
MASTEROPPGAVE



"The Undead Patriarchy"

Reading Popular Literature in the English Language Classroom

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Abstract

The topic of this thesis is to find ways to emphasise gender issues in the English language classroom. Research has shown that despite the substantial inclusion of gender equality perspectives in both legislation and in the curriculum, research is accumulating that such issues are no longer considered to be a big issue. Although teachers do consider gender equality to be an important value, it is not given priority in their teaching. The assumption being, among students and teachers alike, that Norway has already accomplished gender equality.

It is my attempt to find ways to incorporate an awareness of gender issues in English language teaching and demonstrate how popular fiction can be a valuable tool in doing so. Through carefully selected and discussed “light” reading material, weaker readers may become better readers and thus better equipped to identify and resist stereotypical gender attitudes.

For this purpose, I have analysed *Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer. I demonstrate that the novel upholds traditional gender stereotypes and contains a view that controlling behaviour in a relationship is acceptable. My findings provide an insight into how gender perspectives can be integrated in English language teaching and hopefully they may inspire to a more conscious inclusion of such issues.

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“All normal people need both trash and classics”

George Bernhard Shaw

1. Introduction

Recent research has shown that despite the substantial inclusion of gender equality values in acts and regulations, these perspectives are largely neglected in daily teaching practise.

According to the Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research and Education (hereafter referred to as NIFU), gender equality is viewed to be something we have already achieved and is thus taken for granted (Støren et al: 95). Moreover, the report reveals that lack of gender equality is generally something which is associated with previous times or other cultures. Yet another report (Øia 2011a) reveals, however, that Norwegian students have rather gender stereotyped attitudes.

Looking at the gender distribution in upper secondary vocational classes though, it is obvious that in spite of their independence and individuality, girls still tend to choose traditional female roles. Their choice of educational programme is indicative of the fact that increased freedom and independence do not necessarily change patterns of action. This is of course a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. However, the fact that gender issues apparently are overlooked in large parts within teaching practices in Norwegian schools baffled me. The documented lack of emphasis on gender perspectives in teaching together with the general assumption that gender equality is something we have achieved once and for all, gave me the choice of topic for this thesis. I wanted to find out about how English language teachers can engage students in a conscious reflection about gender related issues and I have sought to demonstrate how the widely popular *Twilight* phenomenon can be used for this purpose.

1.1 Background

As a point of departure, I would like to share with you one of my most memorable teaching experiences. It was at the beginning of my teaching career, and I was asked to be a substitute teacher for a group of students who were half way into their first year of the vocational educational programme “Service and Communication”. The subject was Norwegian and their regular teacher had allowed the students to choose a novel to read in class. Initially, I thought my colleague must have been mad when she had allowed the very controversial Norwegian novel, *Pornopung* by Mads Larsen, to be a class reader. The novel, titled *Shavenballs* in English, follows three young men in their effort to seduce more women than Casanova.

Although quite a few reviewers dismissed the novel to be merely a bad excuse for dirty talk to be published, others claimed it to be a part of the discussion of modern day gender roles. Either way, *Pornopung* generated a long media debate and is to date one of Norway's bestselling debut novels ever (Wikipedia). According to my colleague, the students in the above mentioned class had previously not showed particular enthusiasm for reading books, but the frenzy surrounding *Pornopung* had obviously sparked their interest in literature. Since many students may look at a substitute teacher as an easy target to intimidate, I felt unsurprisingly apprehensive about the class I was about to have. I will not dwell on whether or not I was successful in conducting this particular lesson, my key point is that this was truly an eye-opening teaching experience. I realised that not only had my colleague been incredibly brave when she had agreed to use *Pornopung* in her teaching, she had also been very wise. Indeed, this was a hands-on example of how to link students' everyday interest and curiosity with reading in class. A vital component in this case is to be sensitive to factors which can foster reading motivation. One of the major themes in *Pornopung* was the allegedly subverted gender roles on the dating scene. This was a topic that went down well with the students and generated lively discussions.

With my newfound wisdom about reading motivation I started to look for reading material for the English class that would elicit the same response. An obvious starting point was the field of popular literature, and I settled for a popular theme that has been with us for a very long time.

Vampires have captivated readers for centuries and, unless you live on the moon, the past years' vampire craze cannot have passed unnoticed. The television series *True Blood* and the books in the *Twilight* series by Stephenie Meyer are two of the major contributors to the current vampire fascination. My immersion with *Twilight* began while I was working on an analysis on how the vampire, who originally was depicted as an evil villain, has morphed into being an impossibly handsome beau in contemporary popular fiction. I must readily admit that I was not immediately taken by the *Twilight* universe, but then again I do not belong to the target audience.

Luckily, there are very few in Norway who are not able to read and write on a basic level. However the PISA surveys reveal that many students simply do not read and write well enough. Both national and international surveys have shown that Norwegian students' reading skills are not as good as one could have wished for. Reading is not only the basis for

all school subjects; it is also a vital skill for coping in modern society. To find engaging texts to read in class plays a crucial role in this context. I am currently teaching English at the vocational education programme for health and social work in upper secondary school, and to motivate the students to read can be a daunting task. The *Twilight* phenomenon, however, has not gone unnoticed among the students. Currently they are awaiting the final instalment of the novels, the film *Breaking Dawn 2*, which premieres in November 2012.

So, in the light of research findings regarding both Norwegian students' reading skills as well as their attitudes toward gender equality, I recalled how *Pornopung* generated an interest first in reading and then in a subsequent discussion of gender roles. I consequently set out to investigate whether *Twilight* could be used in the English language classroom for exactly the same reasons.

1.2 Research Aims

The results of the PISA surveys give a somewhat negative view of students' reading skills (Roe 2008). Such results indicate that it is of outmost importance for us as teachers to increase students' motivation to read, especially those who do not see any enjoyment in reading books. I will therefore start out and briefly discuss why popular literature can be included as reading material in the English language classroom.

However, the main aim of this thesis is to argue for an integration of gender perspectives in English teaching practice through the use of popular literature. The focus will be on how we can promote a critical exploration and discussion of beliefs and attitudes related to gender with our students through reading, and how *Twilight* fits this purpose. Hopefully, my findings will contribute to current teaching practices and thus be a recommendation for a more conscious incorporation of gender issues in relation to English language teaching.

1.3 Outline and Method

This thesis is organised in five chapters which comprise relevant theoretical background and a procedure where central gender aspects found in *Twilight* are identified and discussed. The method I have applied is partly a document analysis of the LK06 curriculum followed by a summary of recent research findings in two reports concerning attitudes toward gender equality among Norwegian teenagers (Øia 2011a, Støren et al). With the Government's political aims and the current state of affairs as my point of departure, I then present a textual analysis of *Twilight*, and a description of how this novel may be suitable in promoting a critical discussion of gender perspectives in the English classes. In order to narrow down the

scope of my research, I have decided to look at only the first novel in the *Twilight* series, including the film adaptation directed by Catherine Hardwicke.

2. Gender Equality and Education

In this section I will give a definition of the terms gender and gender perspective. I will also take a look at how gender equality is referred to in acts and regulations for primary and secondary education. Then I will give a summary of recent research regarding gender equality work in Norwegian schools and attitudes toward gender equality among young people.

2.1 What is Gender?

Gender is a term that may need clarification. We usually recognise a person as a man or a woman, a boy or a girl. While the term sex refers to the physiological differences that define female and male bodies, gender is a term used for the psychological, social and cultural differences between males and females. Gender is therefore linked to socially constructed notions of masculinity and femininity, which boys and girls learn very early. The types of emotions that boys and girls are encouraged to express, and the types of portrayals of males and females that children encounter in media are all influential. Researchers argue that children have a multitude of experiences through which they learn beliefs and values that are to be regarded as desirable behaviour for their sex (Siegler et al: 579). Boys may, for example, often be taught the importance appearing tough and dominant, whether they like it or not. Women are expected to take care of the home, of the children and of people in general. It is not difficult to imagine how this pattern has been developed as it is women who carry babies and usually breastfeed them, at least during the first few months. Traditionally, men have been freer with regards to child rearing practices. In this way, gender stereotypes are transmitted directly by parents.

Geert Hofstede points out that the gender role socialisation that started in the family continues in peer groups and in schools (Hofstede & Hofstede: 118). Students' ideas about what is considered gender appropriate behaviour are also shaped by the different treatment they receive from their teachers (Siegler et al: 582). Teachers tend to value stereotypical feminine behaviours of being quiet and obedient and to discourage typically associated masculine behaviour such as assertiveness. In fact, it has been suggested that the continuous

assessment grade may be influenced by other factors than the students' achievement (Bakken et al 2008: 19). Since teachers attempt to limit disruptive behaviour, there is reason to believe that girls' behaviour in class profits when school work is assessed over a longer period of time. At national exams, however, boys and girls usually receive more similar grades (ibid: 90).

