

Liz Tretter

Dr. Jones

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Die Hard: A Case Study of Masculine Romance

Works of the Romance genre have long been regarded as “chick flicks” or “chick lit.” According to an article published in the *Frontiers in Psychology* journal, both men and women stereotype entire genres of literature and film, leaving very few on a neutral ground (Wühr). Of these stereotypes, the study revealed romances were gendered as feminine, while action or adventure films were regarded as being more masculine (Wühr). However, the feminization of an entire literary genre along with its structures and tropes has left modern scholars questioning these long-standing stereotypes. Since empirical research has confirmed to some degree that women prefer romances and men prefer action/adventure films, there is a possibility that the two are connected in some way (Wühr). To explore this idea, it is necessary to apply some form of a Romantic ‘yardstick’ to a traditional masculine action/adventure film. *Die Hard*, a film directed by John McTiernan, provides the ideal test subject for this case study due to its credit for “reinventing the action genre” (Klimek). By applying Northrop Frye’s six phases of Romance outlined in his *Anatomy of Criticism* to the action/adventure film *Die Hard*, the connections reveal a gender disparity regarding the feminization of the Romantic genre.

While *Die Hard* is known as an action/adventure film, the core elements of the film’s genre are closely intertwined with those of a Romance. According to Frye, adventure is an “essential element of [Romantic] plot,” which naturally takes on a “processional form” (Frye

186). This sequential form is separated by Frye as six distinct phases that can be applied to nearly every Romance. The first phase of a Romance begins with the “birth of the hero,” which does not necessarily have to include the literal birth of the protagonist (Frye 198). Rather, in a metaphorical sense, the hero maintains a sense of innocence or naivety as he takes up his heroic calling. Applying this principle to *Die Hard*, a New York city detective, John McClane, boards a plane in the beginning of the film with the hopes of reunifying his family by reconnecting with his estranged wife, Holly, in Los Angeles. John’s heroic naivety is revealed through a conversation with his limo driver, Argyle, who functions as a Romantic archetype of the “buffoon” (Frye 197). The purpose of the buffoon archetype is to provide comic relief, which Argyle does throughout the film when, for example, the cameras cut to him singing in his limo, blissfully unaware of terrorists who have taken over the building above him. Characters like Argyle also function in a Romance as a tool that “intensif[ies] and provide[s] a focus for the romantic mood.” For instance, once the limo arrives at Nakatomi Corporation, Argyle asks John whether he believes Holly will just “run into...[his] arms...[and] live happily ever after,” which John begrudgingly admits he would want (*Die Hard*). Not only does this image presented by Argyle reveal John’s heroic naivety before the transition into Romantic phase two, it also serves as an interesting contrast for John and Holly’s actual meeting just a few minutes later.

After the limo arrives at Nakatomi Corporation, the plot begins to shift into the second phase of Romance, “the innocent youth of the hero” (Frye 199). In literary tradition, this shift is signified by “generally a pleasant...landscape” with colors of green and gold to herald the hero’s “vanishing youth” (Frye 200). In *Die Hard*, this shift manifests itself in the sun that is setting behind John as he enters the Nakatomi building. With the setting sun, comes the end of the youthful nature of the hero, as he will soon undergo a trial with the coming night. Not long after

John enters the building, Holly comes face to face with him from across the room. While both stand in awe of one other, their true feelings are not expressed explicitly, as the pair continues to hold themselves at a distance. For example, Holly offers her home for John to stay in, but he rejects her proposal, saying he is staying at a friend's. This friendly, but distant display of love and care represents the archetype of "erotic innocence," referring to a kind of "chaste" love preceding marriage or the reunification of the husband and wife commonly found in phase two (Frye 200). Until the pair is reunified at the end of the tale, the distance existing between Holly and John presents a "sexual barrier" that is commonly found within a Romance, which typically separates the hero from the object of his/her affections (Frye 200). While the barrier can take many forms, in the case of *Die Hard*, John's pride initially stands in the way of the pair reuniting. However, this barrier takes on a much more tangible form, when Holly steps out of the room and so-called "terrorists" take all the party-goers hostage. Alone, John is left to save the day and, once again, attempt to bridge the gap between him and his wife.

