

Original Article

MAN CHANGE THYSELF: HERO VERSUS HEROINE DEVELOPMENT IN HARLEQUIN ROMANCE NOVELS

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Abstract

Previously, we examined the frequency with which words appear in Harlequin romance novel titles to explore women's evolved mating interests. To complement that study, we now perform an exploratory study in which we compare hero and heroine development, with the goal of understanding what women seek in potential mates, and how they ideally conceptualize men. Heroes are always described in considerable detail (e.g., appearance, resources, and career status), while heroines are rarely described in these terms, or in this depth. These descriptions of men are congruent with the evolutionary psychology literature on women's mate preferences. We found that heroes undergo noteworthy changes within the books, such that they often start as 'cads' who are often rude, independent, and aggressive, but by the end of the book they are loyal, devoted men who are in love with the heroine. In contrast, the heroine undergoes only minimal transformation. This desire for a mate who encompasses both a 'cad' and a 'dad' mating strategy is beneficial to women, evolutionarily speaking, because cads may have high gene quality and dads may provide high paternal investment.

Keywords: Romance novels, mating strategies, Darwinian literary studies, qualitative analyses, sex differences

Introduction

The field of Darwinian literary studies has effectively demonstrated that it is possible to examine texts and arrive at meaningful conclusions about evolved human behaviors, motivations, and emotions (Carroll, 1995). Thus, by analyzing texts, one is actually analyzing human nature, albeit indirectly. For example, one can study *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen to gain insight into women's mating strategies (see Strout, Fisher, Kruger & Steeleworthy, 2010). This perspective has made considerable scholarly progress in our understanding of the intersection of literature and evolutionary psychology, as evidenced by several recent books on this topic, such as

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Gottschall (2008) and Boyd, Carroll and Gottschall (2010).

Darwinian literary analysis has also been applied to a variety of genres, such as slash fiction (Salmon & Symons, 2003). Slash fiction is homoerotic frequently written and read by women, such that the 'slash' refers to the interlinking of two male protagonists (e.g., Kirk/Spock) and the plot revolves around the romance between these two individuals. It has also included examination of folk tales from around the world to reveal sex differences in mate preference (e.g., Gottschall, Martin, Quish, & Rea, 2004). Furthermore, men's mating strategies as revealed by proper vs dark heroes has been investigated in British Romantic literature (Kruger & Fisher, Jobling, 2003; 2005; Kruger & Fisher 2005a; 2005b).

However, although the aforementioned studies have been performed, there has been seemingly no analysis of popular fiction, despite the fact it is profitable, contemporary and read by large numbers of people. There have been hints of the need for such an analysis. For example, Barash and Barash (2005), when talking about Regency romance (i.e., romance of the early 19th century), draw a parallel to Harlequin romance novels (p. 63-64), which will be described in more detail subsequently, as well as other contemporary fiction written for women (e.g., *Bridget Jones' Diary*, p. 65).

Past researchers performing Darwinian literary studies have refrained from examinations of popular fiction. They have particularly ignored romance fiction, which is odd given its popularity, but overall, no genre is less respected (Donahue, 2002), which may be the reason for the neglect. Therefore, it might be beneficial to first assess the popularity of modern romance fiction, and then of Harlequin romance novels in particular because they are the topic of study. According to the Romance Writers of America (2010), the sale of romance fiction generated \$1.37 billion (USD) in 2008 (and \$1.375 billion in 2007), despite an economic recession that decreased overall book sales from \$10.714 billion in 2007 to \$10.175 billion in 2008. Their figures show that romance fiction retains the largest share of the market (13.5%), with 7,311 books published in the US alone in 2008. They also suggest that 74.8 million Americans read one or more romance novels in 2008, and that the core readership is 29 million regular readers. Also, they document that 90.5% of readers are women; 44% are between the ages of 31-49 and currently in a romantic relationship.