Gender refers to cultural meanings and connotations associated with one's biological sex. It refers to what is appropriate behaviour for females and males, respectively, and thereby what is considered masculine and feminine. However, this differs within and between cultures. R. W. Connell (2002) writes that it is easy to recognise society's gender order. Examples would be that most science and technology are controlled by men and most big institutions are run by men. The gender order in most societies also leads to unequal respect for men and women, and that women are considered to be and treated as less important. Thus, gender is not something we are or have, but rather something we do and produce. Psychological research suggests that most of us combine feminine and masculine characteristics in varying blends, rather than being all one or all the other (Connell: 5). This means that being a woman or a man is not a fixed state. People construct themselves as masculine or feminine, something which inevitably will be influenced by social norms. A culture where the particular pattern of masculine behaviour holds the dominant position is in gender studies called hegemonic masculinity. Such cultures are typically competitive, and males seek to dominate other males and subordinate females. Albeit being a contested principle, the concept of hegemonic masculinity has influenced thinking about gender and social hierarchy (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005).

A gender perspective means that gender is a social construction which is being discussed or taken into account in explanations and interpretations of the world. It can therefore be said that to have a gender perspective is to have an attitude that sexual discrimination, gender stereotyping and prejudices are attitudes which are socially constructed. Richard Brislin points out that such categorisation is part of normal human thinking. We cannot respond individually to everything and everyone we see on an average day, instead we form categories (Brislin: 199). Stereotypes are categories about people and will thus contain inaccurate assumptions about individuals. Although stereotyping is a shortcut in the mental processes of understanding and something we all do, stereotypes should be consciously held (ibid: 203). This means that we should involve careful consideration and reflection to avoid decisions to be made based on little or no thought.

Gender roles are part and parcel of every society and are reflected through media, e.g. in women's magazines, children's books, TV programmes and films. Differences in gender representation of characters on TV have been well documented and have changed relatively little over the past three decades (Siegler et al: 581). However the different treatment of the sexes in media is not limited to numerical representation. Geert Hofstede and Gert Jan Hofstede argue that mainstream movies are modern myths that create hero models in accordance with the dominant culture in the society where they are made (Hofstede & Hofstede: 133). Does it matter, then, that there are large differences in both the number and nature of gender portrayals on TV, in cinemas or in literature? From a gender socialisation perspective, it matters a great deal. For most children and teenagers, TV programmes, films and books are all a major sources of information about the world at large. Consequently, the way men and women are portrayed can have a profound impact on gender identification.

The psychological implications of being a boy or a girl are determined by subsequent interaction between nature and nurture (Siegler et al: 602). There is a common impression that the sexes are inherently different, but the similarities, in most respects, outweigh the differences. Robert Siegler et al state that the actual differences in boys' and girls' psychological functioning is less significant than what is portrayed by stereotyped gender roles. In various measures where one sex on average scores higher than the other, the differences are slight and there is a considerable overlap in the distribution of scores for men and women (ibid: 603). A stroll into almost any toy store is a striking example. The toys are organised by sex with obvious reference to what is considered to be women's interests and skills. Girls' toys are often about beauty and the home, while toys for boys are more about being active, building things and having adventures. Gender specific toys exert a strong influence over the activities children choose, the skills they build and ultimately the roles they later take in society. It is not hard to see a connection between girls playing with dolls and boys playing with cars and the highly segregated labour market. Nurses and preschool teachers are overwhelmingly female, whereas engineers and mechanics tend to be male. This segregation matters. It helps explain the stubborn wage gap, as care giving professions generally pay less than technical jobs do. Furthermore can stereotypes also help explain why so few women have made it into leadership positions, even in Norway where much effort has been made in levelling the responsibilities of child care duties. Leadership is associated with typical "male" qualities like assertiveness and risk-taking.

As we have seen, male and female stereotypes are established early. For example are toys not particularly labelled to be “for girls”, but the dollhouses and make-up heads leave no doubt who the target group is. Some things have changed, though. Most girls these days do play with Lego and some boys love their play stoves. Perhaps even more important is that toddlers of both sexes are crazy about smartphones and iPads.

Much attention has been spent on attracting women to into engineering jobs, not least because of the lack of skilled workers. Breaking down the stereotype of the typically caring female, however, does also mean to make space for the caring male. Unless we tackle the traditional attitudes as to what is regarded as suitable occupations for men and women respectively, there will be a pressure on boys and girls to follow in the footpath of these consistent stereotypes. One possible measure would be for schools to take a hard look at established teaching practices, perhaps with a nudge from lawmakers.

2.2 Legislation and Framework

The Gender Equality Act was enacted in 1978. Its purpose is to promote gender equality, and it aims in particular at improving the position of women. Over the more than thirty years that have passed, we have seen substantial equality between the genders come true. Today, we are discussing fathers’ roles and rights in regard to parental leave along with promoting women to take part in the upper echelons of working life. For example, the company laws in Norway have been amended in order to achieve the government's target of a quota of 40 per cent board representation for the underrepresented sex in the boardrooms of all state owned enterprises and privately owned public limited companies (from Fact Sheet: The legislation on representation of both sexes in boards at the Ministry of Trade and Industry’s website). Although the quota rules generated a heated discussion initially, the representation of women rose in boardrooms and has been a success story. A societal change does not necessarily come about by itself, but able women were apparently not hard to find.

In the Education Act it is stated that the objectives of education and training are to promote democracy, equality and scientific thinking (section 1-1). Ever since 1974, gender equality has been an integrated part of the curricula for primary and secondary education and training (Imsen: 35). The National Curriculum for Knowledge Promotion was launched in 2006 (hereafter referred to as LK06) and consists of three parts: the Core Curriculum, the Quality Framework and the subject curricula. The Core Curriculum is kept from a previous curriculum, L93, and applies to the LK06 in the same way that it did to Reform 94 and L97.

Here it is stated that education should foster equality between the sexes and solidarity among groups and across boundaries. Bodil Krokan points out that this means that educators must not only work with consciousness raising, but also actively promote gender equality (ibid: 42). However, there little correspondence with the gender equality aims in the Core Curriculum and the various subject curricula. This also becomes apparent in the English subject curriculum which does not contain a reference to neither gender nor equality.

Work on achieving gender equality in the Norwegian school system has had a high priority. The Ministry for Education and Research has produced guidelines and brochures to help teachers in gender equality work in school. One of these brochures, called *Handsome and Pretty*, contains factual information, background material and questions teachers could use as a basis for implementing gender perspectives in their lessons.

As shown, today most people in Norway seem to take gender equality for granted. However, the mission is not completed. Cultural habits, traditions and gender stereotypes are stubborn phenomena. We still have a very gender segmented labour market and young people tend to choose gender traditional education programmes. The Ministry of Education and Research wished to tackle this and presented *The Action Plan for Gender Equality in Kindergarten and Basic Education 2008–2010*. In the foreword, Minister of Education Bård Vegar Solhjell, writes that it is not an objective as such to have equal numbers of men and women in all professions, but rather to break with the visible and invisible barriers that stop girls and boys from making untraditional choices. Moreover, he states that gender equality work requires us to act here and now, but that it also entails systematic and long term work on attitudes.

Hence, we must combat old fashioned gender stereotypes as talents are obviously evenly divided among the sexes. If education is to socialise pupils to gender equality, activities and interaction in the classroom are probably just as, if not more, important than what the textbooks say.

2.3 Research Findings Concerning Gender Equality Work in School

The Norwegian Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research and Education (NIFU) was commissioned by the Directorate for Education and Training to map the status of gender equality in the education sector. The Action Plan for Gender Equality in Kindergarten and Basic Education 2008-2010 formed the basis for the project and was conducted as an

electronic survey among teachers, as well as qualitative interviews with students and teachers. Both students and teachers answered that gender equality is something we have in Norway. In general they had little to say about gender equality with the assumption that this is something we have already achieved and thus is taken for granted (Støren et al: 95).

Teachers and students also shared the opinion that gender equality was integrated in teaching mostly by the way it was given emphasis in the subject curricula in History and Norwegian.

Together with the overall impression that gender equality is something which is already achieved was the emerged pattern of gender stereotyped views. These findings are supported by another report concerning young people and their attitudes toward gender equality (Øia 2011a).

The NIFU report also claims that it probably is not very controversial to point out that gender equality is more than just a question about discrimination. It is also a question of equal opportunities and major gender differences in society are easily detectable. The gender wage gap is used as an example to show that equal opportunities yet not exist (ibid: 116).

