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A Foray into Love: Feminism in the Romance Novel

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Murray State University Honors College

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A Foray into Love: Feminism in the Romance Novel

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A Foray into Love: Feminism in the Romance Novel

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Kiersten Holland

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Abstract:

In this paper, I am examining the relationship between the waves of feminism and the evolution of the romance novel, by focusing on themes of sexual identity, financial independence, societal roles, and free thought within the text. The romance genre is overlooked and underestimated, despite it being one of the largest and best-selling genres in publishing, because of its inherent relationship with women. By analyzing it, I hope to educate people about the genre, as well as highlight the key parts of its importance to women's rights and the feminist movement. By doing a close reading of novels ranging from *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen to contemporary romances like *Beach Read* by Emily Henry, I will focus on the thematic difference in them across time and how that corresponds with the waves of feminism, using both feminist and new historicist lenses. In doing so, I hope to show how closely entwined they are. Using both primary and secondary sources, I will provide context that shows how deeply they are intertwined and how the waves of feminism build within the genre, forming like stairsteps that overlap throughout the years.

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Romance as a Genre

Romance novels, as defined by the Romance Writers of America, are books with two main elements: “a central love story and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending” (rwa.org). The romance genre is one of the largest genres in the publishing world today, contributing to 66% of adult fiction growth in 2022 (Sweet Savage Flame). Between January and August of 2022, 14.3 million romance novels were sold in the United States, compared to the 11 million copies sold in the same time span in 2020 (BookRiot). In 2021, the romance genre reached 47 million printed units sold worldwide over a twelve-month period (Sweet Savage Flame). This rise is projected to continue; based on trends reported by the NPD Group, the growth was estimated to continue its steady rise in 2023, with 82% of its audience being women. A large contributing factor to this rapid growth is the additional marketing and forming social media communities, like Booktok and Bookstagram, in which one post can reach thousands of people and entire accounts are dedicated to sharing content about books. This is the first media outlet of this magnitude that has entered the publishing sphere; a few years earlier, the only similar online community was Booktube, which never reached the same notable significance to book buying trends that these other online communities have.

Another factor to this increase is the larger age range of readers being reached on these social media platforms, the age range of romance readers widening from primarily 35- to 55-year-olds to include 18- to 34-year-olds (BookRiot). This opened up the market to a completely different demographic and prompted a chain reaction of shifts in advertising and marketing strategies that stretched to accommodate the growth of consumers. Targeted marketing campaigns and niche interactive advertisements contribute to the genre’s growth and impact the way that books and certain authors are popularized. For better or worse, major publishers rely

heavily on the newly established social media traffic and online communities to advertise their books, with ‘viral’ books gaining traction very quickly and a vast array of other opportunities along with it, like movie deals and multi-book contracts. On one hand, this online reliance means that self-published novels can quickly gain popularity without the backing of large publishing companies; on the other hand, algorithmic social media is often skewed against minority communities and people of color. At the end of the day, it is a market based on consumerism and makes approximately \$1.44 billion in revenue, the highest earning genre in the publishing industry.

Despite the magnitude of the genre and the scope of the audience, there are many critiques surrounding romance novels and their importance. Often, they are looked at as simply “literature of needs” or books for enjoyment without value. The books themselves represent a close relationship with a very large movement: the waves of feminism. Women make up the largest majority of romance consumers and most of the novels feature female protagonists. This means that romance books and film are some of the most important means of women’s representation in the media, and that they change with societal standards. The romance genre is overlooked and underestimated, despite it being one of the largest and best-selling genres in publishing, because of its inherent relationship with women. By doing a close reading of novels ranging from *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen to contemporary romances like *Beach Read* by Emily Henry, I will be highlighting the thematic differences and similarities across the genre, and consequently, how those themes correspond with the waves of feminism, using both feminist and new historicist lenses. To examine the relationship between the different waves of feminism and the romance genre, first I examine contemporary publishing trends in romance fiction. Then using the early romance novels *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte

Brontë, and *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë, I explore the ways that they challenged Romantic and Victorian gender expectations. Next, I highlight the four waves of feminism and the events leading up to and following each period. Finally, using the contemporary romance novels *Beach Read* by Emily Henry, *Dear Emmie Blue* by Lia Louis, and *Yours Truly* by Abby Jimenez, I explore the ways that contemporary romance novels are both breaking gender stereotypes and representing the changing fourth wave of feminism.