Once the terrorists storm the Nakatomi tower, John's true adventure is realized, which is the third phase of Romance known as "the Quest phase" (Frye 186). As announced in the beginning of the film, John's goal is to win back his wife, but to do that, he has to first defeat the terrorists who have taken her captive. The majority of the movie is spent in the third phase, as it is the heart of nearly every Romance. Due to the magnitude of phase three, Frye discusses three sub-phases or "main stages" of the quest (Frye 186). The first of which is "the stage of the perilous journey and the preliminary minor adventures," which is the largest of the three and consists of multiple side quests (Frye 187). One example of a side quest is John's attempt to save Joseph Takagi, the executive of Nakatomi Corporation. While John unfortunately does not make it in time, he takes on a new side-quest of attempting to contact the police. Later, John takes on

the side quests of eliminating the terrorists one-by-one. While John's actions would put him in serious violation of the rules of reality, the "remote" or "enchanted" setting of the Romance reestablish his heroic nobility (Frye 187). For example, one terrorist, Tony, verbalizes this idea by saying that "there are rules for a policeman," which imply that John must operate under a certain set of rules applying outside of the building (*Die Hard*). Although John acknowledges those rules, he ultimately kills Tony, accidentally transgressing one of his moral responsibilities. However, the "insular world" of Romance creates its own rules as it operates differently than the rest of the outside world, establishing that the reader's values are bound up with the hero (Frye 187).

Another part of the first stage of the Romantic quest includes the establishment of opposites. Regardless of whose side everyone is on, characters tend to be "either for or against the quest" (Frye 195). In *Die Hard*, the most obvious ones would be John McClane and Hans Gruber, who serve as the hero and the villain, the protagonist and antagonist, respectively. As for the other characters, those who help the Romantic hero on his quest are often idealized as "gallant or pure," while those opposed are seen as "evil" or "cowardly" (Frye 195). There are two sets of examples of these in the film, Argyle and Al Powell, who serve as the jester and faithful companion, and their opposites, Harry Ellis and Dwayne Robinson. In Romances, the jester or faithful companion's opposite is always "the traitor," which Ellis, the vice president of sales for the company, fulfills by offering his services to aid the terrorists (Frye 195). Another example is Al Powell, who not only serves as John's literal connection to the outside world, but also his "localized safety valve for realism" within the Romance (Frye 197). Powell's opposite, Deputy Chief of Police Dwayne Robinson, ultimately obstructs the John's heroic quest and therefore is seen as "cowardly" by the viewers (Frye 195). John even verbalizes this romantic

ideal in the film over the phone with Robinson by stating, “if you aren’t part of the solution, you’re part of the problem” (*Die Hard*).

After undergoing a series of side adventures, the hero finally reaches stage two of the quest known as “the crucial struggle” (Frye 187). This stage typically involves a sort of battle where the hero or his foe dies (Frye 187). All prior actions lead up to this final test of the quest. In *Die Hard*, the final standoff is between John McClane and Hans Gruber. This “black and white” nature of the powers fighting in the film is a characteristic typical of romances (Frye 195). Ultimately, through his cunning, John McClane outsmarts mastermind Hans Gruber as he falls out of a window to his death, fulfilling this phase of the quest. Not only does Hans’ death fulfil the common ‘dragon-slaying’ theme existing in Romance, John also saves the ‘maiden,’ which is yet another reoccurring theme (Frye 189). In doing so, John takes off the Rolex given to Holly by Harry Ellis, which represents the idea that she is no longer John’s wife. The watch serves as a reminder that Holly is separated from her husband with the possibility of pursuing other options. Once the watch is removed, Holly is not only free from the villain’s grasp, but also from the bondage keeping her from reuniting with John. The significance of the watch’s absence also comes into play during the next stage of the quest.

