Journal of Popular Romance Studies
published in partnership with the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance

Critical Approaches to the Modern and Contemporary Anglophone Romance Novel (From *A Room with a View* to *Fifty Shades of Grey*)

Francesca Pierini

Published online: June 2022
http://www.jprstudies.org

Abstract: The seminar 'Critical Approaches to the Modern and Contemporary Anglophone Romance Novel (From *A Room with a View* to *Fifty Shades of Grey*)' was held at the Department of English of University of Basel in the Winter term of 2020. Articulated over fourteen weeks, the seminar introduces the students to the romance genre, following the development of the Anglophone romance novel from the beginning of the last century to the contemporary period. The syllabus is designed around a parallel exploration of primary texts alongside critical studies. The main goal is familiarizing students with the definitions, development, and cultural significance of popular romance fiction, educating them on the waves of scholarship on romance fiction, and exploring and problematizing the complex relationship between popular literature and literary scholarship. I share this report with the main intent of offering a platform for debate and the additional one of preserving and celebrating a truly unique and satisfying experience, professionally as well as personally. This report is also meant as a token of my gratitude to all the students who have attended both seminars and have, through their efforts and contributions, and despite the restrictions due to the pandemic, concurred to their success.

About the Author: Francesca Pierini is an Adjunct Lecturer at the English Department of University of Basel. A former postdoctoral fellow at the Institute of European and American Studies, Academia Sinica, Taiwan, her academic interests include Cultural Studies, Anglophone Literary Representations of Italian Culture, the Modern and Contemporary Anglophone Romance Novel. Recent and forthcoming publications include the articles "Roma Spelled Backwards: Love and Heterotopic Space in Contemporary Romance Novels Set in Italy" in *The Routledge Companion to Romantic Love* (2021), and "Imploding

Fireworks: Love and Self-knowledge in the Contemporary Italian Sentimental Novel" in the collective volume *Love and the Politics of Intimacy* (Bloomsbury UK).

Keywords: contemporary romance, E. M. Forster, historical survey of the romance genre, modern romance novel, survey of academic approaches, teaching romance

Introduction

The seminar Critical Approaches to the Modern and Contemporary Anglophone Romance Novel (From *A Room with a View* to *Fifty Shades of Grey*) was held at the Department of English of the University of Basel in the winter term of 2020. Nineteen undergraduate students attended it, which turned out to be a good thing, as it allowed me (and the students, I hope) to mentally associate the number to something altogether different than the Covid virus we were all, at the time, dealing with. The seminar syllabus spanned over fourteen weeks. In extremely broad strokes, it introduced the students to the romance genre, following the development of the Anglophone romance novel from the beginning of the previous century to the contemporary period, offering an extremely concise survey of the genre's main historical phases and themes. It provided students with the opportunity for a scholarly investigation of "the most popular [and] least respected" (Regis xi) of all the genres comprising the spectrum of modern and contemporary Anglophone fiction.

The following term of Spring 2021, I taught a seminar which followed the parallel history and development of romantic novels after *A Room with a View* (1908) along the literary route – from E. M. Forster's *A Room with a View* to Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018). Hence, the present article is the account of the first of two complementary seminars taken comprehensively by 45 students in the academic year 2020-2021.[1]

I share this report with the general intent of offering a platform for debate and the additional one of preserving and celebrating a truly unique and satisfying experience, professionally as well as personally. More specifically, this report may be used or consulted by students who might be interested in immersing themselves in the textual and critical study of popular romance, and by lecturers as a document that, providing a pedagogical framework and pattern (i.e., course design, modular themes and approaches, a set of primary and supplementary readings, and tools for evaluation) could serve as a reference and a guide.

This report is also meant as a token of my gratitude for all the students who attended both seminars and have, through their efforts and contributions, and despite the restrictions due to the pandemic – both seminars have been significantly disrupted, partly taking place on Zoom and/or hybrid modality – contributed to their success.[2]

The syllabus of Critical Approaches is designed around a parallel exploration of primary texts alongside critical studies. The main goal is familiarizing students with the definitions, development, and cultural significance of popular romance fiction, educating them on the waves of scholarship on romance fiction, and exploring and problematizing the complex relationship between popular literature and literary scholarship.

