

Deconstructing Tropes in Popular Romance Fiction

Alyssa Palmer
3513585
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DECONSTRUCTING TROPES IN POPULAR ROMANCE FICTION

Abstract

Tropes are a go-to plot device in popular romance fiction. Many publishers use them as a way to categorize books and submissions, but beyond the surface-level intentions, what do the tropes symbolize, and what do they promote or portray about romance? This essay will examine two of the more common tropes and how they fit into the dominant Western cultural narrative of romance. Love triangles are common in fiction as they create instant conflict and tension via the competition of the protagonists, but depending on their portrayal, can promote patriarchal norms. A virgin heroine is a mainstay in popular romance fiction, from the early “bodice rippers” of the 1970s and 1980s to today. Purity and possession of the heroine are common themes in this trope, providing an easy shorthand for a power imbalance between the protagonists. Derrida’s deconstruction theory will be used to break the tropes down to their specific parts. I will also examine some of the ways to subvert these tropes, to move beyond expectations and create a different narrative.

Keywords: Popular romance fiction, romantic tropes, deconstruction, Derrida, love triangle, virginity, patriarchy, feminism

Deconstructing Tropes in Popular Romance Fiction

Introduction

In a romance novel, a trope is a plot device, theme, or character type that has been used so often as to become a convention of the genre. Tropes are a mainstay of popular romance fiction. A number of romance publishers use tropes as a way to categorize their books and help readers find the type of story they want to read. Romance novels are often derided as being formulaic and the use of tropes can contribute to this viewpoint. Tropes, however, can be more than just formula. In this paper, I attempt to go beyond the surface-level intentions of the tropes, looking at symbolism and how they fit into the dominant Western cultural narrative of romance, using Derrida's deconstruction theory to break them down to their specific parts. I was inspired by Elizabeth A. St. Pierre when she said "for both Foucault and Derrida, critique does not begin with the assumption that what exists is wrong or in error" and noted that critique examines the assumptions being made and why. (St. Pierre, 2014) I will also examine some of the ways to subvert these tropes and to move beyond expectations to create a different narrative.

What is Romance?

The Romance Writers of America, an industry group that supports romance writers at all stages of their careers, defines romance as a story with a central love story and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending (rwa.org). Put simply, protagonists fall in love, face various challenges, whether those be external or internal, and live happily ever after or happily for now. Popular romance fiction has a variety of lengths and formats, from short flash fiction to novellas and full length novels. It also covers a variety of subgenres, which include but are not limited to those with paranormal elements (werewolves or vampires, for instance), suspense or thriller elements, stories set in historical eras or contemporary times, stories with more erotic themes, and stories for young adults. Romance fiction is not only for heterosexual people, but includes LGBTQ2S+ people, and expands beyond the traditional two-person pairing.

Current romance fiction may be published by traditional publishers such as Harlequin, Mills & Boon, Avon and Kensington, as well as smaller publishers like Bold Strokes Books, Bywater Books, and others, and by individual authors. Self-publishing is strong in romance fiction and romance authors like Marie Force and Bella Andre have sold thousands, if not millions, of books. Self-published or indie authors are at the forefront of romance fiction, hitting bestseller lists and doing so on their own terms. The rise in popularity of electronic books have helped, making romance fiction easier to publish, and more accessible for readers. A reader is no longer limited by what their local bookstore is able to stock.

What is a Trope? Why Deconstruct Tropes?

A trope is a plot device, theme, or character type that has been used so often as to become a convention of the genre. They aren't just used in romance fiction, but in most other genre fiction as well. There could be a misanthropic, lone private investigator or cop trying to find a killer in a thriller. Or in a superhero story, there might be a villain who wants to take over the world. Tropes are familiar territory to readers and can offer them a starting point of interest in a story.

Popular and well-known romance publisher Harlequin often focuses on tropes as a part of their categorization of stories, as well as in advertising to readers and to authors aspiring to be published with them. Their category romance series books explicitly request tropes. For

example, Harlequin's Special Edition line requests popular storylines that "include second chances; friends to lovers; city vs. country; and pregnancy and baby stories." (Submittable, n.d.) Entangled Publishing, which is a newer romance publisher that focuses primarily on digital publishing, requests tropes explicitly in their Brazen romance line:

"Proven category tropes such as fake relationship, bait and switch, wrong bed, best friends-to-lovers, fish out of water, older brother's best friend, enemies-to-lovers, mistaken identity, revenge, one-night-stand, sexy protectors, opposites attract, boardroom romance, matchmaker, etc. Bonus points if you combine a few of them into one story." (Entangled, n.d.)