Furthermore, the report calls for a renewed discussion of what gender equality actually involves, and that this very discussion also must be a part of teaching practices. These issues are important for the students both as future employees and parents. Thus, the illusion that gender equality is something we have accomplished once and for all must be questioned together with a critical focus on prevailing gender stereotypes. It is a gigantic task, and one that goes well beyond the realms of the English language classroom. However, in what follows, I will suggest one way to address these issues.

3. Reading

So, how could one integrate these important issues into other school subjects than the ones already mentioned above, History and Norwegian? In addition, given the mandate of the Norwegian school that it actually must promote gender equality, how can one do it better? My answer lies in the use of popular literature in the English language class. Here, I propose to kill two birds with one stone, to promote reading and analytical skills – while at the same time focusing on gender issues. Let us first look at reading.

In this section I will give a short definition of what being able to read actually means. This is followed by a brief presentation of the Norwegian students' results in the Programme for International Student Assessments (PISA). Then I will look at how reading is emphasised in the LK06. Finally, I will discuss why reading popular young adult literature in the English language classroom can be beneficial.

Reading is more than a mere decoding of written words. According to Marit Kjærnsli & Astrid Roe (2010: 4) the term reading literacy includes students' ability to understand the content in a given text in addition to the ability to use written texts as tools for their own learning. Consequently, insufficient reading skills constitute a severe limitation both in education and in future employment. In today's society, with the emerging new technologies, there is an increased demand for reading literacy in a wide sense. Technology has also transformed our ways of communication. To express opinions and engage in discussions on social networking sites are activities many of us do on a daily basis. We must also be able to gather information from multiple sources, and be able to judge the reliability of the information on any given website. Students today are therefore in need of more sophisticated reading skills, compared to previous generations.

3.1 Norwegian Students and Reading: a problem to solve

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has since 2000 conducted the PISA assessments. These surveys are done with a three year interval. It is an international comparative study which measures 15 year olds' skills in three areas, namely maths, science and reading literacy. Every third year the main emphasis is one of the three subject areas, and reading was the main area in 2000 and again in 2009. The Norwegian students' scores were just above the OECD average in the first PISA study. However, the

results were far worse than expected, and caused considerable concern. As a result, the government launched a strategic plan called *Make Space for Reading!* in 2003 to promote the pleasure of reading both in and out of school. A further focus on the importance of reading came with the new curriculum LK06. Five basic skills were introduced to the new curriculum and are to be taught across the curriculum, in all subjects. These basic skills are the ability to express oneself orally, the ability to read, numeracy, the ability to express oneself in writing, and the ability to use digital tools.

Although the PISA assessments are done in the native language, there is reason to believe that these findings also apply to reading in English. In his doctoral thesis Glenn Ole Hellekjær (2005) found, among other things, that since the curriculum does not specify the amount of reading to be done, Norwegian students read very little in English.

As mentioned above, the introduction of basic skills in the curriculum gave an increased emphasis on reading. In the LK06 the basic skill of being able to read is described as follows:

Being able to read English is part of the practical language competence and means being able to read and understand, to explore and reflect upon increasingly more demanding texts and thus gain insight across cultures and disciplines. Developing reading skills in English also improves general reading skills.

As the curriculum does not specify the actual reading to be done, teachers may rely on only the textbook as the main source of reading material in the English language classroom. Textbooks usually consist of a selection of shorter and longer texts inclusive of tasks and activities related to the topic. The texts are often followed by several comprehension questions which cause these texts to be read with much focus on detail, also called intensive reading. However, students must practice extensive reading as well. That is, reading larger quantities of texts and longer texts where there is less focus on detail. It is important though that the texts are at the right level of difficulty. Hellekjær suggests that a rule of thumb should be that students are able to read and understand the overall meaning although they do not know every single word. In order to practise extensive reading, Hellekjær (2009) points out that the textbook is not enough and that other texts which the students enjoy must be included as reading material. Furthermore, he argues that in order to meet the requirements in the curriculum; the schools must purchase additional reading material. Indeed, Day and Bamford remind us that in the absence of interesting texts, very little is possible (Day & Bamford

2002: 136). It seems obvious then that we must take into account other texts than what has been the traditionally school-assigned reading material.

3.2 Reading Motivation

It is generally acknowledged that motivation plays a crucial role in learning. Therefore, teachers need to recognise the powerful relationship between motivation and achievement in literacy development. When children first enter school, they are usually very motivated and excited about learning. However, many students' motivation to read in school decreases as they get older (Bråten: 76). Typically, students who are less successful readers tend to be turned off from reading at an early stage. As a result they may consciously start avoiding reading. Hence, they get very little practice. Since the best way to learn to read is by reading, the students who avoiding reading will eventually be caught in a vicious circle.

In *Lesedidaktikk* Roe (2008) refers to John Guthrie's principles for the promotion of reading motivation. Guthrie's advice is to use diverse texts and to link reading to the students' real-world experiences, because then they are likely to read with keen attention. He proposes that some sort of social interaction should be facilitated during reading activities because collaboration is rewarding and may foster further reading engagement.

In a longitudinal observational study, Judith Langer (2001) identified specific characteristics which affected students' reading literacy positively. All the students at the schools she visited came from less well off backgrounds. Students at fourteen schools performed better than the rest, and according to Langer, the teachers at the higher performing schools were more devoted to the development of the students' reading abilities and used a large amount of time for this purpose. These teachers frequently discussed texts with their classes and focused on critical thinking questions to ensure a deeper understanding. In the more typical performing schools, reading instruction focused on content or skill, but not necessarily on creative and critical reflection about the text.

In the article *Motivation and Motivating in the Foreign Language classroom* Zoltan Dornyei states that motivation is one of the main determinants in second language learning achievement (Dornyei 1994: 273). In his view the question of how to motivate students is an area which has not had sufficient emphasis. Motivation in second language learning is a multifaceted phenomenon says Dornyei. His outline to a comprehensible motivation model consists of three broad levels, the language level, the learner level and the learning situation

level. Based on the components of this model, Dornyei proposes a long list of practical motivational strategies to use with language learners. When it comes to course specific motivational components at the third level (learning situation level), Dornyei argues that in order to increase the attractiveness of the course content, teachers can use unusual and exotic supplementary materials, for example authentic materials that are within students' grasp (ibid. 281). Not surprisingly, if students do not expect that they are able to understand a given text, it is less possible that they will even begin reading.

The problem with authentic material written for native speakers at the same age is that the language level may be too difficult. In order to ensure that texts are at the right linguistic level, many teachers resort to use graded readers. However, it is vital that students also get practice in handling a text where they do not understand every single word, but still are able to extract the general meaning. In order to accustom students to real-world reading, they should also read authentic texts in class. It is when students come in contact with authentic language that they have to work hardest to understand. Thus the use of easy material is controversial. However, it is worth pointing out that teachers must be extra careful when selecting authentic material. After all, it will be very demotivating for students if they are not able to understand much of what they read.

Day and Bamford are strong proponents for the use of graded readers, which they term 'language learner literature' (Day & Bamford, 2002: 137). They see graded readers as a means of increasing reading fluency, and thus motivation, among second language learners (Day & Bamford 1998). Furthermore, they stress that learners should not be confronted with too many unfamiliar words on any given page of a book, as this is likely to be demotivating.

Brian Parkinson and Helen Reid Thomas (2000) point out that many teachers prefer to use authentic material rather than rewritten and simplified versions of other authors' works. They advocate linking reading material more closely to the students' everyday interests. Because the main focus is on the readers' enthusiasm, what kind of literature the students actually read is less significant. At more advanced levels, Gilian Lazar argues that students may be so absorbed by the plot and characters of an authentic novel that they acquire a great deal of language almost in passing (Lazar: 17). Surely, the topics in authentic young adult literature can be more motivating for students to read than solely depend on the topics covered in the course textbook. The challenge lies in the language level, but Hellekjær reminds us to be

aware of the fact that students' reading proficiency often improves more rapidly than expected (Hellekjær 2007). As for the selection of texts, there are several things teachers need to have in mind, and most importantly must the texts be up to date with a language that is not too complicated. The figure below shows how the four variables of reading materials, reading ability, attitudes and sociocultural environment will eventually lead to reading (or not).