Before proceeding to illustrate the work done during the seminar, I would like to offer a brief overview of the seminar through the table below. The table lists the modules, in-class discussions, as well as the assigned reading.

Weeks	Modules	In-class Activities	Assigned Readings
1	**Introductory class**	Introduction of the syllabus Watch Laurie Khan's *Love Between the Covers,* 2015.	Driscoll, B. "Review: Love Between the Covers, Produced, Written, and Directed by Laurie Khan," 2016.
2–3	**Module I** How to Read a Romance Novel	Common bias and misconceptions concerning romance novels. Classifying romance novels: definitions of genre, sub-genre, and formula. Using P. Regis's elements to analyse romance narratives.	Primary: Crusie, J. *Bet me,* 2005. Secondary: Regis, P. *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, 2003, chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4.
4–5	**Module II** The Romance Canon	Established trends in popular romance fiction (historical, regency, contemporary, 'desert'…) Presentation of the Romance Canon according to Pamela Regis's *A Natural History*.	Primary: Forster, E.M. *A Room with a View*, 1908. Secondary: Regis, P. *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, 2003, chapters 4,5, and 9.
6–7	**Module III** Popular Romance and Bodice Rippers	Historical Overview of the Romance Novel (based on chapters 6 and 12 of *A Natural History*).	Primary: one novel between E.M. Hull's *The* Sheik, 1919, and Kathleen Woodiwiss's *The Flame and the Flower*, 1972. Secondary: Toscano, A. "The Narrative Uses of Rape in Popular Romances," 2012.
8–9	**Module IV** Critical Approaches	Overview of romance novel scholarship/criticism. First, second and third wave academic/critical approaches to romance.	Kamblé, J. Selinger, E.M. Teo, H.M. "Introduction" in *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, 2021. In addition, the students have chosen to read and comment on several articles from the *Reader* by E. Selinger, H.M. Teo, A. Burge, J. McAlister, et al.
10–11	**Module V Interracial**	The African-American romance novel: brief survey of	Primary: Cole, A. *An Extraordinary Union*, 2017. Or

	Love at the Time of Slavery	the 'three generations' of authors, with a focus on Beverly Jenkins and Alyssa Cole.	Jenkins, B.: *Indigo*, 1996. Secondary: Moody-Freeman, J. "Afro-American Romance" in *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, 2021.
12–13	**Module VI** Emerging Genres of Popular Romance	The new erotic (*Fifty Shades of Grey*), new adult, menage, disability, polyamorous, ace, cyber, teen paranormal romance, LGBTQ+. Niche /Mass market romances: Harlequin Novels.[3]	Primary: Charles, K.J. *Wanted, A Gentleman*, 2017. Secondary: Allan, J. "Gender and Sexuality", 2021 and Illouz, E. "Epilogue" in *Hard-Core Romance: Fifty Shades of Grey, Best-Sellers, and Society*, 2014.
14	**Last class**	Final Discussion	No assigned readings

The seminar's modular design, as illustrated by the table above, reflects the structuring of the course, which introduces themes and topics while following, as rigorously as possible, an historical account of the genre. Before proceeding to a module-by-module illustration and explanation of the contents of the seminar, I will briefly explain the decision of investing *A Room with a View* with a central role, by placing it at the beginning of this seminar's investigation of the modern romance novel.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, literary fiction moves away from romance. E.M. Forster's literary imagination is placed at the height of the "society of disciplines" (Foucault, 1975), between Jane Austen and Modernism, the normative British subject and its others (Italy/India), and on the cusp of the literary "great divide" (Huyssen 1986) which sees literary and popular forms of fiction take neatly separate directions for several decades. Forster creates a narrative that will become one of the last canonized literary romances of the pre-wars era, a relatively light-hearted romantic story of great formal complexity and extraordinary existential depth.

After a long intermission, Anglophone literary fiction slowly reprises the canonization of its romances. This occurs after the second half of the century, with texts such as John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) and A.S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990) that have thoroughly adopted a view of the romantic as a fundamentally conflicted and, by then, controversial genre.