Of all the publishers in the world, the top series romance publisher has remained Harlequin Enterprises Limited (Harlequin, 2010a). According to the company's website, they sell over 110 titles a month, which are translated into 28 languages and sold in 114 international markets. They report selling 130 billion books in 2008, such that approximately 50% were sold to non-North American audiences. During the life of the company, they have sold approximately 5.8 billion books. Also, their books spent 252 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list in 2008. These numbers do not include readers who acquire Harlequins from used book sales or who borrow them from a library, but overall, they clearly indicate that Harlequin romance novels are extremely popular among women, especially those of reproductive age, provided that the demographics from the Romance Writers of America apply to Harlequins.

Much of the past work on romance novels has been conducted from a socio-cultural perspective (see Cox & Fisher, 2009 for a review). For example, scholars such as Camp (1997) claim that the books are popular because they deal with love, and women have an insatiable appetite for love. She also suggests that women enjoy these novels because the plots teach them how to be nurturing and how to find romantic success. One departure from this theme is Cox and Fisher (2009); we analyzed the frequency of words appearing in novel titles to understand women's evolved mating interests. In that paper, we argued that women are 'voting' with their money when they buy certain books but not others, such that they are selecting the titles that appeal to them. Using a thematic analysis, we found women are interested in long-term committed relationships, in becoming mothers, and in finding a mate who possesses

resources, all of which are in keeping with findings offered by evolutionary psychology (e.g., Buss, 1994). Although we also hypothesized that the titles would contain words to describe attractive men, given that women should want to mate with men who are physically attractive (e.g., Kenrick, Groth, Trost & Sadalla, 1993), the results did not confirm this expectation. However, we discovered that cowboys were largely represented in the titles, and we suggested that they might serve as a proxy for attractiveness, whereas medical doctors, who are also frequently mentioned in titles, may represent a preference for resources.

Although this approach was successful in revealing women's mating interests, it was an examination of a surface level part of the book – the title. It did not contain any analysis of the plot or characters. Therefore, the goal of the current study was to examine hero and heroine descriptions and their character development within Harlequin romance novels. The reason that this issue is of interest to evolutionary psychologists is because it reveals what women want in potential mates using real-world data, albeit through the lens of a mass media product. Thus, we investigated women's ideal mate preferences, and the developments they wish to see happen in a mate during the dating process, or during the time preceding marriage (which is usually the event marking the end of a Harlequin series romance novel).

We note that the current study was entirely exploratory in nature; we did not create *a priori* hypotheses, nor did we seek to obtain quantifiable data. Instead, we examine trends and developments within the novels overall (and provide specific examples as evidence of these), which is in keeping with some Darwinian literary content analysis (e.g., Salmon & Symons, 2003). Indeed, much of the past quantitative work in this area has been examinations of participant's interactions with literary characters, rather than the characters themselves (e.g., Kruger et al., 2003; 2005; Kruger & Fisher 2005a; 2005b; Strout et al., 2010). This type of research is vastly different than a content analysis of the texts themselves, particularly with respect to character development, which was one focus of our study.

Methods

We used a convenience sample of Harlequin romance novels that were selected on the basis of decade to ensure a range in year of publication, from a large (i.e., 400 novels) private collection of the authors. The private collection has been obtained through various means over a very long time; some were purchased new, others from used bookstores or library discard sales, while many were gifts or donations to the program of research.

There were 72 novels analyzed in total, dating from 1960 to 2007, with at least six novels or more spread across the decade. The novels were all in English, and none were published as part of an anthology (i.e., all would have been sold as single books). All of the selected novels were published within the flagship “Harlequin Romance” series, which is the longest running series (1949 until now). As of June 2009, a total of 4,203 titles had been published in this series (compared to “Harlequin Presents,” the second strongest series, which started in 1973 and contains a total of 2,820 titles during the same time frame; Cox & Fisher, 2009). “Romance” is advertised as a series that will, “Warm your heart with the ultimate feel-good Harlequin Romance tales. You can't miss the best in romantic fiction, whether the story takes place in an exotic setting or somewhere a little closer to home!” In contrast, “Presents” is advertised as, “Be swept off your feet with Harlequin Presents books! Glamorous settings, passionate men and more money than you can imagine... The perfect recipe for romance!” (Harlequin, 2010b). We opted to examine only books within the “Romance” line due to the longevity of the series.