Mass Market Media Consumption and Its Effects on the Genre

The publishing industry itself is also changing rapidly, the romance genre splintering into subgenres in order to support the saturation of the market. Rising in popularity within the online book communities are niche genres like fantasy romance¹, including widely popular novels like *A Court of Thorns and Roses* by Sarah J. Maas or *Caraval* by Stephanie Garber, as well as the overlap of women's fiction² into romance³, like *Lessons in Chemistry* by Bonnie Garmus. A genre that previously relied on mass market paperback copies as a primary source of distribution—small pocket-sized novels that were sold at airports, gas stations, grocery stores, and other distributors besides bookstores for usually a cheaper price than standard trade paperbacks—the growing popularity of romance novels led to publishing companies shifting the market into traditional hardback first editions, followed by standard trade paperback prints.

While older romance novels were easily accessible, relatively inexpensive, and often found

¹ Usually considered to be a fantasy novel with a romance side plot that is heavily tied to the general plot of the novel.

² Novels that feature a female main character, usually without a love interest or with a love interest that is secondary to the plot and has almost no bearing on the main story.

³ Novels that feature a prominent love story that is featured at the forefront of the story and is essential to the plot.

everywhere, newly published romance novels are bound by preorder and cost more money. It becomes an issue of commodification and restricted access, where these books that were previously easily attainable are now more expensive because of their large audience and ability to make money.

Plenty of other novels, like mysteries and westerns, use this method of primarily printing mass market paperbacks, but none of them garner quite the same disdain that the romance genre does. The romance genre is massive yet often overlooked by both non-romance readers and academics in terms of how much of an economic powerhouse it truly is, as well as its societal influence. Mass market romance completely changed the genre, both in the way it was accessed and the things that were being written about, making its popularity skyrocket. It also informed trends in the future romance books and advanced the freedom of writers and what they could include in their stories. Founded in 1949, Harlequin was the first publishing company to produce romance novels aimed for female audiences, specifically with their eye-catching covers (New York Public Library). In the 1970s, the pocket-sized romances changed vastly with the introduction of the “bodice ripper.” Desire became marketable, specifically women’s desire. While mass market paperbacks had already existed, now authors were pushing the envelope and testing what they could publish. Authors like Nora Roberts, Danielle Steel, and Jude Deveraux were rising to popularity and bringing with them a new type of romance novel.

There is a direct relationship between the waves of feminism and the romance novel genre, both in the general explosions of the market and the trends and audiences that are targeted. Since Jane Austen was credited with writing one of the first romance novels, we can see how they have affected each other, and the way they both behave in modern day. However, just because the romance genre has an inherent relationship with the fight for women’s rights doesn’t

mean that the representation of women in the romance genre has always been good. Specifically in the mid-20th century, the representation of women that was being produced was damaging and relied on the weakness of the female main characters.

Jane Austen Writes Romance Novels: How Did It Change Literature?

Jane Austen's novels broke barriers for women's literature because of the way that she treated her female characters and allowed them to grow and change beyond what was expected of them. She emphasized the care they had for their sisters and family in a way that promoted female relationships and love instead of the need to gain financial security and status by marrying and having children. The first sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* states that "It is a truth universally acknowledged that every man must be in want of a wife" (Austen 2). Heralded as one of the first romance novels, it changed female representation and allowed readers to see Elizabeth Bennett as a person apart from a man, groundbreaking considering how much power men held over women in that time period.

Elizabeth is constantly juxtaposed with characters that represent the societal expectations of marriage and status, beginning with her mother. Mrs. Bennet loves her daughters and cares for them, which we can see in her reaction to Lydia leaving, but at the same time that love is almost completely overshadowed by her need to see her girls married off to wealthy families; she tells her husband, "If I can but see one of my daughters happily settled at Netherfield," said Mrs. Bennet to her husband, "and all the others equally well married, I shall have nothing to wish for" (Austen 11). Her ultimate goal is to get them married, even if they themselves do not desire it. This shows exactly what the priorities were for the time that Jane Austen was writing this, and

how she sets up Lizzie to defy expectations. When Jane goes to see Miss Bingley and gets caught in the rain and falls ill, it happens exactly the way that Mrs. Bennet planned in order for Jane to integrate into the household and catch Mr. Bingley's eye. Mr. Bennet responds, "if your daughter should have a dangerous fit of illness, if she should die, it will be a comfort to know that it was all in pursuit of Mr. Bingley, and under your orders" (Austen 32). She has almost no confidence in Jane's own ability to get a husband and thus matchmakes and meddles to make it happen, regardless of even Jane's wellbeing.