How tropes are used can demonstrate the author's cultural and societal values and of those publishing the book. When the expected narrative has a virgin heroine, for example, what does that imply? One should consider if the tropes used are realistic or completely fantastical. If the trope is able to be subverted from its typical narrative, how may tropes either defend or pillory the sex and gender roles of the protagonists? Subversion of a trope can make the familiar seem strange. In the next section, I attempt to answer some of these questions by focusing on two popular tropes.

The Love Triangle

This trope is a much-used device for creating almost instant conflict in a story. Love triangles involve three people, and are often used as a form of competition, where the arrangement is unsuitable to at least one person in the arrangement. Two men compete for one woman, or two women compete for one man. In either variation, it's the man who wins, either by being the literal winner of the woman and taking her from the other man, or by being fought over by two women. It's a trope that has been used since the time of Shakespeare, if not earlier. Romeo and Paris competed for the hand of fair Juliet. There are so many: Elizabeth Bennet, Darcy and Wickam¹; Buttercup, Westley and Prince Humperdinck²; Katniss, Peeta and Gale³; Sookie, Bill and Eric⁴; Archie, Betty, and Veronica⁵; Bella, Edward and Jacob.⁶

But why a triangle? There are three people involved, but yet, none of the above noted love triangles have a romantic interest between all characters. Two characters are interested in the other, not all three. That doesn't create a triangle. There's no equal interest involved. What that seems to create is a "V", where the two competitors' focus is the third. MD Presley points out that you can't have a love triangle without homosexuality or homosexual interest because "there are three people, so that's where the triangle comes into play since we all know a triangle has three points and three sides." (Presley, 2017) Given continued societal discomfort to homosexuality and the LGBTQ2S+ community, it is likely that this oversight is intentional. Competition can be understood, but anything more than a heteronormative pairing is confusing or suspect.

¹ *Pride & Prejudice* by Jane Austen.

² *The Princess Bride* by William Goldman.

³ *The Hunger Games* series by Suzanne Collins.

⁴ *Sookie Stackhouse* series by Charlaine Harris.

⁵ *Archie* comics.

⁶ *Twilight* series by Stephenie Meyer.

There is an argument that the typical heteronormative “triangle” enables the woman to choose and has a feminist bent. Either the woman succeeds in snagging the guy from a female rival or the woman can choose from one of two men vying for her attention. Whether this trope is feminist or patriarchal depends upon the author and their storytelling, how the reader perceives their words and how the story enables the heroine choices. When the heroine is portrayed as helpless or without agency, where events happen to her, the narrative feeds into the cultural message of women as weak and in need of rescue. If she is independent and has agency instead of just reacting to what is happening to her or around her, then a more feminist viewpoint of her choice would be likely. If she’s but a leaf in the stream, going wherever it takes her, accepting what happens, then it’s likely to be a patriarchal meaning, as she accepts the decisions of the men around her, whether there are two competing for her affections or one choosing between her and another woman. If both choices are poor, or the narrative eliminates one by death or other method, then the choice is made for her.

There are a growing number of stories that subvert this trope, fully embracing the queer part of the triangle and making interest equal between the three involved. The erotic romance “Full Mountie” by authors Ainsley Booth and Sadie Haller is an excellent example. In the book, the main characters Beth (assistant to the prime minister) and Lachlan (the RCMP head of security for the prime minister) have been skirting around each other for a year, attracted but not yet willing to make a move. With the addition of Hugh, an RCMP security agent with a past relationship history with Lachlan, the conflict is ramped up. Lachlan and Beth seem to realize that they don’t need to be just a couple before Hugh does. Beth observes to Lachlan: “I really think that somehow along the way, he’s [Hugh] convinced himself that he’s only temporary for you. For us. And he went into our relationship eyes wide open, convinced that was the case, but it got to be too much.” (Booth et al, 2018, p. 329) It’s not easy for them to come to grips with wanting more than a usual heterosexual couple. Lachlan notes, in a discussion with both Hugh and Beth: “We’ll figure it out. What we know for sure is that we’re all in this, right? We’re a...couple. A triad. We are in a relationship, the three of us.” (2018, p. 339) Even in romance, it’s not so easy, as societal expectations and nervousness around being out come into play. Hugh says to Beth, “It’s a steep learning curve, this poly thing. We’ll figure it out.” (2018, p. 354) It takes some time for all of them to come to the realization that they don’t have to have the men compete for Beth and have one come out the winner, but their main concern is how their friends and family will react and how they will deal with societal expectations. Love is the easy part.