Given that our goal was to explore character development within the novels, readers were asked to document title of the book, any descriptions (even if just one or two words) of the hero and heroine, as well as a short summary of the plot. There

were five readers for the books; ages varied from 19 to 47, four were women, and all but one was naïve as to the goal of the study. After all of the novels were read, readers met to discuss their observations concerning the prevailing themes pertaining to character description and development, which we now present.

Results

We begin by reviewing, briefly, the plots of Harlequins and then present hero *vs* heroine descriptions, followed by hero *vs* heroine character development.

Harlequin's Formulaic Plots

The prevailing stereotype that Harlequin authors use a formal template to write is not true (Harlequin Enterprises Ltd., Personal Communication, April 2010). Instead, at least since the advent of the Internet, readers provide direct feedback to authors about the sorts of books that they want to read. Subsequently, authors respond to any received feedback and adapt their writing with respect to reader's requests and comments.

This said, the plots of these romance novels are noticeably homogeneous. Within the first few pages, the heroine always meets the hero. As will be discussed in further detail, usually he is aloof, rude, or in some way undesirable to her. This perception could stem from the heroine's misinterpretation of the situation, the hero's lack of social skills, or simply because the hero is not an overall "nice guy." Readers know, however, that he will transform within the remaining 180 or so pages (in our experience the typical length of a Harlequin series romance is 180-189 pages). He will become a charming, devout, loving man by the end of the book. The transformation might be caused by the influence of the heroine in that she causes him to see the error in his ways. That is, "her future happiness and his depends on her ability to teach him to love" (Barlow & Krentz, 1992, p.17). Alternatively, he might have been a kind-hearted person all along, but hides this side of his personality (under the cover of being aloof or rude) so as to avoid being taken advantage of or thought of as less masculine. Somewhere in the middle of the book, though, he begins to more openly express these positive traits, or else the heroine inadvertently discovers them. Thus, the transformation might partially be in terms of the heroine's ability to recognize that the hero has some positive attributes that he did not initially express. However, almost always, the transformative change is focused on the hero, not the heroine.

Essentially then, a Harlequin plot can be summarized as follows: boy meets girl, boy has to do something to live up to girl's expectations, girl falls for boy, and they live happily ever after. This formulaic plot in itself reflects women's evolved mating interests, in that women are actively selecting a mate of good quality for a long-term relationship. The same plot could be written more explicitly in evolutionary psychological terms, which reads as follows: Female meets potential mate and assesses him with respect to gene quality, earning potential, parental investment, personality characteristics (including kindness, honesty, sociality) and emotional loyalty. Being the one to undertake the majority of parental investment, the female is very selective about her potential mates and decides that he needs to improve in certain aspects before he will be a viable choice. She also needs to determine with some certainty that he is interested in a long-term relationship with her. She must also figure out whether or not he has children with other females whom he will be required to invest in, and if so, she requires assurance that he will still care for her and her children. She also needs proof that he has positive relationships with those around him, such as his family, friends, co-workers, all of which reflects a soundness of character. The male ascertains that the female is not interested in a short-term mating strategy, and she seeks a mate with certain characteristics that he should express if he

wants to engage in a sexually exclusive relationship with paternity certainty. In some instances, he engages in intrasexual competition to fend off potential rivals, which thus indicates to the female that he is interested in her, as well as displaying characteristics that might be desirable, such as physical strength. Any necessary competition, though, must not be overly violent, and is rarely initiated by the male so that the perception of his positive personality characteristics (e.g., kindness) remains intact. The female, at some point in their interactions, notices that he has these traits and decides that he is, after all, a viable mate, at which point she expresses her acceptance. The two of them then proceed and initiate a monogamous, committed relationship. As this example of a plot demonstrates, the focus is on the woman choosing a mate, thus placing the heroine within an active role in the mating process.

In the next section, we begin our analysis of the leading male character (i.e., the 'hero') within the Harlequin romances. While we analyzed over 70 novels, we will limit our examples to about 10 of these books. We hope that by using multiple examples from the same few books readers will become more familiar with their characters and plots.