Elizabeth has almost no interest in having a husband and refuses to bend her strong will to meet a man's needs. She makes this very clear to those close to her. When she first meets Mr. Darcy then hears him insult her, she instantly decides that she does not care for him at all: "That is very true," replied Elizabeth, "and I could easily forgive *his* pride, if he had not mortified *mine*" (Austen 21). This dislike of him colors most of their interactions, during which she also turns down his invitation to dance. Her lack of reaction to both his attention and his wealth proves her disinterest in the societal expectations that are required of her. Furthermore, over the course of the novel Elizabeth turns down two marriage proposals that would've provided her with the means for a comfortable life. In part, this shows that she has enough privilege and financial support from her family that she had the freedom to say no, whereas many other women would not have had that choice.

In addition to being strong-willed and quick-witted, both qualities that were not encouraged in women, Elizabeth was also very stubborn. When Mr. Darcy proposes to Lizzie for the first time, she turns him down. She still doesn't like him and turns him down rather harshly: "You could not have made me the offer of your hand in any possible way that would have tempted me to accept it" (Austen 191). This is the opportunity that her mother has been pushing

her towards for most of her life, and yet she has no interest in pursuing it. Lizzie subverts all expectations, both familial and societal, for herself by refusing his first proposal. Refusing a proposal based on that person's personality was not at all something that was usually taken into account. Lizzie knows this and does not care. She doesn't understand how others can marry for circumstances and not love or desire, and when it comes to her friend Charlotte and her marriage to Mr. Collins, she judges her at first and feels betrayed because she thought that Charlotte agreed with her views.

One thing in particular that sets Jane Austen's female character apart from others is the relationships they form with those around them. She focuses a lot on Elizabeth's relationship with her sisters, particularly Jane. She is thought to have based it on her own relationship with her sister Cassandra, which is probably why the relationship feels so genuine. It is not only the female characters that begin to rely on these relationships but also the male characters. Sarah Morrison points out that to Austen, family is one of the most important aspects of a person's life:

“More importantly, Austen's work is predicated on the conviction that for men as well as for women the domestic circle of family, friends, and neighbors among whom one spends life's most private moments is of paramount importance. It is here that Austen would judge the success or failure of an individual life... embodied in many female novels shows the well-heeled hero in his disinterested choice of a marriage partner embracing this "feminine" truth...” (Morrison 345)

Instead of focusing on success or status, Austen's characters had a primary focus on forming intimate communities and relationships for both men and women. For women specifically, these relationships showed women outside of their interactions with men, outside of their love story,

and gives them depth. These written relationships show women interacting with each other and forming communities, gaining independence and support.

Each of her characters also has the space to learn and evolve, giving them a kind of humanity that makes them jump off the page. Elizabeth learns throughout the novel that her hasty assumptions led her to misjudge Mr. Darcy, even saying to him, ““Yes, you know enough of my *frankness* to believe me capable of *that*. After abusing you so abominably to your face, I could have no scruple in abusing you to all your relations”” (Austen 355). Her reaction at the beginning, her dislike, showed him that his behavior was wrong, and he changed. At the same time, his kindness and care for her was breaking through her immediate dislike and grudge until she realized that she had been wrong about him all along. Throughout contemporary romances, we see the similarity in the way that female characters are written, not overpowered by men, or dominated by their desires. The characters grow with each other. Instead, the relationship is built upon trust and mutual respect, with an emotional intelligence that automatically educates the reader on matters of the heart.