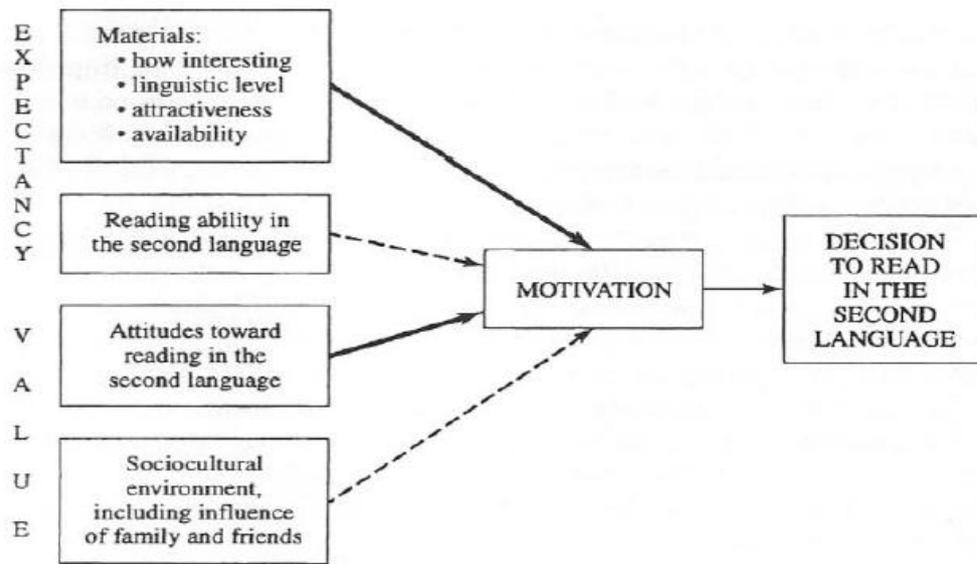


Figure 1: Model of the major variables motivating the decision to read in a second language. A solid line indicates a stronger influence than a broken line (Day & Bamford 1998: 28).

Since motivation is the single most important factor which influences the choice to read, it is essential to find reading material which is likely to engage students. The above model particularly highlights the attractiveness of the material used. A certain topic, exercise, book or film may have the potential to generate interest among students, although we have to be aware that the students' delight over a given task does not ensure that learning is taking place. Nevertheless, without interesting reading material, it is unlikely that we are able to persuade the less proficient students into reading literature.

To sum up, the decision to read relies very much on the motivation factor. In addition, based on the research presented above, it may be assumed that classrooms which have a focus on motivation can optimise reading achievement. Authentic reading material has the potential to engage students as long as the language is not too complicated. We must also remember that carefully selected texts can help students understand more written English than they initially thought they were able to do.

3.3 Popular Literature as a Possible Solution

We have seen that there is no demand in the LK06 to read even one novel in English, and to read longer literary texts is obviously quite time consuming. Why, then, should teachers then focus on literature within the limited time they have available?

Lazar (1993) examines some of the underlying issues and concerns involving the use of literature in the language classroom. Above all, literary texts bring up different themes which can evoke reactions and interpretations which can be discussed in class. Lazar is convinced that if the materials are carefully chosen, students will feel that what they do in the classroom is relevant and meaningful to their lives (ibid: 15). Students can bring their own experiences and personal responses to the themes in the text. Hopefully, a focus on personal involvement will lead to a motivation to read and discuss texts in class. To create such a response, though, the students have to have some feelings toward what they read. Collie and Slater write:

It is true of course that the “world” of a novel, play or a short story is a created one, yet it offers a full and vivid context in which characters from many social backgrounds can be depicted. A reader can discover their thoughts, feelings, customs, possessions; what they buy, believe in, fear, enjoy; how they speak and behave behind closed doors (Collie & Slater: 4).

In this way, literature provides students with insight to foreign cultures and societies. To discuss social and cultural conditions in English-speaking countries is part of the English subject curriculum.

Teachers may wish for students to read classical literature or other books of literary value. However, Day & Bamford point out that second language extensive reading may not be the best context for such endeavours (Day & Bamford 1998: 110). Although there may be several reasons as to why it is more profitable to read books with high linguistic quality, Naper is convinced that *all* reading will enhance language ability (Naper 1994:172). She argues that in line with what we know about language acquisition, there is a strong indication that reading is one of the most important factors in language development. According to Naper there is a strong indication that the more children are being read to, the more they read themselves and better readers do better at school. How much we read seems therefore to be the key. Research done for the OECD has found that students who read well tend to be active readers. The results show that it is important not only to teach students to read, but also to engage them into reading outside the context of school work. Stephen Krashen (2004) lists various studies that have found free voluntary reading to correspond to an increase in vocabulary, reading

comprehension and oral fluency. Obviously, then, if students are to become lifetime consumers of books teachers should promote titles which are tailored to their age group. One possible way to persuade the more reluctant readers among students to actually read an entire novel is to follow the example of popular culture. This is especially true if reading is seen mostly as a school related chore. An inclusion of contemporary popular literature written in English aimed at young adults can be a fresh and unexpected addition to the textbook and thus be highly motivating.

Popular literature is typically formula based according to Naper (Naper 1994: 24). Such fiction usually has predictable plots and is often stereotypically associated with the term kiosk literature. The French literature sociologist Robert Escarpit pointed out the different distribution channels used for what was considered to be serious literature as supposed to where popular literature was being sold. The first type of literature was sold within what he called the cultivated circuit, e.g. bookshops, whereas the latter was distributed in what he called the popular circuit, e.g. bookstalls at railway stations. Previously this may also have applied to Norway as well, but the distribution channels for different literature are not as separate nowadays. The term kiosk literature, however, is still in use. Surely, this type of literature has its own publishers and is sold in supermarkets, and such books are rarely reviewed in newspapers and magazines. However, it is worth noticing that these authors do not strive for literary complexity. The main purpose is to entertain and therefore these novels should not be compared to or measured by criteria used for literature in other genres (Naper 2007b: 17). It may be that there is little respect for these books because they are considered to be less “exclusive”. For the purpose of language acquisition though, romance novels can be highly useful texts. Indeed, Krashen argues that perhaps the most powerful way to encourage reading is to expose students to this kind of “light” reading, a genre he claims schools pretend do not exist (Krashen: 92). The first thing we need to do is to find out what reading material which may appeal to our students by finding out what other teenagers read voluntarily. For many students, reading is its own reward. However, this is not the case for all students and it is a major challenge to convince those students that reading can be a pleasurable activity. In order to help facilitate active and engaged reading, teachers need to consider a wide variety of texts for classroom use. Most importantly is probably that the students’ own reading preferences are known and accepted.

What is then worthy literature for classroom use? Literary taste has to do with fascination, and reading preferences correlate with linguistic competence. Escarpit described how mass

paperbacks and what is considered more serious literature existed in separate spheres and thus had a different readership. Similarly, Cecilie Naper looked at how library borrowers and readers of kiosk literature differ in terms of background, education and in literary taste in her doctoral study *Bestsellers in public libraries and bookstalls* (2007a). She documented that the more educated preferred greater complexity in literature. The less educated readers preferred literature which was easily read, clear and unambiguous. Popular literature is much like kiosk literature, viewed by critics to lack both complexity and originality. Furthermore has popular literature been dismissed as to be nothing more than a daydream in a book format (Naper 2007a). Such fiction is like offering candy instead of bread according to the Danish literature researcher Sven Møller Kristensen (as cited in Naper 1994: 125). Apparently, to him these books are easily digested, but lack nutritious value. However, Naper argues that popular fiction can be beneficial to use with language learners simply *because* it is formula based and thus has a plotline that easy to understand.

Donald Fry studied weak readers and reading of popular literature in particular (ibid: 172). He found that identification was an important factor for the readers. In addition to a detailed description of characters and setting, these stories contain a black-and-white moral universe. Fry concludes that the predictable patterns in these texts offer support to the reader. In this way, the recognisable patterns make it easier for the weaker readers to understand the plot.

Fry also claims that reading popular literature is more beneficial to second language acquisition rather than reading other works of literature (ibid: 13). The reason for this is that these books are so easily “swallowed up” by the reader. Furthermore, he argues that popular literature is especially suitable for language learners because these books contain a relative simple language and have straightforward plots. It is therefore my claim that such light reads should belong to the reading material in the English classroom. How *far* we get in our language acquisition, however, does not solely depend on the amount of reading, but also on the linguistic quality of what we read. This might be why some would consider the use of light reads to be somewhat counterproductive in language teaching. In my opinion such a position applies mostly for the more advanced learners, e.g. the students at the second or third year of the academic specialisation programme in upper secondary education.

According to Krashen, the major function of the second language classroom is to provide sufficient intake for acquisition to take place. He argues that given the right kind of exposure, the target language would emerge naturally in a predetermined order. The hypothesis he put

forward was that the exposure had to be comprehensible and slightly above the learner's level, often abbreviated as *i+1*. The most useful task a teacher could perform was to expose students to large amounts of language input just above their current level of proficiency. There have been a number of critiques to Krashen's hypothesis (Ellis: 251). One basic problem was the difficulty of defining a learner's current language level (*i*), and most notably, the corresponding level of comprehensible input (*+1*). While relatively few entirely subscribe to Krashen's hypothesis today, the value of rich and varied language input in language teaching has wide support (Carter & Nunan: 90). Moreover is Krashen a strong advocate for pleasure reading, or what he calls free voluntary reading (Krashen: x). He has, however, modified his theories and admits that even with massive free voluntary reading of appropriate texts, complete acquisition may not take place (Krashen: 129). Apparently, there is no reason to ditch direct grammar teaching and dictionaries after all.