Analysis of Hero Descriptions

The hero in Harlequin romances is always described in detail, right from the start of the book. For example, three pages into the story (which started on page 5):

Eagerly she watched him enter her room again. She liked his tallness and confidence, it made her feel safe...she frowned at the breadth of his shoulders without knowing why...the grey eyes bored into her, as if trying to read her very soul... (Pargeter, 1984, p. 8-9)

And then three pages later: "He was dark and handsome, the nurse declared she could fall for him like a ton of bricks, but Jane was wary of his sophistication...some part of her responded to his undoubted masculinity" (Pargeter, 1984, p. 12).

The description of the hero usually begins with his physical attractiveness, which abides with female mate preferences (i.e., he is tall, well-built, strong body, dark eyes, creamy skin, he has a sexy voice, and a clean smell; for a review of evolved mate preferences, see for example Buss, 1994; Ellis, 1992). These descriptions often include personality features, such as confidence (again, preferred trait, e.g., Buss, 1994).

The dark suit and pristine white shirt he wore emphasized his rugged masculine looks. He carried himself with a confidence that insured he would never go unnoticed. Just standing there, he seemed to fill the space. Funny, she'd never thought the large open room particularly small before. (McMahon, 2003, p. 34)

Often, but not in every case, he is wealthy or at least has a very stable income with room for promotion. The descriptions are short, but they effectively convey this information. For example:

"She let her gaze run over him, her heart still acting weird. He was tall and immaculately dressed. The suit looked custom-made and expensive. His dark hair was well cut, his eyes steady and dark...His voice was deep and sexy, and he already had her fantasizing..." (McMahon, 2003, p. 15)

Then later, in the same book:

“So it’ll blow over in a day or two. I mean, who cares if an art director...gets engaged?” “The entire social and financial sector of San Francisco does when her fiancé is Nicholas Bailey of Magellan Hotels.” Molly’s knees went weak... “Impossible. You can’t be the head of Magellan Hotels. They’ve been around for decades and are family owned.” “Founded by my grandfather right after the war. Taken over by me when my father died ten years ago.” (McMahon, 2003, p. 36-37)

Also in keeping with female mate preferences (e.g., Buss, 1994), he is typically “slightly older” although much of the time, the actual age is not mentioned. There are some exceptions, though:

As if sensing Lauren’s gaze, Blake opened his eyes. “How old are you?” he asked unexpectedly. Taken off guard, Lauren replied automatically, “Twenty-four.” “You look younger than that.” He studied her intently...Lauren blushed and sat with her hands clasped in her lap. “How old are you?” She asked impetuously. “Thirty-five.” (Naughton, 1979, p. 56)

Usually, he is sexually experienced, although the reader does not know the extent of the experience. For example, “Nick” has obvious sexual experience and skill although when “Molly” makes mention of this, Nick tells her that she is giving him “more credit than [he] deserves” (McMahon, 2003, p. 77).

He is often someone the heroine knows (family friend, local physician, neighbor, boss). For example, in *Showdown* (Dale, 1993), “Kit” started living on a ranch when she was 12, when her aunt was a housekeeper. She went on to become the housekeeper herself. “Boone” was 16 at the time and is the grandson of the person who owns the ranch. Thus, they were exposed to each other for several years until Boone left for college. They are reunited when Boone returns to the ranch, worried that his grandfather might be dying. Their past knowledge of each other is highly documented, as Kit compares him to the “Old Boone” in many spots in the book.