When *Pride and Prejudice* was published in 1817, it was before what is usually recognized as the beginning of the first wave of feminism, and yet Austen was already changing the way that women were written about and perceived. Most of her female characters broke barriers with their independence and strong personalities, waiting for their love match before committing to marriage. However, she was by far not the first woman writing about these things or the beginning of feminism. As Lloyd Brown notes, women like Mary Wollstonecraft had already been writing, and Austen responding to those ideas; “In other words, we need to examine female images in Jane Austen's work in relation to the liberationist philosophy of that "feminist tradition" which preceded Jane Austen in the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, and which, of

course, has blossomed into the feminist revolt of our time” (Brown 324). When we look at Jane Austen’s books through the lens of other feminist ideas of the time, we see the threads of inspiration running through her work. All these authors are operating through already circulating ideas and responding to those in their own work, that’s how the movements gain ground and evolve over time.

Other Classic Romance Novels

Falling into the category of gothic romance, both *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë and *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë operate in very different ways from Jane Austen’s novels. From the very beginning, neither one of them represents healthy fulfilling relationships. Specifically in *Wuthering Heights*, Catherine Earnshaw’s character defies all expectations and rules of society, both by loving someone beneath her status and by her wild, emotional nature. She is tied to Heathcliff from the very beginning, and it is only the start of her fraught and troubled relationship. For most of the novel, she is trapped between Edgar Linton and Heathcliff, the former representing status and wealth and the second representing a violent and all-consuming love. She describes Heathcliff as, “whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same; and Linton’s is as different as a moonbeam from lightning, or frost from fire” (E. Brontë 76). This shows us the dynamic between the three of them and Catherine’s ultimate struggle. Published in 1847, Catherine holds a lot of the power in these relationships, even in death, subverting the societal expectations of the time.

Since she was a child, Catherine had a fierce wildness about her that defied her wealthy status and left her feeling unmoored as an adult. Brontë emphasizes this, writing: “I wish I were

a girl again, half savage and hardy, and free; and laughing at injuries, not maddening under them! Why am I so changed? Why does my blood rush into a hell of tumult at a few words? I'm sure I should be myself were I once among the heather on those hills" (E. Brontë 120).

Catherine's disposition is emotional and harsh, leading her to seem cruel at times. She is prone to outbursts that are not fit for a lady of wealth, in addition to being strong-willed and free-spirited. In this way, Brontë actively works against the general stereotypes and societal roles that 'well-bred' women have, giving her power over her circumstances that was not given to many other women during this time. Her character finds its foil in Isabella Linton, her demeanor delicate and conventionally beautiful in many ways. Even Isabella is capable of bucking the status quo, however, when she marries Heathcliff despite his low status and lack of wealth. She does what Catherine is not willing to do, and in the end, she pays for it dearly.

In *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, the main female protagonist challenges all societal expectations from the very beginning. Jane is plain and penniless, yet introspective and full of emotion. She pushes back against those who have wronged her, even going so far as to tell her aunt, "How dare I? Because it is the *truth*. You think I have no feelings, and that I can do without one bit of love or kindness; but I cannot live so: and you have no pity... People think you a good woman, but you are bad; hard-hearted. *You* are deceitful!" (C. Brontë 39). This outburst comes from a place of indignity, relying on the self-righteous anger that she had been wronged. Women were expected to be subordinate and docile, without a backbone, and turn the other cheek when mistreated: the exact opposite is true of Jane. Her stubbornness and strength do not come from a place of cruelty, however; instead, she relies on her strong sense of self. It seems to be a very modern concept; there are strands of this independent strength in more contemporary romances. We see echoes of it from *Pride and Prejudice* as well, with Elizabeth's strong will. Peter Grudin

explained Jane's disposition like this: "Rare demonstrations like this are reinforced by a choice of imagery that is strikingly vivid even for the most unconventional heroine: ' . . . conscience, turned tyrant, held passion by the throat, told her, tauntingly'" (Grudin 153). Jane's outburst with those around her, and her inner strength are the makings of a "most unconventional heroine" and allow Brontë the freedom to write her character in a different way.

Throughout the novel, Jane also refuses to cower to a man, standing her ground despite those that try to dominate her. When she meets St. John Rivers, she notes that he was surprised with how she spoke to him; "Again the surprised expression crossed his face. He had not imagined that a woman would dare to speak so to a man. For me, I felt at home in this sort of discourse. I could never rest in communication with strong, discreet, and refined minds, whether male or female, till I passed the outworks of conventional reserve..." (C. Brontë 377). As a very intelligent person, she wanted to engage in intelligent conversation, even if that meant disregarding the topics and styles of "proper" topics. Her directness is part of her personality, and she refuses to pretend to be anything else. We see this directness again when she leaves Mr. Rochester behind, telling him, "I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself... preconceived opinions, foregone determinations, are all I have at this hour to stand by: there I plant my foot" (C. Brontë 319). Her determination and independence meant that she would not take Mr. Rochester's betrayal easily, and she could not forgive it when he had no intention of righting the wrong.