Sadly, recreational reading is uncommon for many students. Research has documented that many young people do not read for pleasure (Haugstveit et al 2009, Øia 2011b). In a report assessing reading habits in lower secondary school in connection to the strategic plan *Make Space for Reading*, the students who say they are not interested in reading express strongly that they consider reading to be very boring. In their view, reading is a meaningless chore (Haugstveit et al: 19). According to the students they were not introduced to contemporary young adult literature in school. Traditionally, young adult literature has been kept off the reading lists in language teaching (Nesje Vestli 2008: 30). To get students to read as much and as willingly as possible, it is important that we make reading fun by also including reading materials students would be likely to read on their own, e.g. comic books, magazines and teen romance novels.

3.4 Reader Oriented Theories

Escarpit stated that the text does not become a text until it meets its reader (Naper 1994: 154). Reception theory represented a shift from a focus on the author and the text, to the text and the reader. The literary text was no longer seen to be something to be untangled or interpreted. Reading was to be viewed as a dialog or a meeting between the text and the reader (Nesje Vestli: 8). Wolfgang Iser has been particularly influential when it comes to reception theory. According to him, reading must be creative and active. Typically, in texts which are thought to be of higher literary value, all of our expectations are not being met. We are surprised and must rebuild our understanding which again creates new expectations. If our expectations are not challenged, we cannot be co-constructors of the text according to Iser

(Naper 1994). A common feature shared by popular works of literature is that there is less room for interpretations. The text has few “empty spaces”. Empty spaces can be seen as crossroads where the reading experience eventually will follow different ways depending on who is reading, and the literary value lies in the readers’ construction of meaning.

Reader-response theory has, to a larger extent than reception theory, a increased emphasis on the reader’s role. From a reader-response point of view, which spaces in a text that are considered to be open depend solely on the reader. Cecilie Naper’s doctoral thesis (Naper 2007a) analysed the most popular titles in public libraries and bookstalls over the last fifteen years. High on the list of the most borrowed books in the year 2000 was a classical Norwegian author, Sigrid Undset. In the radio programme *Bok i P2* claims Naper that *Kristin Lavransdatter* by Sigrid Undset is the inspiration for kiosk literature in Norway (<http://www.nrk.no/nett-tv/klipp/552313/> at approximately 7 minutes and 13 seconds into the podcast). Similarly, she continues, Bronte and Austen influenced the kiosk literature in England. Interestingly, Meyer has explicitly stated that these authors’ works have been among her main sources of inspiration when writing *Twilight* (Mathiassen: 6).

Naper highlights (2007a) that literary taste and reading habits must be seen in relation to social background and age, and thus readers will read the same piece of literature with different spectacles. Naper exemplifies this by listing up three fictional readers and their response to *Kristin Lavransdatter* by Sigrid Undset (Naper 1994: 156):

Anne Olsen, 21 years, engaged to Peter: “Kristin is drawn between her duties and on the one hand and independency on the other, but also between the freedom of choice and the obsession for Erlend. She chooses Erlend in spite of her fathers’ wish”.

Lise Hansen, 31 years, a teacher, married to Ole, two children: “The major conflict for Kristin is she is drawn between being Erlend’s playful mistress and being a responsible mother”.

Kari Jensen, 59 years, a nurse, widow: “Kristin is drawn between her Christian beliefs and what Erlend represents [...]”.

Not surprisingly, which themes found in *Kristin Lavransdatter* these readers consider to be the most central differs, and is influenced by their life experiences. Since we all read through different lenses, it is important to focus on the role of the reader. Therefore, as Elin Nesje Vestli highlights, successful use of literary texts in the classroom demands knowledge about

the target audience (Nesje Vestli: 31). It seems obvious then, that we must take into account texts our students consider interesting. Above all, literature can be a valuable tool for encouraging students to reflect upon their own experiences and opinions.

3.5 Summary

In this section we have seen that students' decision to read in a second language depends on different motivational factors. The benefits of using literature with language learners have been mentioned, and we have seen how it can help to stimulate imagination and develop critical awareness. Several issues should be involved when we decide the appropriacy of a text for classroom use. As teachers we make pedagogic decisions about content and methodology, and these decisions are inevitably based on an assumption about how we believe our students learn best. However, it is obvious that in order to become competent readers, language learners need to read as much as possible. Factors such as the level of difficulty, quantity and variety of texts will influence the learning outcome. Hence, students need to read books that interest them and are at a level they master. This kind of literature can increase their motivation and confidence. Furthermore, engaging stories are more likely to create a positive attitude towards reading and language learning in general. However, finding an engaging novel to use in the classroom is probably one of the most challenging tasks an English teacher has. It can be argued that the students are generally more motivated to read in English if they are allowed to choose their own reading materials. However, for the purpose of this thesis where I want my students to share and express their opinions in class discussions, as I will explain later, I have only selected one novel.

Vivian Cook reminds us that the reason why a particular teaching method works or not, depends on many factors (Cook: 10). He also reminds us that there is no easy link between language research and teaching methods. Teachers must see the classroom from many angles. The choice of what to do in lessons will be an assessment of factors involved in teaching particular students in a particular situation. According to Parkinson and Reid Thomas there is no conclusive research evidence that reading for pleasure significantly improves students' language skills (Parkinson & Reid Thomas: 30). Their view is disputed by Day & Bamford and Krashen who all are all advocates for the benefits of extensive reading in language development.

4. Reading *Twilight* in the English Language Classroom

In this chapter I will briefly touch upon how to deal with texts containing gender stereotyped views before I turn to give reasons for my selected text. This is followed by a short introduction of the fictional vampire and a plot summary of *Twilight*, before I present an analysis of the two most central characters in *Twilight* and their relationship. Finally, I suggest a number of critical questions which can be used in classroom discussions.

4.1 Gendered readings

It has been argued that there is a system in our society which encourages men and women to take on different roles, viewing men to be more active, productive and aggressive while women are more prone to be passive, compliant and nurturing (Bonnycastle 1998). The system where men act as the authority figures and women are subordinate is known as the patriarchal order. Bonnycastle claims that we must learn to recognise these ideas when they are passed on and subvert them when possible (ibid: 194).

We are being influenced by what we read and what we watch. The way gender is represented in young adult literature is likely to have an impact on young adults' attitudes and perceptions of what is considered gender appropriate behaviour. Kathryn Jacobs (2004) points out that teenager' minds may be more susceptible to gender portrayals in books, films and music because they are at a stage where they are trying to find themselves and see where they fit in. It is a difficult period to be a human being during these turbulent years that we call adolescence.

How should one then go about meeting Bonnycastle's demand for recognising biased gender portrayals, and fulfilling the demands of the Norwegian school when it comes to promoting gender equality? In order not to perpetuate traditional roles, one obvious choice would be to avoid literature that contains old fashion gender stereotypes. However, gender biased messages exist everywhere, in literature, in advertising and on screen. A better strategy to combat such prejudices is to develop students' awareness and promote critical thinking. By teaching our students to evaluate and question texts, we do not have to worry if they are unconsciously absorbing distorted messages. Jacobs argues that what matters the most is that they are becoming aware of gender biased views and can decide for themselves whether to adopt or rebel against them (Jacobs: 23). When used in this way, popular literature has the potential to entertain, educate and empower our students. Popular teen novels may not show

qualities that will make them stand the test of time, however the reception they have received indicates that this is literature which can be used with great advantage in the language learning classroom. Most importantly it can be a door opener to the joy of reading in English.

4.2 Selecting a Text

As mentioned above when selecting a text to read in class, it should match the students' language ability and level of maturity. Furthermore, there is evidence that self-selection of texts may enhance students' motivation to read (Day & Bamford 2002, Krashen 2004). Day & Bamford (2002) put forward a set of ten principles for teaching extensive reading, and an overriding consideration is that students should be able to choose their own reading material. In *Perlejakten*, a brochure written in connection to the *Make Space for Reading* project, it is also proposed that students should be involved in text selection (Heglevold, Vik & Hoel: 14). However, one of the unfortunate sides to a situation where the student read different books in class is that this would limit the option for all students to be involved in discussions while and after reading. Consequently, for the purpose of this thesis, I have decided to use the novel *Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer based on the assumption that it is very likely that my students could agree to read this. The class consists of female student and are all capable, yet not typically avid readers.

Apparently, what students read is less relevant as long as they enjoy what they are reading. According to Hans Robert Jauss the relationship between literature and reader can become so close that there is little room left for the reader to think about the main character and her project. This is typical feature of the interaction between popular literature and its reader (Naper 2007a). The identification with the protagonist is an essential prerequisite here, especially since the reader is supposed to live and suffer together with, in our case, the heroine in *Twilight*.