Analysis of Heroine Description

In contrast to the detailed description of the hero, the heroine is rarely described other than her approximate height, eye and hair color. When she is described, it is never as a gorgeous woman with a winning personality. For example, “she was mousey little Jodie Simpson” (Blake, 2006, p. 8), or “She’d spent years being told by her mother that if only she were taller or not quite so pale she might be pretty” (p. 25). When the heroine is thought of as anything but moderately attractive, it comes as a surprise. For example, “He grinned at her, unrepentant. “You said you needed me...How could I not respond immediately to that kind of plea from a beautiful woman?” He thought she was beautiful? The idea stunned her. Beautiful?” (Goodnight, 2006, p. 182). In all cases, the hero considers her beautiful:

Jodie bit her inner lip, wishing not for the first time that she were a blonde ‘glamazon’ like Lisa. Or a brunette sex kitten like Mandy. Or serenely elegant like her half-sister Louise. Not wan, wispy, little old her. ‘Sorry to disappoint’ she said. “Not at all,” he said, resting contentedly against the back of his chair as his eyes remained locked on hers. “You’re lovely.” (Blake, 2006, p. 25)

The lack of provided details enables readers to imagine themselves more easily as the heroine. The descriptions that are included make her seem realistic, at least physically. Thus, readers can vicariously live through the romance, putting themselves in the shoes of the heroine and yet imagining the hero in precise detail. As one reviewer of this article suggested, it could also be a way to reduce any potential of intrasexual competition with the heroine, or to avoid possible contrast effects (e.g., Fisher, 2004; Wade & Abetz, 1997). Furthermore, Modleski (1980) proposes that because the reader knows how the book will work out, she is wiser than the heroine and “does not have to suffer her confusion” (p. 439). In other words, she gets the joy of falling in love without the worry or stress of possible rejection.

The heroine is loyal to her friends and family. For example, “You want me to fight?” she asked. “I’ve spent my whole life fighting. Fighting to protect my mum from confinement, from doing herself harm...” (Blake, 2006, p. 143). Sometimes the heroine lives with a family member she is taking care of; in these instances, it is often a child. In *Angels do have Wings* (Brooks, 1994) “Angel” takes care of her 12-year-old brother since her parents died due to the deadly fumes of a gas leak. In a different book, “Kristy” upon arriving at her paternal grandfather’s house, a man she’s particularly close to, cleans his house immediately (Thompson, 1991). Kristy has “not seen her grandfather in years, but they [have] written to each other faithfully ever since...she was twelve” (p. 9).

She is independent; mate choice is left to her, not her family, although the reader is led to believe her family will approve. Usually, she has only minimal sexual experience (which may reflect women’s awareness of male mate preferences, Buss, 1994), acts coy, and expresses worry about being “easy.” For example, “She is a virgin, having had several boyfriends since the age of 15, but they were all immature” (Brooks, 1994, p. 37). In *The Convenient Fiancé* (McMahon, 2003), “Molly” has numerous friends, but she has had “few serious boyfriends” (p. 50) and has very little sexual experience and skill, but it is noted that she has been “touched by men before” (p. 58).

The heroine is typically not wealthy, and usually her career ambitions are those that would reflect medium status (e.g., becoming a physician’s assistant, rather than a physician, or a CEO’s assistant, rather than the CEO). More contemporary novels have heroines who are employed and have professional strivings (Rabine, 2001). For example, “Angel” is described as working as a receptionist-assistant for a local doctor’s office (Brooks, 1994). She is determined to return to her studies just as soon as Toby, her 12-year old brother that she is looking after, is old enough. “She had always wanted to work in a hospital in a lab, or if her aptitude went that far, a doctor” (p. 6). In order to get money for school, she worked for 18 months in a pharmacy and won a grant. Her father could barely keep the cottage they lived in supplied with food before him and her mother died in an accident, so there was no money for anything (p. 26). There are some exceptions, but usually the way a heroine’s wealth is described is indirectly. For example, “Kristy” attended university for five years, was given an expensive BMW car (Thompson, 1991, p. 114), wears “designer jeans” (p. 46), has a silk pajama top (p.127), and bathes the dog in an expensive, high quality gel (p. 76), thus indicating she is modestly wealthy, at a minimum.

Inequality of Hero vs. Heroine Character Development

The key to the Harlequin romance novel is the inequality between hero and heroine character development. In general, the heroine shows little character development; her personality, values, and goals are relatively, when compared to the hero, quite stable. This said, her attitudes and views towards the hero change. The hero is often the character that shows significant development, or at least is viewed

differently by the heroine at the end of the story, as compared to the start to of the book.