As one of the last canonized romances before such momentous shifts and breaks, before E.M. Hull's *The Sheik* (1919) and the renewed affirmation of a feminized view of the genre, *A Room with a View* offers the opportunity to reflect on some foundational tenets of romance narratives. It teaches, in a more modern key, the "Austenian" valuable and deep lesson that existential fulfilment, self-knowledge, and personal emancipation are possible, even if they come at the price of coming to terms with one's flaws, sometimes the most aggravating to acknowledge: all that pride, the prejudice, and heaps of denial.

Moreover, *A Room with a View* very concretely shows how Pamela Regis's essential rules of the romance novel may be manipulated by authors to an extreme degree, blending seamlessly within the narrative while sustaining it. Reading and analysing this novel,

therefore, serves the general purpose of making the students concretely aware of the fact that authors can employ and manipulate the essential elements in a variety of different and complex ways.

Introductory Class and Assignments

In the introductory class, students watched the documentary *Love Between the Covers* (2015) by Laurie Kahn-Leavitt. This filmic text effectively familiarized them with some of the fundamental issues and questions central to the seminar, including the relationship between literary and generic forms of fiction, the expectations different audiences hold about reading, and the relationship between the author and their readership. The ice-breaking impact of this documentary on an audience largely unfamiliar with the romance genre was remarkable, and students seemed to appreciate the way it introduced the world of popular romance: "*Love Between the Covers* was the ideal start for this course, because it revealed the many emotional strings and journeys of self-expression and self-love that are connected to these books" (Melissa V.).

Students were assigned to read and comment if they wanted to on Beth Driscoll's 2016 review of the documentary. Melissa pointed out that "'the expression of closeness between authors and readers' (Driscoll 2016: 2) … is something I liked very much: how the writers are also the readers, and how there is a very intimate relation between the writers themselves as well as between writers and readers" (Melissa B.).

Students were also given the option in their first assignment to articulate their expectations of the seminar. Laura did this very critically:

> I don't know if this reflects my personal taste or my indoctrination by the patriarchy to dismiss anything exclusively feminine as silly and inferior, but I cringed very hard at the images from the Romance Novel Writers Convention we have seen in the documentary. I could not identify with these women; in fact, I had a strong desire to distance myself from them and, by consequence, from the reading of romance novels. This created a considerable dilemma for me – how can I, as a woman and a feminist, stand up for the rights of women while at the same time condemning the genre most widely read by women and their passion for it? My hope for this seminar is that it will in some way present a solution to this dilemma. (Laura P.)

This was my hope too. Of course, I did not expect this seminar to "present a solution" to this dilemma, but I wished it would help students articulate more clearly some of the time-honoured questions and issues that underlie Laura's honest expression of dismay. After introducing it briefly in class, I suggested Julie M. Dugger's report "I'm a Feminist but…" (2014) to students sharing similar concerns.

Before going forward, I should briefly elaborate on the evaluation criteria set for the seminar. Aside from the standard requirements concerning attendance and participation, students were asked to write half a page of critical considerations on the readings that were assigned to them each week. This gave me the opportunity to monitor their level of consistency and engagement with the texts. Obviously, they were free to criticize them, as

long as their reflections were accurately expressed, written in academic English, and referenced.[4]

How to Read a Romance Novel

The first module aimed at exploring common conceptions, preconceptions, and misconceptions about popular romance fiction. Moreover, it introduced Pamela Regis's eight essential narrative rules.[5] Students were asked to discuss them in relation to Jennifer Crusie's *Bet Me* (2004), a text that offered me the opportunity to introduce Crusie as an author as well as a columnist and blogger, showing the students a concrete instance of the customary double role romance authors take on as producers and critics of the romance genre. Below are two excerpts from the students' assignments:

> While reading *Bet Me* by Jennifer Crusie without any knowledge of these eight elements, I experienced it as entertaining but somewhat corny. I enjoyed the witty dialogue, the characters' development, the topics that the story covers, and what I would call the 'sexual suspense' lasting until the very end. Yet, some sequences seemed to stretch endlessly, a couple of the characters were a bit boring, the protagonist was whiny … Browsing through the novel a second time around with Regis' eight elements in mind, the structure of the story appears much more thought-out: the first element would be a flawed society where overweight people are seen as not pretty, where the mother of the protagonist dictates her choices, where everyone is obsessed with sex, and where men are no good. The second element is Cal and Min's encounter in the bar… (Nina M.)