We see her righteous indignation taking over many times throughout the book, making her a force to be reckoned with. Regardless of the opinions of those around her, she never compromised her core beliefs or herself. Commenting on this narration and growth of self, Carla Kaplan points out the evolution we as readers get from Jane; "Jane does move from silence to

speech, thus providing a model of feminist resistance and liberation. And she directly involves the reader in that liberatory process, providing a model of feminist criticism as a collaborative heroics, of the feminist critic as the ideal listener for which the text longs” (Kaplan 6). Her eventual outspokenness at the school compared to her unyieldingness with Mr. Rochester show this move to freedom of self that Brontë shows quite thoroughly in the novel and explains why this text is often used with feminism criticisms.

The Waves of Feminism

Over the years as feminism has changed and evolved, the literature and media has changed with it. It is divided into three (or possibly four) waves that began in 1848 with the suffragette movement until now. These waves operate as overlapping and interweaving layers of behavior and events that mark the changing of society. In addition to beginning with the women’s suffrage movement, it is thought to end with women getting the right to vote. Even though there would be a 40-year gap between then and when second wave feminism was thought to have started, that doesn’t mean that feminism didn’t still exist. Instead, this is where we can see the overlapping layers of feminism begin to change and shift. There were no specific events to mark these years, and while now we can look back and see exact years when thoughts were changing and shifting, they were just in the middle of that transition period. During this transition period, Simone de Beauvoir, a French feminist author, wrote a book titled *The Second Sex*. It explained womanhood and the historical treatment of women, as well as tackling the larger overall question of “what is a woman,” eventually landing on “one is not born but

becomes a woman” (National Women’s History Museum). It rapidly gained ground and was quoted frequently in the rising movement and is well-known even today.

Second wave can be marked by the chafing and frustration women felt at their societal roles of mothers and wives from 1963 to about 1990. After gaining the ability to vote, the next hurdle was gender roles and discrimination in the workplace, with women being treated as less than men in most areas of life. Women were tired of being stuck in the traditional roles of homemaker, wife, and mother, and were not encouraged to take on any additional careers or education. This wave is marked by both its political movements and an attitude of strength that got women into places that men commanded. The Equal Pay Act of 1963 spurred this movement into greater action. Women were fighting for the right to be in male-dominated places. The Griswold vs. Connecticut supreme court ruling of 1965 and the Roe vs. Wade supreme court ruling in 1973 made significant changes towards women’s bodily autonomy and private life (National Women’s History Museum). However, it was not at all focused-on intersectionality and left many women in minority groups out of the conversation entirely. That continued into the 90s until it was slowly replaced by third wave feminism.

Third wave feminism was very different from second in many ways. It’s highlighted by equality in the workplace, embracing sexuality and individuality, and a resurgence of femininity. Where the first two waves weren’t exactly inclusive or intersectional, with very divided movements between women of color and white women, unification was one of the third waves main objectives. The catalyst for this movement was the Anita Hill hearings in 1991, where she testified against Clarence Thomas for sexual harassment. Ultimately, he was still appointed to the Supreme Court. Whereas second wave feminism was about breaking gender norms and fighting against the objectification of women, third wave feminism was about taking back the

power and embracing femininity. Girl groups like Bikini Kill were rising in popularity, advocating for feminine power. They created printed “zines” that said things like “Because we don't wanna assimilate to someone else's (boy) standards of what is or isn't. Because we are angry at a society that tells us Girl = Dumb, Girl = Bad, Girl = Weak” (National Women's History Museum). This resonated with a lot of women that felt that they couldn't be feminine and be taken seriously. Second and third wave feminism were very different from each other and that created a bit of animosity between the two. Second-wave feminists thought that third wave feminist were undoing some of the work that they had done, and third-wave feminists didn't like the connotations of the term “feminists” created by the second wave, to the point that some of them didn't want to be aligned with the movement at all.