The heroine's changing opinion and perception is the main way in which the transformation of the hero is portrayed. Initially she dismisses him, dislikes, or thinks poorly of him, but by the middle of the book she has developed romantic feelings for him, and by the end, they are to be married. For example, "Chase" was initially seen as cold, heartless and cynical, but by the end of the story, "Kate" learns of his many positive attributes through her pen-pal's (Chase's son) letters that are copied from letters Chase wrote to his ex-wife (Kaye, 1989, p. 34). She finds these letters, "really lovely. Witty. Intelligent. Sensitive" (p. 108) and is "intrigued by Chase's honesty" (p. 112) and loves his "gentleness and tolerance" (p. 149). Upon reflection, she realizes that these are features that he exhibited towards the start, but that she only noticed towards the end of the book. Chase does undergo a change though; initially he is rude and intimidating to those around him, and "comes down hard on just about every employee in the hospital" (p10). One is led to believe that he is similarly abrupt in his personal life. By the end of the book, however, he is no longer domineering and instead treats his subordinates with more respect.

Therefore, the hero undergoes a radical transformation from someone who is not a desirable mate, to someone who would make an exceptional a long-term partner (at least in the eyes of the heroine). In the beginning he is a cad — a rogue-type character unworthy of the heroine's affections; he may be rude, gruff, aggressive, surly, but always handsome and financially sound. By the middle of the book, something happens, causing a change of heart in heroine. By the end, he has changed to become a sensitive, family-oriented man, who professes his unwavering love for the heroine. To illustrate this phenomenon, we present the following example; consider that this description is on the third page into the story:

It didn't take a genius to figure out the man was a criminal. He lifted a dark mocking eyebrow... she questioned his monstrous conduct...he loomed menacingly over her. Amusement only slightly softened the harsh cynical face. He was so arrogant...devastating masculinity. The man was a brute (Allan, 1996, p. 8).

By the end of the book, the hero is in love: "Adam said, "I felt I owed you that much. I treated you as a passing aberration, a challenge to bed, a cute and sassy pipsqueak"...he was polite, diffident. He said, "I didn't believe in love until I met you...you'd better be planning to marry me" (Allan, 1996, p.188).

In another example, "Paul Denyer's impassive glance searched her bewildered face. His voice was hard and cold, without emotion...[his] eyes glinted cynically" (Pargeter, 1984, p. 10). Then later, after insulting and berating her several times throughout the book, he says:

I've wanted to marry you for a long time...For both our sakes, Jane, you have to decide if you'll ever be able to forget how much I doubted you. I made your life hell with my terrible accusations, and I don't know how you can ever forgive me...I haven't been able to look at another woman since I met you. (Pargeter, 1984, p. 185-186).

The fact that heroes are often rude at the start of the stories has been previously noted by other scholars. For example, Modelski (1980) reported, "During the first meeting between the hero and heroine, the man's indifference, contempt, or amusement is emphasized" (p. 439). But at the same time, it is a safe context because the reader knows "the hero will eventually imply or state that he has loved the heroine from the beginning, so the reader can attribute the hero's hostility...to his inability to admit [his love]" (p. 439).

Discussion

Romance novels are an extremely popular form of entertainment for women. Here, we have explored hero versus heroine description and development in order to examine what women want in potential mates. We documented how women envision their potential long-term partners, as well as the developments they wish to see occur in a potential mate during the time preceding marriage. We discovered that the descriptions of the heroes are congruent with the evolutionary psychology literature on mate preferences (see Buss, 1994; Ellis 1992, for a review), whereas the heroine is typically described in a vague fashion, possibly to allow the reader to more readily place herself in the shoes of the heroine. We do note that our study is limited in that it is exploratory in scope, and thus, the conclusions we can offer are necessarily limited. In the future, researchers may wish to document each mate preference listed in the individual novels to derive quantifiable data, allowing them to determine precisely how many books contain these descriptions. Furthermore, researchers could examine the prevalence of these preferences over time and see whether there are temporal differences in how they are presented or in how they are noticed by the heroine.