Most of teen romance books are written to a formula. The central character is typically in her mid teens and the story is written from her viewpoint (Krashen: 110). The narrative structure of "boy meets girl, obstacles surface and then boy and girl declares eternal love for each other" has remained relatively unchanged for centuries (Naper 2007a). *Twilight* follows the typical "girl meets boy" pattern described above, and the main protagonist, seventeen year old Bella, seem like the archetypal teen romance heroine.

Finally, I would like to add that I make no claim for the aesthetic quality of *Twilight*.

Moreover, teachers do not have to belong to the *Twilight* fan base. Personal opinions about

Twilight are not relevant in this case. More succinctly to the point, I think the novel has potential. Firstly, the novel was chosen because it may persuade students into reading longer texts in English. Secondly, and most importantly, it was chosen because it fits my primary goal, namely to promote reflection surrounding gender and gender issues in the English language classroom.

4.3 The Rise of the Vampire Stories

There is something about vampires. In all of their deadly incarnations, they fascinate us. A stroll in any bookstore these days confirms that vampire fiction has hardly been more popular than today. Not many other fictional monsters have so many faces and have undergone so many changes as the vampires. Nowadays, the vampire is rarely an evil walking corpse. These new, more sympathetic vampires have had an immense impact on popular culture. The basis for vampire legends, however, is derived from folklore which had existed for centuries (Montague: 14). In most cultures worldwide there were stories involving the central element of the vampire myth, namely the drinking of blood. The first true work of vampire fiction was John Polidori's short story *The Vampyre* which was published in 1819 (ibid: 10). However it is Count Dracula, the fictional vampire in Bram Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula*, which has become *the* example to which other vampires are compared (Hughes: 143).

The 1970s brought about a resuscitation of vampire stories. Anne Rice refreshed the archetypal vampire myth with Lestat as the ultimate hero in *Interview with the Vampire* in 1976. Rice introduced several variations to the classical vampire myth. Her vampires were not destroyed by crucifixes, garlic or wooden stakes. They were portrayed as sensitive, gifted individuals with magical powers. The vampires thus became very different from the ghostly medieval figure in the Victorian horror stories. In modern novels and films, the vampires are hardly indistinguishable from ordinary human beings. The vampires in *Twilight* do not even have the typical fangs. Most modern vampires have human feelings and even fall in love. Indeed, many of them appear to be more concerned with love and romance than quenching their thirst for blood. Some vampires show unhappiness about their own state since being undead, at least to some extent, excludes them from human society. It is understandable that the feeling of loneliness and "not quite fitting in" is something the adolescent reader can relate to and identify with. Anna Höglund writes in her doctoral thesis that the vampire previously was a monster that was used to portray something which humans were afraid of. However, today it is a monster with which humans can identify. This, she claims, is due to the fact that the age in which we live is to a large extent infused with a consumer culture; our

lives are filled with demands which influence our self-image. Feelings of inadequacy and isolation are typical. Thus, the vampire is an ally that offers an alternative and meets those needs that are neglected in a consumer society. Indeed, many of the modern vampires are misfits with good intentions, although the most central vampire characters in *Twilight* are departing themselves from this typical outsider image as they live a very traditional family life.

Most of us see vampire stories as entertaining and perhaps a somewhat disturbing form of fiction. Apparently, nowadays vampirism appeals in particular to teenage girls. The vampire continues to be a metaphor for sexuality and the biting aspect may be used as an avoidance of the realities of sexual intercourse. Be that as it may, the idea of a handsome vampire is undoubtedly an attractive figure of which the immensely popular *Twilight* series, both in book and film format, bears witness to. Of the numerous books, television series and films about vampires, the most commercially successful is *Twilight*. The series consists of four vampire themed teen romance novels which, according to Wikipedia, have sold over 116 million copies worldwide.

4.4 Plot Summary of *Twilight*

The author of the series, Stephenie Meyer, states that the idea for the story in *Twilight*, that a vampire falls in love with a teenage girl, came to her in a dream (Mathiassen: 4). The first novel was published in 2005 and the series includes *New Moon*, (2006), *Eclipse* (2007) and *Breaking Dawn* (2008). In the *Twilight* narrative, the central character is Isabella Swan, known as Bella, who moves from her home in sunny Phoenix, Arizona to live with her father, Charlie Swan, in the small town of Forks in Washington. Her parents divorced while she was still a baby, and her father has not been particularly involved in her life up until this point. Her mother Renée has decided to travel with her new husband who is a baseball player. We get to know Bella just when she leaves behind the sunshine of her childhood years and begins to make her way into a complex and confusing adult world. The fateful move introduces Bella to Edward whom she meets on her first day at her new school. Although Bella makes new friends and several boys compete for her attention it is Edward, the boy sitting next to her in Biology class, who catches her eye. Edward glares at Bella as if he hates her but saves her nonetheless in the school parking lot a few days later. A classmate's car slides toward Bella on the icy road and Edward prevents disaster to happen by stopping the car with his bare hands. Bella is determined to find out why he has such superhuman powers, and she eventually finds out that Edward and his family are vampires. The plot thickens when other

vampires arrive in town, and one of them sets out to attack Bella. She is bitten by the vampire James, but Edward comes to her rescue and sucks out the venom before Bella is infected. However, Bella actually declares that she wants to become a vampire. Although he loves Bella, Edward refuses to fulfil her wish and wants her to stay human.

4.5 Findings

In this section I focus on what are the typical features in romance novels. Then I will address the concern if such “light” reading material can be considered appropriate for classroom use.

The concept of the romance novel is old. Marilyn Lowery has a list of ingredients that should be found in a successful romance novel (in Øhman 2002: 54), and I will try on these elements to see how they fit the *Twilight* narration.

1. *A woman, the heroine, meets a man, the hero, who is above her in social rank:* Bella comes from a lower-income home (*Twilight*: 12). When she first sees Edward he is undoubtedly portrayed as coming from a well off background. Both he and his siblings arrive at school wearing fashionable clothing and drive shiny new cars.
2. *The hero is excites the heroine, but he also frightens her:* Bella is immediately attracted to Edward and continues to be infatuated by his good looks. He, however, behaves like he repulses her.
3. *The heroine is usually alone and therefore vulnerable:* As a newcomer, Bella feels like a curiosity and a freak (*Twilight*: 9). In addition she expresses that she does not relate well to people, not even to her own mother whom she feels closer to than any other person.
4. *The hero dominates the heroine, but she is fiery and sensual and needs this powerful man:* The first time Edward rescues Bella is in the school parking lot where he prevents her from being hit by a car. He continues to take care of her, e.g. after she faints during a blood typing exercise Biology class.
5. *Although he acts like he despises her, he is attracted to her:* After the first meeting, Edward tries to switch classes to avoid meeting Bella again. Bella is different, he cannot read her mind and the smell of her blood is highly seductive to him.
6. *The heroine seeks love [...]:* Bella is fascinated by the fact that Edward thirsts for her blood and admits she is unconditionally in love with him (*Twilight*: 171).
7. *They have an argument:* After the incident at the parking lot, Bella wants an explanation to why he has such superpowers, but Edward refuses to tell her.

8. *In holding to her own standards, the heroine appears to lose the hero. She does not know he respects her:* The following month after the accident he does not speak to her (*Twilight*: 58). He later apologises for being rude to her (*Twilight*: 60).
9. *A moment of danger for either main character results in the realisation on the part of the hero or heroine that the feeling between them is true love:* Three unknown vampires arrive while they are on a date playing ball. The vampire James picks up Bella's scent and talks about her being a snack. He tracks her down and attacks her.
10. *A last minute plot twist threatens their relationship:* Bella gets bitten by James.
11. *They finally communicate again and declare eternal love for each other:* Edward thought Bella might want to move away, but she makes him promise not to leave her. Edward says he will stay as long as it makes her happy and as long as it is best for her. In the final chapter Edward surprises Bella by taking her to the prom.

As we can see, *Twilight* mirrors the traditional romance conventions. Lowery asks how it can be that this formula continues to fascinate the readers. She argues that in every romance novel the reader can imagine she is able to control a savage man (Øhman: 54). The reader does not care how it all is going to end, but it is the triumphant ending she wants to believe in. It is an unbeatable formula (ibid: 55). The joy of falling in love, the anxiety and pain that often follows, combined with the inevitable happy ending, are all elements in the *Twilight* narrative which at heart is a story of true love prevailing against all odds.

