

The Romance Novel: Rubbish or Revolution?

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Desperate love confessions in the rain, red roses on the doorstep, tearstained letters of vulnerability and raw emotion: all staples of the romance literary genre. Beloved or cheesy, endearing or eye roll-inducing, these types of novels tend to produce mixed reactions. While some critics argue that the romance novel genre embodies a poor form of escapism that presents a vapid reinforcement of traditional gender roles, defenders contend that these books are dynamic ways to celebrate femininity and showcase healthy relationships, and that the negative criticism stems from gendered perceptions of the work.

Inherent with the title of the genre, romance novels tend to romanticize relationships, falling in love, and intimacy. As critics assert, “the very escapism of romantic fiction promotes psychosexual problems” that confirms “the gender role sexual stereotypes seen in other forms of media and in the minds of the general population” (Iqbal). In other words, these portrayals perpetuate sexist power dynamics in relationships with the woman rendering herself submissive as the masculine hero comes knocking at the door. Therefore, opponents declare that the content of romance novels can be interpreted as anti-feminist, as a woman’s story is told in relation to her interaction with men and given validity through her docile nature in approaching a member of the opposite sex. Furthermore, critics reinforce that the way in which intimacy is presented in romance novels can be harmful to women when it comes to actual relationships, as they have higher expectations and standards that will lead to disappointment and embarrassment.

Are high expectations a negative concept though? In their article, “There’s Underlying Sexism when the Romance Genre is Criticized, Novelists Say,” Jessica Linzey and Danielle Carr assert that romance novels have been historically and wrongfully discounted, and they can actually be valuable resources in exemplifying what a healthy, respectful relationship should look like. Furthermore, the writers declare that the books are influential in reinforcing the idea that every woman is worthy of a thoughtful partner. As Linzey and Carr claim, “Romance novels are not just enjoyable but there’s also a lesson.” Thus, they emphasize that in a sexist world rotting with asymmetrical gender power dynamics, it is essential that women are reminded of what they deserve in a relationship - respect, love, partnership - and romance novels are a compelling approach to serve as that reminder.

Linzey and Carr also argue against gendered critique of the romance novel genre through quoting several authors that passionately respond to claims that their work is not true, accomplished writing. As they cite, male authors have accused romance readers and writers of being obsessive, desperate, and in need of escape from the lackluster of their personal lives. For example, critic William Giraldi alleges that romance novels are “born of a borderline despair” and are a way for readers to forget about their “humdrum domesticity,” “colourless work lives,” and “oppressive disappointment in their spouses and their family lives” (qtd. in Linzey and Carr).

Vehemently attacking these stigmatized assertions, Linzey and Carr recount the angered outcry of the romance literary community, ultimately declaring the genre to be misjudged, oversimplified and stereotyped, and a triumph of femininity. To further advocate for the relevance of the romance genre, Linzey and Carr summarize literature professor Mary Bly's argument against male critique, declaring "Romance writing tends to be judged by the worst example of what has been written whereas literature is judged by the best." Through contrasting the perceptions of a genre typically dominated by women and the praise directed towards a more conventional style of writing marked with substantial male influence, Linzey and Carr attempt to unveil how gender affiliations and misconceptions of certain novels can lead to an ultimate, unfair dismissal of an entire literary subset.

Essayist Kundan Iqbal adopts a contrary perspective. Because the genre is mainly female dominated, it can become all-consuming in regard to the way women view their own lives and relationships. As Iqbal alleges, "Fictional information is easily incorporated into memory, even if clearly false," thus intimating that if women continue to immerse themselves in the fantasy worlds of the romance genre, they will subconsciously form opinions on relationships and intimacy as influenced by the stories they read. Iqbal even describes a study in which romance readers were surveyed about their outlooks toward intimate experiences, stressing that "most participants said they discounted the information presented in romance novels as unreliable" but that the genre still could "exert undue influence on attitudes and behaviors." Namely, Iqbal and other critics view the consumption of these stories as a precarious balance between entertainment and impression, leading to a clouding of judgment and a state of dangerous illusion. They stipulate that this deception ends in tangible emotional and physical health impacts especially in regard to dissatisfied attitudes toward partners and consequences resulting from the lack of physical awareness that is not as explicitly noted in specific novels.