As for character development, the focus of most novels is on the changes that occur within the hero. He typically starts as a ‘cad,’ and by the end, he has been transformed into a ‘dad.’ Perhaps this portrayal is a representation of women’s fantasy to have the benefits of both types of male mating strategies. At one end of the male mating spectrum is the cad, who is thought to maximize his reproductive success by having many short-term relationships without parental investment, whereas the dad at the other end of the same spectrum maximizes his reproductive success by engaging in a monogamous, long-term relationship with heavy parental investment (Draper & Blesky, 1990; Draper & Harpending, 1982; for a review see Kruger, Fisher, & Jobling, 2003). In theory, a woman will mate with a cad because the genes that made him successful at having numerous short-term relationships will be transferred to any sons she might have with him (the sexy son hypothesis; see Weatherhead & Robertson, 1979). In contrast, the dad is good parent, stable provider, and loyally invests his time, energies and resources in mate and children. Research shows that women report being attracted to men who are financially secure, dependable, emotionally stable, and industriousness, all of which might relate to being sound providers (Buss 1994).

Thus, in our opinion, Barash and Barash (2005) were incorrect when they stated, “a remarkable proportion [of romance novels] deal with the trials and tribulations of finding the right man. These difficulties often involve...a choice between dads and cads” (p. 64). It is not a choice at all; the heroines, and by extension the readers, want both.

Writers of romance fiction acknowledge the dichotomy and that they have to provide readers with a man who emphasizes both strategies:

The heroes in romances are bit larger than life, but they also possess the very real qualities women look for in a life-mate. True, he might be drop-dead gorgeous, but I also...portray him as the type of man who will make a good father and husband. He...usually is...hard-edged and dangerous, but he is also a man of honor and integrity, a man who isn’t going to cheat on his wife...But while the hero might be the sort of man who will cook and change diapers...he is also a...dangerous man, who can be tamed by the love of a good woman.” (Williamson, 1992, p. 127)

One romance writer has even proposed that writers must keep their characters “socio-biologically correct” by keeping the book centered on the “emotional experience that occurs when the female reproductive strategy triumphs over the male

reproductive strategy” (Peirson, 1999, p. 83). She explains that this means that the heroine, “gets the male to commit to her and her offspring but he does not get her to commit sexually without having to first commit himself” (p.83). Of most relevance, though, she reminds potential writers that women are attracted to the “Mondo male” (p. 86) who is angry and a little mean, and that eventually the heroine must “tame him and turn him into father material and he actually modifies his behavior and becomes capable of bonding with her” (p. 86).

While we have found that it is the hero who makes the most significant and important changes, we do not claim that the heroine is wholly static and unchanging. Rather, we have found that the hero’s changes tend to be more behavioral in nature, where as the heroine’s are more perceptual. Since the majority of Harlequin readers are women, it is likely that the small changes the heroine exhibits does not hinder the reader’s ability to associate with the heroine. If the heroine underwent more dramatic changes, it may be difficult for a reader to remain fully connected to her.

Although Harlequin romance novels are written, marketed, and predominantly purchased by women, they are sometimes read by men. One of the authors of this study, who performed some analysis of the books, is male and reported more notable changes in the heroine than the other four analysts. Thus, it is possible that if one associates more closely with the hero, then the hero is perceived as being more static and the heroine as more dynamic, and it is possible that the character the reader associates with most strongly may consequently impact on perceptions of the plot and characters.

One can be considered lucky if she or he “can have one’s cake and eat it too.” Readers of Harlequin romances experience this phenomenon, as the heroine, through her gentle and caring ways, turns a strong, powerful, masculine ‘cad,’ with good genes into a loving, protective, and caring ‘dad,’ who possesses plentiful resources. These novels permit a woman to live in a world where a partner with high genetic fitness and good resources will adapt and change in order to win her love and affection. This ‘recipe’ is obviously successful, as indicated by the sales of Harlequin romances, and thus indicates that women, when selecting mates, would prefer not to make trade-offs and to obtain a devoted partner, with good genes, good resources, and the desire to willingly share them.

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