support. This inversion of roles creates an intriguing dynamic where Bella assumes a position of responsibility typically associated with parental figures. Such portrayals highlight the fluidity of gender roles within familial relationships, challenging stereotypes of women as inherently maternal and self-sacrificing. Moreover, Bella's interactions with female vampires like Esme Cullen reveal another layer of complexity. Esme, despite her nurturing demeanour, is fiercely protective of her family, embodying a duality of strength and care that challenges one-dimensional representations of femininity in literature.

Beyond its narrative scope, *Midnight Sun* has had a profound impact on contemporary culture, especially among young adult audiences. Its publication during a time of heightened awareness of gender and power dynamics in popular media has reignited discussions about the portrayal of relationships in literature. As noted in *The Guardian*, "Midnight Sun's appeal

lies in its ability to draw readers into Edward's mind while also challenging them to consider the implications of romanticized control and protection" (Cain, 2020). Fan communities on platforms such as Reddit and Tumblr have created extensive discussions, memes, and reinterpretations of the text, reflecting a generational shift in how media is consumed and critiqued. Fans have also reimagined iconic scenes from *Midnight Sun* through humorous memes and TikTok trends. For instance, the #EdwardCullenChallenge, which gained over 500,000 views on the platform, humorously critiques Edward's 'vampire instincts' with exaggerated depictions of his reactions to Bella's scent. As Taylor (2020) notes, 'Fan-driven content on platforms like TikTok has turned literary critique into an accessible and participatory cultural phenomenon.' These engagements demonstrate how younger audiences interact critically yet playfully with Meyer's narrative choices. These online spaces allow readers to dissect Meyer's narrative choices and explore how her portrayal of Edward and Bella aligns with or challenges societal norms. Moreover, *Midnight Sun* has influenced other contemporary works, as authors and screenwriters draw inspiration from its introspective approach to character development. Additionally, the resurgence of *Twilight*-related tourism in Forks, Washington, highlights the novel's enduring economic and cultural impact. Local businesses have reported a noticeable increase in visitors since the release of *Midnight Sun*, with some fans describing their pilgrimage as "a return to the world that defined their adolescence" (*The New York Times*, 2021). This phenomenon underscores the lasting emotional connection readers have with Meyer's work, as well as its ability to bridge literary fiction and real-world experiences. Scholars have also analysed *Midnight Sun* within the broader context of post-2000s young adult literature, comparing its narrative choices to works like *Twilight* and its cinematic adaptations. According to Brown (2022), "Meyer's decision to revisit the *Twilight* story from Edward's perspective not only reframes the original narrative but also invites readers to engage more critically with themes of agency, power, and gender dynamics." This dual-layered impact—emotional and intellectual—cements *Midnight Sun* as a pivotal work in modern literature. Furthermore, the novel's impact extends into multimedia adaptations and derivative works. Fan fiction communities have notably reinterpreted *Midnight Sun*, creating alternate scenarios that explore Bella and Edward's relationship through a feminist lens. These reinterpretations, often shared on platforms like Archive of Our Own, reflect an active reimagining of the narrative to address perceived gaps or limitations. In tourism, the resurgence of interest in Forks, Washington, has led to the creation of dedicated events such as "Twilight Tours," where fans celebrate the cultural significance of the series. According to *The New York Times* (2021), "these tours highlight how literature can bridge fictional worlds and real-life experiences, creating a lasting cultural footprint".

This article has examined the intricate dynamics of gender stereotypes, power, and identity as portrayed in *Midnight Sun*. Beginning with an overview of Stephenie Meyer's narrative approach, the discussion delved into how the novel reimagines traditional vampire tropes, positioning

Edward Cullen as both a protector and a figure of vulnerability. The analysis also explored Bella Swan's dual role as a passive and assertive character, challenging conventional representations of femininity. Comparisons with classic and contemporary literature, such as *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *The Hunger Games* (2008–2010), highlighted *Midnight Sun's* place within the broader literary landscape. Additionally, the article evaluated the cultural reception of the novel, emphasising its enduring appeal and the debates it has sparked about the portrayal of gendered power dynamics in romantic relationships. The release of *Midnight Sun* in 2020 coincided with a global pandemic, a time when readers sought comfort in familiar narratives. As Brown (2022) suggests, 'The return to Forks was not merely a nostalgic escape but also a reflection of the cultural desire to reconnect with simpler narratives during a period of uncertainty.' This context amplified its cultural impact, as audiences revisited Meyer's world with renewed appreciation for its themes of protection, identity, and love. The findings reveal that *Midnight Sun* both reinforces and subverts traditional gender norms. While Edward's protective instincts and Bella's dependence often adhere to stereotypical depictions of masculinity and femininity, Meyer complicates these roles by introducing moments of vulnerability and defiance in her characters. Edward's emotional depth, expressed through his inner conflict and possessive love for Bella, challenges the archetype of the stoic male hero. Similarly, Bella's interactions with other female characters, such as Alice Cullen, offer a nuanced exploration of female solidarity and agency. From a cultural perspective, the reception of *Midnight Sun* underscores its relevance in ongoing discussions about gender and relationships. Critiques of Edward's surveillance-like behaviour have drawn attention to the novel's implicit commentary on consent and autonomy, while fans' enthusiastic engagement with the story reflects its ability to resonate with contemporary audiences. The novel's cultural impact extends beyond the literary sphere, influencing tourism, online fan communities, and even adaptations in visual media.

In 2025, the themes explored in *Midnight Sun* remain highly relevant, both literarily and socially. The novel's portrayal of complex gender dynamics aligns with contemporary efforts to deconstruct traditional gender roles in literature and media. As discussions around feminism and representation continue to evolve, *Midnight Sun* serves as a case study for analysing the tension between romantic tropes and progressive ideals. The novel's nuanced characters and their struggles with identity provide valuable insights for readers navigating their own questions of agency and autonomy. Socially, the cultural footprint of *Midnight Sun* highlights the enduring power of literature to shape conversations about gender and relationships. The debates it has sparked among critics, scholars, and fans underscore the importance of critically engaging with popular narratives. By blending introspective character development with broader societal themes, Meyer's work bridges the gap between literary fiction and cultural discourse, making *Midnight Sun* a significant text for understanding gender representation in the 21st century. In conclusion, *Midnight Sun* exemplifies the potential of young adult literature to challenge and reimagine traditional

narratives. Its impact, both literary and cultural, reflects the evolving nature of storytelling and its capacity to inspire critical reflection on identity, relationships, and power in a rapidly changing world. The novel also exemplifies the power of young adult literature to foster critical conversations about identity and relationships. In an era where representation in media is scrutinised more than ever, *Midnight Sun* serves as a reminder of the transformative potential of storytelling. By revisiting established narratives through new perspectives, authors can challenge readers to engage with complex themes and reflect on their own societal contexts. As Meyer's work continues to inspire adaptations, critiques, and fan engagement, it reinforces the importance of literature as a dynamic and evolving cultural force.

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