Fourth wave came along with the rapid increase in internet and social media presence. This new platform changed the way that ideas were communicated and spread and allowed movements to gain more momentum and traction than ever before. The Me-Too movement gained global attention in 2017 when the hashtag went viral (Global Fund for Women). In a lot of ways, this wave overlaps with the third wave, specifically in its attention to intersectionality and femininity. It can be said that we are in the transition period between waves that we see a little bit between the first and second, as well as the second and third. However, it's the shifting ideas and information that lead many to believe that we are in a new wave, since it has changed so much since the height of third wave feminism. Movements are so much more widespread in recent years and this mainstream media aspect means that it affects far more than the other movements ever could. It has grown so widespread that many corporations try to appeal to female audiences specifically with advertisements and products because they know that it will

appeal to such a large demographic; the most recent examples in film and music are the *Barbie* movie and Taylor Swift, both with massive fan groups.

When one wave of feminism transitions into another, it doesn't have a clear ending point that we can look to for clarification on when the shift happens. The waves of feminism operate as overlapping layers instead of stairsteps. One doesn't end exactly when another begins; instead, they build and blend with the one before it, with intersecting conversations and concerns between movements. In the past few years, the transition to fourth wave feminism has been gradually occurring, with the Me-Too movement and the greater emphasis on intersectionality and inclusion. The waves of feminism in theory operate as a way to both understand the movement and unify its history. Jo Reger in an article from *Feminist Studies* explains the role of the waves as a form of solidarity with the legacy of women: "In this sense, waves as a metaphor became a discursive legacy that allowed feminists to understand that they were a part of a history, and that this history incorporated a set of beliefs and an identity labeled as 'feminist' by both the movement and the public" (Reger 201). The waves help to quantify and label the movement and its effects on society, as well to create a unifying identity across the decades. By using them, we can see how the ways interact with the literature being published at that time and the societal changes being pushed through politics.

Contemporary Romances and Feminism

In *Beach Read* by Emily Henry, we see a lot of the same characteristics in her female characters that we do in *Pride and Prejudice*. She portrays complex relationships with other female characters, the challenges of finding love, and a complexity to her main character January

Andrews that sets the female lead apart from other similarly written characters. However, the main difference between the two books is that what was groundbreaking for Jane Austen's time is something that is gradually becoming standard in today's contemporary literature.

Published in 2020, *Beach Read* represents that cusp between third and fourth wave feminism. It shows women fighting for their place in areas that we have been "allowed" into, and demonstrates that to fit into those places, we don't have to stop being a woman. In the novel, January Andrews is an author herself and allows Emily Henry to comment directly on the things she has experienced as a romance writer herself. Her character is constantly fighting against stereotypes of the genre and women's fiction in general, saying "If you swapped out all my Jessicas for Johns, do you know what you'd get? Fiction. Just fiction. Ready and willing to be read by anyone, but somehow by *being* a woman who *writes* about women, I've eliminated half the Earth's population from my potential readers" (Henry 68). Her commentary points out the general attitude surrounding the genre of romance and women's literature and the disdain that follows a lot of romance authors in literary spaces.

In addition to its complex relationship with the romance genre, it also provides a perceptive analysis of functional relationships and how the "modern woman" looks at love. January Andrews is very representative of fourth wave feminism in that she is emboldened by showing emotions and femininity. At one point in the novel, she describes herself as "Soft January. January who could never hide what she was thinking. January who he'd always been afraid to break" (Henry 343). She is fully aware of her vulnerability and throughout the course of the novel, it becomes less of a weakness and more of a strength. This lack of fear of uniqueness and non-conformity is something we see echoed throughout Austen's works as well, especially in Lizzie Bennet's interactions with other characters in the novel. Lizzie and January are both

examples of non-conformity and breaking barriers for very different reasons, each highlighting the time period that they were written in. Austen was very concerned with independence and feminine strength and that showed in her characters. Lizzie was not willing to compromise her personal morals and she refused to marry for anything less than love, regardless of if that caused her to break social rules. In Emily Henry's case, the idea of women's rights and gendered stereotypes is not a new one, so she breaks the barriers in a different way. January is more concerned with celebrating differences and highlighting internalized misogyny that keeps women separate in spaces like the publishing industry.