> In terms of Pamela Regis' eight narrative elements of the romance novel, I could definitely spot all of them in *Bet Me*, some of them quite early on, such as the definition of society, some of the barriers, the meeting between the heroine and the hero, and their account of their attraction for each other. The story is full of barriers, not only those placed between the hero and heroine by a third character. The hero and heroine themselves are also responsible for putting a few obstacles in the way of their relationship. This stems from the fact that both of them have their own issues which are rendering them incapable of focusing on or investing any feelings in another person. (Laura S.)

Students were asked to keep Regis's elements in mind going forward with their readings. Some of them made of their usage and display within a narrative a criterion for criticism: "Regis' eight essential elements, which I cannot stop thinking about or ignore when reading a romance ever since I have learnt about them, are painfully obvious in this novel …" (Laura S.).

The Romance Canon

The second module placed *A Room with a View* in the context of Anglophone romantic fiction, with references to several other modern classics, such as Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), and Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938). This was mainly done following Regis's account of the history and development of modern romantic fiction, and since students were familiar with several of these texts, having read them for their courses in literary fiction, some of them took the initiative of sending in assignments on their impressions after re-reading them or (perhaps more frequently) re-thinking them as romantic narratives.

I should add, at this point, that the students' previous knowledge of the canon, as well as their familiarity with critical theory and textual analysis (a course in Cultural Studies is a prerequisite to enrol in the seminar) contributed significantly to their ability to approach the contents of the seminar and understand what was required of them as students and readers.[6]

In reference to *A Room with a View*, and with Regis's framework at their disposal, students revised their previous impressions of the novel:

> With Regis' 'eight elements' in mind, it was particularly interesting to see how Forster – according to Regis herself – plays with these elements, rather than employing them as maybe Jane Austen would have done. Forster, for example, does not only include the element of ritual death once but twice. One of the two main scenes of ritual death occurs in the beginning of the novel, in chapter four. While I knew of chapter four being one of the novel's turning points from my previous readings, I had never thought of it as a 'narrative element' of a romance novel. Regis' explanation of this moment as a point of ritual death is then not only well elaborated upon but opens a new perspective of interpretation for me. (Michelle H.)

At this point in the seminar, I suggested that *A Room with a View* is one of the first modern romantic narratives to display the emergence of what Eva Illouz calls "the regime of authenticity" (*Why Love Hurts* 31), an important turn in romantic relationships, as well as in literature about them, towards conceiving of courtship and the choice of one's partner as a fundamentally individual and private matter, rather than a process a young woman would go through from a position of encasement within familial protective relations.

Therefore, even if Forster creates a happy ending that formally adheres to the rules of romantic fiction (the betrothal, Regis 19, 37-38), he anticipates the world of existential isolation typical of the late modern and postmodern conditions, a state familiar to all who decide to exert full agency and take complete responsibility in the matters of the heart.

Romance and Bodice Rippers

The third module introduced bodice rippers via E.M. Hull's *The Sheik* and Kathleen E. Woodiwiss's *The Flame and the Flower* (1972). These texts were historically

contextualized and presented as important in view of an informed understanding of current erotic novels – eminently the *Fifty Shades* trilogy (2011–2012) – that have, during the last decade or so, re-ignited a debate around themes of sexual agency and consent. As I have mainly worked on the orientalist aspects of *The Sheik*, I tried to direct the students' attention towards them. This only worked to an extent, as students, generally, had a lot to say about these novels' construction of gender roles and politics. Their quite unanimous response to these texts was emotional rejection. Numerous students mentioned "[*The Sheik's*] blatant racism and orientalism" (Elodie T.), "triggering sequences" (Sumeyya K.) and "obnoxious sexism" (Linda B.). See, for instance, the passage below:

> Whereas I may have thought protagonist Diana to be somewhat atypical for her time in the beginning of the novel, my opinion of said character changed drastically while I continued my reading. In fact, the more I read, the harder it became for me to finish reading the novel … Something that was particularly bothersome was Diana's own victim blaming after the initial rape scene. Yes, she despises the Sheik and what he has done to her, but even more so she seems to be focused on beating herself up for not having been 'strong' enough. By calling herself a 'coward' over and over again, she makes herself responsible for the fact that she had been raped … Additionally, reading about the countless stereotypes on both women and Arab people made it extremely hard to even try and take the novel seriously … (Michelle H.)