The Virgin Heroine

This trope is exceedingly common in romances with heterosexual characters, to the extent that a number of current romance releases include titles such as “Virgin’s Sweet Rebellion” and “Virgin on Her Wedding Night” or “Virgin Promise”. Even without such blatant signalling in the title, there are other nods to virginity in titles such as “Innocent in the Sicilian’s Palazzo” and “Innocent in the Billionaire’s Bed”. Innocence and purity are still a draw in popular romance fiction. As Jonathan A. Allan notes, “in the first wave of romance scholarship, the trope of female virginity was often presented as a necessary feature of the genre” (2011). Wendell and Tan note in their book *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches Guide to Romance Novels* that “the sexually experienced woman in fiction still raises hackles and creates uncomfortable associations with uncleanness, the threat of infidelity, and moral degeneration” (2009, p. 38).

But what is a virgin? By the most basic of definitions, a virgin is someone who hasn’t had sexual intercourse. What then, is sexual intercourse? Merriam Webster defines it as penetrative

sex, heterosexual intercourse, or intercourse (anal or oral) that doesn't involve penetration. Why, though, is the heroine's virginity the focus? Women were (or are, in some areas of the world still) considered property of men, whether that be her father or her husband. Her ownership passed from father to husband at marriage. This socio-biological control helped ensure that her offspring were those of her husband. (Bancroft, 2009) Even now, though official ownership is prohibited by law and a woman is considered a person⁷, possession of a woman is still valued by many men, especially that of being a woman's "first." There is a strong association between virginity, sexual pre-marital purity, and family honour. This belief can be religious or non-religious, and abstinence is often taught to young women and conflated with virginity and chastity. There are no purity balls⁸ for boys, just for girls. Men and boys aren't expected to remain virgins.

Male virgins are a rarity in romance fiction. In comparison to male virgins in various media, such as the protagonist in the film "The 40 Year Old Virgin", Jonathan A. Allan observes that a male virgin hero in a romance novel "tends to be a complex character, not a joke to be laughed at or a tragic figure to pity." (2011, p. 5) Allan also notes that there are several different archetypes for male virgins in romance: the sick virgin, the student virgin, and the genius virgin. (2011, p. 5-7) It appears that male virgins need to have a reason or justification for their delayed sexual experiences and prolonged lack of sex. A male virgin can't simply just exist like the female ones seem to in romance fiction as an innocent waiting for awakening.

Male virginity is defined just the same as the dictionary definition above, but there is no physical way to identify a male virgin. After all, a person with a penis has no hymen. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why female virginity has occupied most of the focus in Western culture. In a romance with a female virgin, there is a good chance that her first sexual penis-in-vagina (PIV) experience has one or more of the following: pain, blood, and/or actual physical tearing of the hymen. These events may or may not occur in real life, and the lack thereof is no indication of virginity. Some people with vaginas may have a hymen that covers more of the vaginal opening than others. Some people with vaginas may not even have a detectable hymen at all. (Savchenko, 2021) There are also issues with knowledge of biology at play in romance novels. Many authors assume the hymen is within the woman's vagina, not at the entrance, and the hero often penetrates the heroine partway before "running into" a physical barrier. The hymen is a fold of skin or membrane that is located below the opening of the vagina and can encircle the vaginal opening or just cover part. Not all people with vaginas will have a hymen, and it may not break during sex as it can be quite elastic.