Henry's breakdown of societal expectations for women leads to a focus on the aspect of gender performativity that is especially prevalent for women in relationships. A term first used by Judith Butler in the 1990s, gender performativity is the idea that women and men are operating under societal expectations and behaviors instead of actual differences between genders. She explains it like this:

“Gender is, thus, a construction... The tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of its own production. The authors of gender become entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one's belief in its necessity and naturalness” (Butler 522).

Gender is essentially the expected societal actions that have been designated for men and women based on believed “necessity.” This idea affects women's relationships in particular because of the expectations for their performance in those relationships. They are expected to provide for the emotional and physical needs of their significant others, and the blame for unsuccessful relationships is placed on the women's shoulders often. In *Beach Read*, the healthy

relationship is juxtaposed with the unsuccessful previous relationship, highlighting to the reader the unequal requirements required of women. Henry writes, “Again and again he told me I wasn’t myself. But he was wrong. I was the same me I’d always been. I’d just stopped trying to glow in the dark for him, or anyone else” (118). Her ex-boyfriend had wanted January to shine and to be the happy, perfect girl that he first started dating, regardless of the fact that her father had just died and that she was still human. These societal pressures are a common aspect present in many romance novels, since Jane Austen’s first novel.

In conversation with this aspect of performativity in Henry’s novel is the overarching concept that society doesn’t take things that women do or enjoy seriously regardless of its popularity or intricacy, once again highlighting the main ideas of fourth wave feminism. When January is describing what it’s like to talk to someone about her job, she emphasizes how most people treat her profession, which she enjoys, like it’s easy:

“It made me feel like people thought my career was a fluke. Like I’d sneezed and a romance novel came out... There were the people who acted like we were in on some secret joke together when...they found out I wrote upbeat women’s fiction: *Whatever pays the bills, right?* they’d say, practically begging me to confirm I didn’t *want* to write books about women or love” (Henry 33).

Writing romance novels is sometimes seen as a temporary thing or something you do until something better comes along, rather than a serious career path. It’s regarded as “escapist” literature and deemed purely for entertainment purposes, many times simply because it is not serious enough. In actuality, most modern romance novels deal with emotional intelligence, vulnerability, and healthy relationships.

This hasn't always been the case. Oftentimes, popular romance novels in the mid-20th century didn't reflect these ideas of female empowerment and subversion of societal expectations. Many "bodice ripping" novels involve an unequal power dynamic and many restrictions on what women can and should be, as described by Helen Leedy: "In important matters, they [men] are expected to make the decisions because women are unable to decide for themselves. A man tries to avoid commitment, preferring not to be 'saddled' with a female. The woman is not settled until she has a commitment" (Leedy 65). In part, this represents the culture in which these books are being written. For most of these mid-century novels, they suggest that a woman cannot exist because her entire existence is contradictory, created by a patriarchal society that lives to perpetuate its unequal dynamics of power.

To explain why this would occur in the midst of rising women's rights movements, Leedy hypothesizes that these women writers are trapped in those societal standards; "It is hard to be radical when you, yourself, believe in the way things are. This could be due to social conditioning and stereotyping. The influence of many years of teaching is hard to escape" (68). The idea of social conditioning holding back the women's rights movement and encouraging conformity to the previous patriarchal society's imbalances emphasizes the idea that Judith Butler was trying to make about Gender Performativity, in the way that it operates under "the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders" (Butler, 522). The roles of women in society were created out of "necessity" by the men in power and used to justify centuries of compliance. The new ideas of equality had not yet spread to the general population, and we can see that reflected in the literature.

Compared to other contemporary romance novels, this societal conformity is not something actively happening in the text anymore. Like in *Beach Read*, the trends of the

romance genre now are leaning towards the aspects of non-conformity. In addition to that increased attention to vulnerability and emotional intelligence, there is also a focus on financial and societal independence, as well as sexual freedom. In both *Yours Truly* by Abby Jimenez and *Dear Emmie Blue* by Lia Louis, financial independence is a big part of the main characters' story. In *Yours Truly*, the main character doesn't want to give up her job as a surgeon to take care of their child, so the father takes on the role of stay-at-home dad. This is unconventionally modern even from the other contemporary literature being published. When the characters discuss this, it seems like a very simple decision for them; "Briana liked going to work and didn't want to give up the security of having a salary. So we talked it over and decided I would quit my job at Royaume to stay home with Ava... So I was a stay-at-home dad" (Jimenez 385). This role reversal speaks to the changing power dynamic that we see represented in contemporary literature, making newly published romance novels starkly different from those that we published in the mid-20th century.