Immediately after John rescues Holly, stage three of the quest begins with “the exaltation of the hero” (Frye 187). While the media and police officers fight to get a quote from John McClane, the only praise he seeks is from his wife Holly, which she gives by introducing herself as “Holly McClane” to Al Powell. In the beginning of the film, Holly had used her maiden name to show a clear separation in her marriage. After the watch was removed from her wrist, so was the symbolic separation between her and John. Now, Holly places herself back under the name of “McClane,” signifying her willful acceptance of a reunification with John.

At this point, phase three and all of the sub-stages of the quest have been completed, and phase four, where the hero “maintains innocence works against assault of experience,” begins within the final moments of *Die Hard* (Frye 202). Phase four deals with “consolidating heroic innocence” in the fictional world after the main quest has reached completion (Frye 202). While all the terrorists are presumed to be dead and order has been restored, Kyle, another terrorist, manages to somehow survive and attempts to murder John. Al Powell, who previously opened up about how he has been unable to use a gun, uses his police revolver to shoot and effectively kill Kyle. The Romantic theme of “the legend of justice” is once more restored when Powell can utilize his weapon for good and atone for his past of misfiring and killing a teenager. Other times, phase four includes the theme of “the monster” being “tamed or controlled” by the “virgin,” in this case Holly. While Holly is a married woman, she fulfils this role of a “virgin” who has remained chaste to her one husband throughout his quest. Although a small action, Holly has brief moment of autonomy where she punches the camera man who exploited her children and ultimately gave away her identify to Hans Gruber. In a sense, she has fulfilled this traditional theme of a Romance as well.

Phases five and six, while both equally distinct and important, seemingly go hand-in-hand during the final moments of the film. Phase five, which is “a reflective, idyllic view of experience from above,” often is like the second phase of the Romance (Frye 202). Once again, John McClane prepares to step back into the same limo he arrived in during the second phase, only this time with his wife. However, the mood is different than that of the second phase. Frye refers to the mood as a “competitive withdrawal,” exemplified by McClane’s focus on his wife as he ignores the numerous police, firemen, and camera crews rushing around the scene (Frye 202). As for the final sixth phase, “penseroso,” the hero returns back to the “warm, comfortable,

reflective phase” that is associated with the reunification of the hero and his maiden as well as the completion of the quest (Frye 202). In *Die Hard*, the audience is once again returned to the happiness and safety of the limo Argyle drove in the beginning, where John and Holly share an intimate kiss in the back of the vehicle. Thus, completes the “solar cycle” of a Romance, where the balance has been restored and justice has been served (Frye 187).

After applying Northrop Frye’s six Romantic phases to a film beloved by the male population, the plot is revealed to be very much in line with the typical Romance genre gendered as feminine. If anything, *Die Hard* becomes the ideal romance for men. While the film is but one action plot beloved by male viewers, there are several other films with similar structures, such as *Transformers* or *Fast and Furious*, that also warrant a critical analysis of their possible Romantic nature. At the very least, the example provided by *Die Hard* has revealed a major gender disparity when it comes to feminizing the Romance genre. Why this disparity continues to persist is a question to be answered by future scholarship, but perhaps there is an explanation as to why men prefer *Die Hard* over other stereotypical Romances. Frye defines a Romantic hero as someone who is an “idealized character” (Frye 191). By applying this definition to the character of John McClane, the physical nature of his atonement takes the place of a verbal expression of love often found within Romantic comedies. While John is far from perfect, his unwavering masculinity allows him to sustain serious damage, such as the cuts from walking on glass, in order to defeat the terrorists and save his wife. Through these physical trials and injuries, John puts his life on the line for the Holly, which is enough to atone for his past mistakes leading to their separation. In that sense, John represents an ideal of masculinity that acts to fulfill the wishes of a specific male audience, those who watch longing for the hopes of getting the girl, but also for the chance to prove themselves in the face of adversity.

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