A series of studies have suggested that teen romance novels may be the ideal source of comprehensible and interesting reading material for learners of English (Krashen: 112). Although there has been little research on students' reading of teen romance novels, it is unlikely to believe that reading such literature prevents other kinds of reading. My impression is quite the contrary, namely that the popularity of *Twilight* have brought students to the library. *Twilight* and other popular teen novels can thus be a door opener to the wonderful world of books. However, it is sensible to assume that what students read matters. To resort to only light reading material such as the romance novels will probably not lead to advanced levels of language development. Indeed, Naper pointed out the link between reading preferences and reading ability, but for the less eager readers the popularity a book or a film has can be a valuable stimulus to get started reading.

4.5.1 Beware, girls like this

The massive popularity of the novels indicates that Meyer has touched a nerve. However, the combination of low-status genres, the romance and the vampire narrative, has caused many critics to mock *Twilight*. They may have good reasons doing so, yet this dismissal deserves a closer examination.

Genres identified with a male readership, which may be just as lightweight in their topics and focus, are seen as lesser laughable than the romance novel. It has been discussed if Meyer is the new J.K. Rowling. Both *Twilight* and *Harry Potter* simultaneously appealed to adults, but since Meyer's main fan base is adolescent girls, this may have influenced the differing critical response. *Harry Potter* was originally a series marketed for children and young adults, but crossed over and became immensely popular regardless of sex and age. Although *Twilight* also crossed over into mainstream culture, the targeted readership was much narrower. Ann Steiner points out that the reception of *Twilight* has been surprisingly gendered (Larsson & Steiner: 202). The fact that Meyer writes about female desire brought the series to popularity among young girls and women, yet others members of the reading public show contempt for the genre. Indicative is the American author Stephen King who said in an interview that Meyer is a poor writer¹. This illustrates that he clearly wants to distance himself from this type of writing. Steiner claims that King's view of Meyer has little to do with literary qualities and everything to do with their different readership, male and female respectively (ibid: 202). Similarly, Natalie Wilson writes on her blog *Seduced by Twilight* (seducedbytwilight.wordpress.com) that scholars must not let the gendered mockery of *Twilight* fans continue unchallenged. Indeed, readers of romance novels are sometimes being ridiculed, and the commonly used term in Norwegian *husmorporno* (which literally means porn for housewives) is indicative of this. These women may start to feel guilty about their so-called bad taste in books, and that reading such novels is a waste of time. There is an obvious double standard here because men who watch sports on television are not made fun of, even though they also spend time on what can be considered as low quality entertainment.

Apparently, *Twilight* has proved to attract an audience beyond teenage girls. The *Twilight* fan base is therefore hardly what can be considered a homogenous group. The editors of the anthology *Bitten by Twilight: Youth Culture, Media, & the Vampire Franchise* admit in the prologue that they officially went to a conference for Stephenie Meyer and the *Twilight*

¹ (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/feb/05/stephenking-fiction>).

phenomenon, yet unofficially they went to participate in the fandom. They wanted to understand the reasons behind why so many have connected to these books, and also why they themselves were so drawn to the *Twilight* universe:

Between December 2008 and February 2009, the three of us had all been surprised by how engrossed we became in the four *Twilight* books. We are feminist thirty-something married mothers who happen to be professors of communication – not exactly the target audience of *Twilight*. Nevertheless, we found ourselves swept away by the romance between a mortal teen girl and a sparkly vampire. All the while bemoaning sappy writing style and too-traditional gender dynamics of the books, we were very much bitten by *Twilight* (Click et al: ix).

Although there are troubling gender portrayals present in the story, which will be discussed later, the *Twilight* phenomenon must not be dismissed simply because it is within the romance genre and mostly popular among teenage girls. This is not to argue that the *Twilight* narrative is without flaws. It is most likely that the combination of the modern day setting and the stereotypical gender roles found in *Twilight* will receive attention from feminist cultural scholars for years to come.

Then one might ask why it is important to analyse a popular “low” status text like *Twilight*. Melissa Miller writes that according to Adorno and Horkheimer, mass produced texts of poor quality are meant to trick an unsophisticated audience into passivity (in Parke & Wilson: 166). Cultural studies scholars, however, see popular culture as an expression of the ideas and values held by members of a society. *Twilight* can therefore be used as a means to expose traditional, stereotypical representations and, in the process, help expose patriarchy in popular media (ibid: 166). Obviously, there is nothing wrong in enjoying the *Twilight* universe, but a critical reader may simultaneously recognise the more delimiting messages in the novel. Thus we cannot fail to remember that popular culture also assists to formulate ideas found in our culture. Miller is convinced that popular media help shape a world-view among its audience. Since patriarchal ideology is the primary oppressor of females in a society, and does not necessarily operate explicitly, we must review aspects that perpetuate patriarchy and causes it to continue to be normalised (ibid: 174). In this sense, romance novels do more than just entertain us; they also reflect and illuminate reality.

4.5.2 Tall, dark and thirsty

From the beginning, Bella senses that there is something different about Edward. He does not hang out with his classmates, but prefers to have lunch together with his siblings in the school

cafeteria. However, he is not only separate from his peers; he acts as he is above them. Apparently this makes him even more attractive and inaccessible. Tall, pale, handsome and numerous other adjectives are used to define his beauty. For many readers, Edward is the ultimate hero and whether their appreciation has to do with the actual story, or if it is all about the eye candy, is perhaps a moot point. The emphasis on Edward's appearance is central in Bella's narration. She has other suitors, like the friendly Mike Newton, but she dismisses him as she is drawn to Edward. Although it seems unlikely that fans would be as devoted to a more average Joe character like Mike Newton as they have been to Edward, we must not assume that readers necessarily agree with how bodies are depicted in *Twilight*. Danielle D. McGeough reminds us that an investigation of any online discussion regarding *Twilight* reveals critical interpretations of the texts (in Click, Aubrey & Behm-Morawitz: 101). Although Edward has every asset on his side, we must not assume that all readers agree with these representations or find them believable.

Today, our bodies are used to state who we are, or want to be. Furthermore can the depiction of bodies in popular literature give insight to how the female and male body is a social and cultural construct. This becomes apparent in *Twilight* when Edward's appearance, his cool and hard body and his pale skin make Bella think of Greek sculptures. She takes him in bit by bit and concludes that he is "inhumanely beautiful" (*Twilight*: 17). Stephenie Meyer is not the first author who makes a vampire the object of desire, but she has obviously done it extraordinary well. In an interview, Stephenie Meyer said: "Edward is the most popular, and I think it is because he is an old fashioned gentleman, but on the other hand he is a very modern, sort of tortured soul. Although I guess, you can go back to Byron and it is all there."² The Byronic hero is defined in the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* as a boldly defiant but bitterly self-tormenting outcast, proudly contemptuous of social norms but suffering from some unnamed sin. Edward, in this case, was turned into a vampire against his will; he was bitten by another vampire while he was unconscious and woke up in a purgatory state. He is constantly fighting the urge for human blood and for Bella's blood in particular. In the first chapter of *Twilight* we see Edward's pained behaviour when Bella is assigned to sit next to him in Biology class (ibid: 21) and he remains in this state more or less throughout the story.

² *Twilight* DVD, Extra Material: A Conversation with Stephenie Meyer. Directed by Catherine Hardwicke, Summit Entertainment (Egmont Nordisk Film), 2008.

One case in point is Edward's unwillingness to deprive Bella of her human life as he does not want to turn her into what he refers to as a monster (ibid: 433). Perhaps it is out of guilt, but Edward is very protective of Bella and she appears to be flattered by his concern. It is clear right from the beginning of their relationship that he is the one in charge. However, in a rare moment of agency, Bella admits that Edward's influence might be unhealthy (*Twilight*: 63).

After Bella had fainted at the sight of blood during a subsequent episode in Biology class, and Edward had carried her to the nurses' office, they argue whether or not he should drive her home in his car. Bella recognises his pushy attitude and tries to fend for herself, saying she is perfectly capable of driving her own car back home, but Edward insists he knows what is best for her (ibid: 89). This is just the first out of what is to become numerous occasions where Bella is being saved or taken care of by Edward. As a result, Bella becomes the stereotypical damsel in distress who is in need of a rescuer. Similarly, Edward conforms to a masculine stereotype of being strong and protective. Maria Nikolajeva discusses the long tradition of stereotypical gender roles, and she concludes that masculine stereotypes have been more persistent than the female ones. According to Nikolajeva, the male stereotype has been dominant in young adult literature because these perceptions have prevailed in western culture at large (Nikolajeva: 106). The fact that Bella chooses Edward and everything he represents reinforces messages of male superiority, and thus it is essential to make such messages visible in the examination of texts. Particularly since *Twilight* is aimed at young adults, it is vital that we investigate how gender is constructed. Even though this is fantasy, it is important to remember that portrayals in popular culture may be held up as an ideal and thus may contribute to the socialisation of young readers.