This seemed a good moment to introduce further scholarship on the romance beyond Regis's *Natural History*. Students chose a text between Kelly Faircloth's article "The Sweet, Savage Sexual Revolution that Set the Romance Novel Free" (2016) and Sarah Frantz Lyons and Eric Selinger's chapter "Strange Stirrings, Strange Yearnings: *The Flame and the Flower*, *Sweet Savage Love*, and the Lost Diversities of Blockbuster Historical Romance" (2019). In class, we discussed Angela Toscano's article (2012) on the narrative uses of rape in romance novels.[7]

The general aim was making students realize the importance of receiving some guidance in navigating texts that appear to clash so significantly with the current regime of interpersonal and romantic relationships. Below are a few reflections on the secondary readings by the students:

> I expected an article [Toscano's] that would make me angry and totally disagree with the author's argument but instead … the many examples and their interpretation in terms of rape as a metaphor made sense in the course of the essay … It is clearly not the author's intention to belittle the horror of rape and violence. Rather, the article opens an interesting perspective to look at the meanings of these events in novels … Also, the notion of the hero's difficulties in distinguishing between the heroine's body and mind identity and its relation to the hero's wrong understanding of possession and knowledge of the heroine was a great and well-thought input … (Melissa V.)

> Despite the secondary reading that gives a lot of insight on this topic, I still believe *The Sheik* to be a romanticization of the Stockholm Syndrome facilitated by the condoning of rape. (Maria G.)

Popular Romance Scholarship

The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction (2021) presents, in its introduction, a historically linear account of the different waves of scholarship on the romance genre. This was a very useful reading that opened a window on attitudes and mindsets towards the genre through time. The introduction does a particularly good job of connecting the history of romance scholarship with the different waves of feminism and feminist scholarship. This way, despite not having the possibility to read specific texts from the first and second waves of critical texts on the romance, students could familiarize themselves with fundamental shifts in attitudes and approaches concerning the genre, as well as with major works and names attached to its academic study.

At this point, students started deciding for themselves what to read next. Some of them took the initiative of reading other secondary articles from the *Companion*, whereas others prepared presentations of various texts that, quite simply, appealed to them. For instance, Laura P. presented a slideshow illustrating some arguments from the book *Why Love Hurts* (2011) by Eva Illouz, Daria G. introduced the other students (and me) to the work of Swedish novelist and comics artist Liv Strömquist. Melissa B. and Michelle H. looked at first and second wave scholarly texts on romance novels, of which they were both quite critical.[8] In reference to several statements by Janice Radway reported in Jonathan A. Allan's chapter "Gender and Sexuality" (2021), Melissa observed:[9]

> I claim that there is more sense of self and sexual awareness to women than these explanations suggest. It does not serve the cause of women's empowerment to put them in 'drawers' like this and searching for an all-encompassing and self-explanatory Oedipal complex. I mean, is it in every literary genre that the readers get analysed like this? Are there critics writing about complexes people who read vampire novels might have? I think sometimes this gets all a bit too much…" (Melissa B.)

> While I do appreciate Krentz and Barlow's viewpoint on how they – as authors of romance novels – view the language and plot of said narratives, I found myself to be pretty disturbed by the constant evocation of 'the reader,' 'the women,' 'the author.' Probably, there exist similarities between the readers of romance novels – just like there probably exist similarities between all human beings. However, to simply throw all female readers of romance novels in one pot made me slightly uncomfortable … Krentz and Barlow argue that the 'bond' between women is what empowers them, increasing the reader's feelings of connection to other women. Who are they, however, to judge what different kind of fantasies women all over the world share? While I am all for female empowerment and women supporting other

> women, I find it extremely problematic to generalize all women's desires … Rather than actually empowering women, these generalizations reduce them to universal figures which simply do not exist. (Michelle H.)