Staunch defenders of the romance genre such as Jade Deveraux passionately respond to this take and once again address the sexism laden in the critique, proclaiming, "Is anyone worried that the men who read spy thrillers are going to go after their neighbours with an automatic weapon?" (qtd. in Cameron). In other words, when men read fantastical action novels, why are critics not more concerned with the impacts that those types of plots have on the psyche? Proponents gripe that women are once again assumed to be easily and naively impressionable and manipulated, vulnerable to believe whatever they read. The main critiques against the genre, these romance supporters argue, are rooted in a negative assumption about femininity that feeds into the reception of the novels and concerns over their impacts.

The TikTok titled "Break the Stigma," created by the user Danisbookish, aptly presents the negativity toward romantic stories and the subsequent responses. Initially, the video features conventional shaming of the style as "embarrassing," "trash," and "unintelligent and uneducated" (@danisbookish). Building to a crescendo, the TikTok then reveals the fact that the romance genre accounts for one-third of all mass market fiction books and the most sales in comparison to all other genres combined, over 70 million people in the US read at least one romance per year, prestigious universities offer courses in the style, and 54% of romance readers hold a college degree (@danisbookish). Thus, this TikTok attempts to dispel the negative stigma surrounding the romance genre and present it as a form of popular, valid literary work.

Given the genre's commercial success, popularity, and academic involvement, why do some still perceive it as lacking literary merit, providing danisbookish with content to respond to? Those in opposition suggest that it is due to the formulaic nature of these novels. Predictable and conventional, as Lauren Cameron describes in her article "The Romance Publishing Industry and its Reputation," a typical romance book often features build up, increased intimacy, vulnerability, and affection at around the 60% mark, then some sort of fight or quarrel between love interests, and finally a reconciliation often complete with grand gestures and a happily ever after. Critics identify that this sort of romance story equation retracts from the genre's literary value and places female writers in a box since it leaves less room to display writing flexibility, creativity, and ingenuity (Cameron).

However, others claim that writing formulas are inherent in many genres conventionally deemed credible. For example, Jayne Ann Krentz, a researcher on the myths of the romance genre, argues that crime novels feature predictable plots: something criminal is uncovered, there is conflict surrounding the investigation, a red herring or false suspect thwarts the case, and the culprit is finally revealed in dramatic fashion (qtd. in Cameron). Cameron contextualizes this information through claiming, "crime is not seen negatively, because it is a male dominated genre. This shows that it is the women that are the issue, not the formula." Thus, romance supporters once again identify the act of discounting literary merit as a result of gendered stigmatization. Fans of the genre argue that while there may be certain plot sequences that conventionally appear in romance novels, the same phenomenon occurs in other genres but is not as heavily criticized, leaving one to point out the independent variable of outstanding gender.

It is apparent that romance novels, fiery in content, also provoke an equally fiery debate over their space within the literary realm. What does this debate mean in the context of reflecting on the female role in literature? Examining reactions among both critics and supporters of the genre alike can reveal where women stand today and how feminism is approached in the literary medium. Thus, happily ever after: a frivolously whimsical fantasy that renders women more unsatisfied or a celebration of the individual and collective female experience? There are those that side with the former take and vehemently claim that the romance genre is utterly dull, duplicitous, and anti-feminist, while others aligned with the latter view continue to defend the conventional love story, insisting that it is saturated with positive representations of womanhood and amorous relationships - a culmination of feminist celebration. Both consider the romance genre differently; both are concerned with the advancement of literary feminism as a movement.

Works Cited

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