4.5.3 Cinderbella

Bella is not portrayed to be anyone special. Although she receives a lot of attention from the boys at her new school during the first day, she is repeatedly described as ordinary and average, with an emphasis on her clumsy awkward nature. As the following quote reveals, she characterises herself not to match the feminine standard:

I should be tan, sporty, blond –a volleyball player, or a cheerleader, perhaps –all the things that go with living in the valley of sun. Instead, I was ivory-skinned, without even the excuse of blue eyes or red hair, despite the constant sunshine. I had always been slender, but soft somehow, obviously not an athlete; I didn't have the necessary hand-eye coordination to play sports without humiliating myself –and harming both myself and anyone else who stood too close (*Twilight*: 9).

This representation may appeal to young female readers who can identify with such feelings; however, it also upholds the stereotype that girls are, by nature, less capable. In addition this echoes the patriarchal message of gender that constructs men to be the norm and women to be “the Other”.

Twilight follows many of the typical happily-forever-after patterns commonly found in fairy tales, and Bella is very much an old-fashioned heroine. Although the details of the young fairy tale women have changed over the decades, there are important factors which have remained constant. Soon after Bella arrives in Forks, she voluntarily takes over the household chores (*Twilight*: 27). The fact that her father, Charlie, has managed to do the housework for years after his wife left him is something Bella does not take in to account. She is a very dutiful daughter who cleans and cooks, much like Cinderella. In addition, Bella comes from a middle-class background with a father who is the chief of police. Her mother is not mentioned to have any occupation. Although Bella has not worn rags at the beginning of the story, she does climb the socioeconomic ladder by marrying into the extremely wealthy Cullen family.

In addition, Bella follows in much the same footsteps as her mother. Renée gives up the comfort of her own home to go travelling with her baseball playing husband. Although she is not transformed into a vampire before the fourth and final book, Bella literally sacrifices her life for the one she loves. The happily-ever-after come at a high cost, and the price Bella pays is her life.

4.5.4 Love at first scent

Readers of romance novels are presented with an ideology of romance. In *Twilight*, the attraction is instant, Edward acts as he repulses her, but the truth is that he is completely blown away by her appearance. In fact he later admits that Bella’s blood is the sweetest he has ever smelled. Despite his beastly appetites, Edward does not pose any immediate physical threat to Bella, but he surely is dangerous. He repeatedly scoops her up and demands her to obey him. Even more troubling is that Edward’s actions are justified as being for the benefit of Bella’s safety.

Bella is quick to judge that she is subordinate to Edward. Right from the start and throughout the book she reminds the reader, and herself, that she is not good enough for Edward:

I was still frightened of the hostility I sometimes felt emanating from him, and I was still tongue-tied whenever I pictured his perfect face. I was well aware that his league and my league were spheres that did not touch (*Twilight*: 46).

Finally, when Bella wakes up in hospital after suffering severe injuries from the vampire attack, Edward tells her mother the reason why Bella is in hospital is that she fell down the stairs. Even though Edward is not the direct cause for her injuries, his behaviour is still troublesome. If someone we know ends up in hospital and their boyfriend makes up a story that the injuries stem from falling down the stairs, there is serious reason for concern.

4.6 A Discussion Guide to *Twilight*

In the light of the findings I have presents above; I will in this section propose a discussion guide in the form of five tasks. I have suggested a number of critical thinking points to be used as a basis for a class discussion. These are just rough outlines or skeletons to work from. The suggested focus points are designed with students at first year of vocational studies in upper secondary school in mind. However, the questions could easily be adjusted to match other students' language level and maturity. It is also important to keep in mind that some students might be less than thrilled about the idea of reading a romance novel, or a story which contains werewolves and vampires for that matter. However, their dissatisfaction can be used as a point of departure for questions about whether or not *Twilight* is a believable love story, and if the relationship between Edward and Bella is an example to follow or not.

4.6.1 Title (discussion task 1)

This guide contains many thinking points for you to explore individually or in groups. There are no wrong answers, but remember that your response will be more interesting if you can support your opinions by examples from the story.

- Why do you think the book was called *Twilight*?
- Can you think of a more suitable title?

The *Twilight* books and film adaptations have been very successful. Do you think this popularity will last? Would you consider them too feminine to appeal to boys? If so, why?

4.6.2 Edward (discussion task 2)

- In your opinion, is Edward described to be too perfect? Is he a believable character?

Edward has many super powers and can read everyone's minds. However, he cannot read Bella's mind. Why do you think the author has not made him able to do so?

We get to know that Edward enters Bella's bedroom and watches her while she sleeps. How does this make you feel? Should Bella be more upset about this?

4.6.3 Bella (discussion task 3)

- What do you think of Bella? Is she a believable character?

The novel contains many details about the housework she performs. What is this saying about the role of women?

Once Bella sees Edward, nothing else matters. What does this say about being in love and having a boyfriend or a girlfriend?

4.6.4 The film (discussion task 4)

The film *Twilight* is based on the first in a series of novels by the author Stephenie Meyer. The novel was adapted for the screen by Melissa Rosenberg and the film was directed by Catherine Hardwicke.

- What did you think of the film adaptation? Did it compare to the novel? Was it enjoyable? Which did you enjoy the most, book or film?

When analysing a film you are looking at the pictures that are created and what these tell the audience. You should think about the camera angles, the editing and the music that are used and the effect it has on the atmosphere in the film. You should also consider the setting(s) and how the characters are presented and developed. What are the theme(s) that the film explores?

4.6.5 Book report (task 5)

It is important to monitor the students reading in some way. One possibility is to have them write a quick book report like the sample shown below. Here, the students fill in a brief form after they have finished reading. The form does not contain any comprehension questions and the emphasis is not on the students' written accounts of the book.

Quick Book Report Form



Title of Book: _____

Author: _____ **Illustrator:** _____

Number of Pages: _____ **Number of Chapters:** _____

Genre (type) of Book: _____

What I like about the book is: _____

What I don't like about the book is: _____

Would you recommend this book? Why or why not? _____

Alternatively, the students can summarise the book in a couple of sentences. What is it about? What happens? As a response to the book, students can write a few words about what the book made them think about. Do they have other comments about it? How would they rate the book? Was it too easy, okay or too difficult to read? Evaluation forms and other tasks and activities are abundant in Day& Bamford (2004).

If students have access to the internet, they could write an online reading journal. To make use of a chat forum can increase the students' motivation to exchange their views about what they have just read. This approach is also faster than a traditional paper based hand-ins and allows us to keep track of our students' reading right from the first page. In addition, the students can read and comment their peers' contributions.

5. Concluding Remarks

Gender equality has a relatively strong tradition in Norway and gender issues are part of the Norwegian curriculum. Yet, research has found that gender equality work in schools is largely neglected. In addition, it has been revealed that gender equality is considered to be something which is already achieved. In this thesis, I have attempted to find possible ways to integrate gender equality perspectives in English language teaching.

Another problem to solve is the Norwegian student's relative low score in reading assessments such as the PISA surveys. There is a composite of different factors responsible for reading comprehension development, and I do not suggest that reading popular teenage romance novels is one factor alone that produces increased reading literacy. What I have aimed to demonstrate, however, is that teachers can take advantage of student's preferences. Motivation is an important factor in reading and students who feel ownership of their reading material are more likely to become engaged.

The main conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that teachers, in the light of the gender equality perspective, should explore and challenge gender stereotypes found in e.g. popular young adult literature. The immensely popular novel *Twilight* was chosen because it fits my dual purpose, namely to persuade students into the habit of reading and at the same time be a vehicle for the exploration of typical gender stereotyped patterns.

The heroine of the *Twilight* series conforms to a very traditional feminine stereotype, and she is hopelessly devoted to her boyfriend. Even though masculinity is idealised, especially in relation to Edward, it is not depicted as entirely unproblematic. Edward is both arrogant and domineering and admits that he has a problem with his temper. He is a reckless driver, he orders Bella around, and even watches her while she is asleep. In many ways Edward conforms to the Byronic hero archetype, but the reader is not encouraged to condemn Edward's actions. Instead does the book rather actively promote him as perfect boyfriend material. Vampires have gone from being terrifying and evil to be both compassionate and romantic. However, the fact that the vampire boyfriend continuously dominates his girlfriend and actually wants to kill her is not given much thought in the *Twilight* narrative. This is an

alarming message, and *Twilight* can thus be used as a means to confront how female oppression occurs in society.

Reading *Twilight* in the English language classroom offers a prime opportunity for an exploration and a discussion about gender stereotyped attitudes. Since popular culture plays an important role in the socialisation of young adults, and is thus a source of learning, teachers should help students to critically evaluate the messages it delivers. Future research could examine the complete *Twilight* series. Both the portrayal of Indian Americans and the emphasis on sexual abstinence and the way motherhood is portrayed would make compelling investigations.

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