Why is penetrative sex, particularly the PIV sort, so lauded? If a couple are pursuing sexual pleasure, wouldn't it make more sense to seek out and admire people with experience? In many romance novels, this expectation of innocence or purity is rarely if ever expected of the male character of the pairing. In the book "The Billionaire's Proposition in Paris", the hero, Conall, is between lovers. He acknowledges that he is easily bored of women, dating a new

⁷ In Canada, women became people on October 29, 1929 when the decision was made to include women in the legal definition of "persons." This did not, however, include all women, as Indigenous and women of Asian heritage were excluded. Indigenous women did not gain the right to vote until 1960. (Government of Canada, 2021)

⁸ A purity ball is an event where girls pledge to their fathers to maintain their virginity until marriage. There are often father-daughter dances, much like a wedding, and the event is usually formal.

woman every few months. (Rice, 2021) It's considered normal and very few if any characters remark upon this in a negative way. The heroine, Katherine, in her mid-twenties, has yet to have lost her virginity, even though she had been previously married and "it had been a childhood friendship that had blossomed into love. A love they'd never consummated. Physical intimacy had been the least of the things they'd lost when Tom had become ill." (Rice, p. 6) Likely due to her age and prior marriage, the author makes an effort to justify why Katherine is still virginal, as with the male virgins mentioned by Jonathan Allan. There is an expectation of sexual experience beyond a certain age or along with certain life milestones such as marriage. Though Katherine very much fits the trope, she also does subvert it somewhat as she isn't completely innocent. Her age and career experience gives her some depth despite her lack of physical experience.

As with many romance novels, attraction is swift and so is consummation between Conall and Katherine, and the ownership and patriarchal viewpoint comes into play when Conall realizes he's Katherine's first, remembering "the last words his father had ever spoken to him" and that those words were "damning him", demanding that he protect and respect her. (Rice, p. 94) As he has taken her virginity ("taken" is used purposefully here as he does consider it a taking) he then feels obligated to marry her, and proposes. (Rice, 2021)

In older romance novels, particularly the "bodice ripper" variety of the 1970s and early 1980s, virginity often went hand-in-hand with the forced consent or rape of the heroine by the hero. In the book "The Flame and the Flower" by Kathleen E. Woodiwiss, published in 1972, the heroine, Heather, is mistaken by the hero, Brandon, as a prostitute, and is raped. She's forced to marry him when she becomes pregnant. The rape enabled the character of Heather to maintain the expectation that women didn't pursue sex and were submissive to men, while also allowing her to be able to have sex and in future encounters, enjoy it with the hero. Wendell and Tan observe that at least in romance novels, "women [outside of romance novels] who were knowingly involved in prostitution, or who were raped, are considered 'damaged goods'; in a romance novel, particularly some stunningly good ones, such women deserve and earn happy endings". (2009, p. 159) In "The Billionaire's Proposition in Paris", Conall's proposal harkens back to an older time when women were submissive and expected to only have one sexual partner. Still, there is at least some progressive, possibly even feminist understanding from him and Katherine that she will not be forced to accept his proposal despite him taking her virginity.

Fortunately, though virginity is still a common trope, it is not as expected as it once was, and women in particular are able to claim their sexual wants and needs as openly as men. Books such as "Her Naughty Holiday" by Tiffany Reisz have the heroines claiming their own pleasure and that of their partner.

Conclusion

A trope is a plot device, theme, or character type that has been used so often as to become a convention of the genre. Tropes are often relied upon in popular romance fiction. Two of the more common tropes used are the love triangle and the virgin heroine. The love triangle is an easy way to add instant conflict to a story, as the typical use of this trope involves a competition between protagonists to win the love interest. However, this typical usage is more of a V shape rather than a triangle as there is no interest between all three characters. A true triangle would involve homosexual interest between the three points of the triangle, but traditional societal reluctance to acknowledge LGBTQ2S+ relationships may play a part in keeping the triangle a V. The virgin heroine trope has been common in romance fiction for decades and continues to be popular. Heroes as virgins are rare, possibly because there is no physical way to determine if a

DECONSTRUCTING TROPES IN POPULAR ROMANCE FICTION

person with a penis has had sex, whereas a person with a vagina may or may not have a hymen. A virgin heroine may be used as a shorthand for establishing a power imbalance with a more-experienced hero who is able to teach the virgin about sex and relationships, often creating a kind of ownership and pride over being the virgin's first time. More recent romance fiction is changing this expectation of virginity, relying upon more feminist concepts, treating a sexually experienced heroine as normal and illustrating her agency. While many readers still expect these tropes to be written as they always were, more romance fiction readers are looking for stories that subvert these tropes and go beyond traditional views.

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