Women have the financial freedom to support themselves, and they have jobs where they are accepted and successful; this is very different from both first and part of second wave feminism, when women were tied to their husband's income and status regardless of their skills and capabilities. In *Dear Emmie Blue*, when the main female character Emmie is nervous about interviewing for the job she's always wanted, the love interest encourages her without hesitation: "I support you and accept you, even though you're a wreck..." (Louis 202). Modern romances are centered around this acceptance and equality, instead of the dominating power structures and control that was prominent in the past, in turn reflecting the core ideals of third and fourth wave feminism.

What Does It Matter?

Romance novels, especially today, represent a specific desire in its audiences: love and acceptance. We can see this reflected in most contemporary romances, and in some of the older novels as well. This very human ability to see ourselves reflected in characters and resonate with their stories and their joy makes us feel heard and understood. Like Emily Henry said, ““It [the romance novel] does *exactly* what I aim to: it makes its readers feel known and understood, like their stories— women’s stories— matter” (Henry 70). These romance novels show women’s stories and women’s strength, and happiness in the midst of life. When it in turn responds to social movements, the readers find themselves relating to the difficulties of characters, specifically female characters within the text. More than that, we can see this desire evolving throughout the romance genre, responding to the feminist movement as it gains momentum and changes throughout the years. It’s not happening at exactly the same rate or at exactly the same time, but the views and values of the mainly female audience (and the authors themselves) are actively commenting and interacting with each other. Romance novels and the authors are responding to feminist ideas being spread; simultaneously, the feminist movement is responding to the overarching popular opinions of women, which are often what’s currently being written in contemporary romance since it has such a large audience of women consumers. It’s a reciprocal relationship that is constantly affecting the other, especially in fourth wave feminism with the influence of social media creating a rapid exchange of ideas.

When discussing the importance of romance as a genre of literature, specifically its impact on women, it is critical to also examine the effects of internalized misogyny on both the movement and the genre, as both are led primarily by women. Many books written by women for

women are not canonized because they are not recognized as “good enough.” In schools, we teach novels with “meaning,” and often tortured female characters. According to Carol Ricker-Wilson, that doesn’t teach female students how to be empowered within a patriarchal society; “One might argue that literature about women written from a feminist perspective is meant to function as women’s ‘literature of need,’ but reading about women’s oppression— particularly if one is already disempowered by academic, familial, or social circumstance— does not necessarily engage readers or enable them to significantly change their relationships with father, brother, and lovers” (Ricker-Wilson 57). It is an injustice to young women not to teach them about strong women, happy women, and instead only the tragedy of women. They will see plenty of tragedy in their own lives.

All six of these novels represent the stories of strong women that broke barriers and thrived despite their imperfections. Mirroring the social movements of the time, specifically feminism. Popular literature acts as a guide to the social and political climate of the time that it was written, even when that climate was not great. The oppression of women has lasted for centuries, and we can see that reflected in the literature. Sometimes, even in the midst of societal advances, the literature seems far behind. To Helen Leedy, public popular movements do not mean radical change; “With the women’s rights movement of the 60s, one believes that women have made tremendous strides toward bettering their status in society. No longer can they be viewed as passive-dependent creatures, subject to the desires of men. Alas, the changes are not as great as we are led to believe” (Leedy 68). The romance novels of the mid-20th century reflected a social conditioning that had not yet been totally disestablished. However, in the years after that we can see the novels beginning to reflect the movement. The contemporary novels of fourth wave feminism have the quickest transfer of ideas due to the internet, thus we can see the

concepts of fourth wave feminism reflected in the literature much quicker than in other decades. As the ideas continue to evolve and we find ourselves firmly in fourth wave feminism instead of on the cusp, the focus on intersectionality and diversity will continue to grow and reflect in the literature. However, the importance of the stories told in romance novels will continue as long as it is telling the narrative of the people who need them, for the enjoyment of the reader.

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