> Wanting to read a romance novel does not necessarily mean wishing to experience a love story in real life. Books can be used as an escape from real life, as an inspiration for real life, as education, or they can be just books. (Karolina C.)

The essays in the *Companion* gave the students a more concrete impression of the field of popular romance studies that has been steadily expanding over the course of the last two decades, with important contributions being made to scholarship in the different subgenres such as historical, gothic, paranormal, young adult, and erotic, and themes such as class, wealth, gender, sexuality, religion, race and ethnicity. However, as scholarship in this field has remained largely unknown to scholars in especially European literary studies while popular romance scholars have also remained at a distance from the field of literary fiction, this seminar, for many interested students, opened a door on a largely unknown genre and its scholarship.

The Afro-American Romance Novel

The fifth module was dedicated to the Afro-American romance novel. After a brief survey of its different historical phases and representative generations of authors, students were given the choice to read Rita Dandridge's "The African American Historical Romance: An Interview with Beverly Jenkins" (2010) or Julie Moody-Freeman's article on the Afro-American Romance in the *Routledge Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*.[10] The students' response to these texts, and to the novels of the module, was decidedly positive. Below are a few excerpts, from the students' assignments, commenting on Dandridge's interview with Jenkins:

> While reading the interview, I realized that I had never read an African-American romance novel before … Reading that first-wave writers were so restrained to the mindset and conventions of their time that attributed to their black characters traits that 'middle and upper-class Caucasians deemed worthy' (Dandridge 2010: 1) in order to disprove myths about black people was shocking to me. (Melissa V.)

> I was particularly shocked by the fact that Jenkins' editor wanted to make such drastic changes to her novel *Night Song*, wanted her to include in its dialogues the N-word, and depict some of her characters with such outdated stereotypical descriptions. It was interesting to read about the determination it took Jenkins to stand her ground and refuse to publish her novel under such circumstances which ultimately led to her having to wait fifteen years for her first novel to be published. (Patsy M.)

European students are not necessarily familiar with any significant specificity concerning the Civil War and Reconstruction periods such as, for instance, the institution of the underground railroad. Furthermore, they have not usually read any significant amount of Afro-American historical fiction (literary or generic) depicting the day-to-day struggle against slavery. One of the few notable exceptions is Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), a novel several students had read for their courses in literary fiction.

At the Department of English, students are required to write a longer supervised paper on a topic of their choice in connection with the contents of a seminar they have successfully taken. At the end of the seminar, nine students decided to write a longer paper on a topic connected with the romance genre and one of them wrote an essay centred on a comparison between Morrison's *Beloved*, Jenkins's *Indigo* (1996), and Cole's *An Extraordinary Union* (2018). The essay bravely tackles the difficulties attached to critically discussing literary novels and popular romances.

In general terms, the novels' historical and cultural context was greatly appreciated. For instance, in *Indigo,* Linda B. appreciated Jenkins's depiction of the "uncertainty former slaves had to deal with, since they never knew if one day they would have been forced back into slavery" and of "the system that supported the slaveowners and worked to keep slavery in place by sending out slave hunters to kidnap people out of their homes" (Linda B.). Other students commented:

> Of all the novels we have read for this seminar so far, I liked *Indigo* the best. I was actually very surprised that I liked it that much, because I had a lot of concerns before I started reading: writing a historical romance novel on a topic as dark as slavery can be problematic. I was worried that the book would lose its focus in romance dilly-dallying and shift away from the atrocities and horrors of the time … (Nina M.)

> *Indigo* is first and foremost a romantic novel, but Jenkins manages to refer to important social and political issues in a way that does not take the reader's mind too far away from the romantic plot. Jenkins includes fascinating details concerning the underground railroad that offered slaves a chance to reach freedom and safety. The romantic intimacy between the hero and the heroine is described in a soft and gentle way … and the relationship between them is one of mutuality and devotion. Although both are characters with strong personalities, they also have their weaknesses and are sometimes in need of support. (Laura S.)

I had the general impression that the historical aspects of these novels met with more interest than their romantic storylines. For instance, Patsy noted:

> Although I read an entertaining romance [*Indigo*], I feel that I have learnt a lot about the abolitionist movement in nineteenth century America. Jenkins managed to integrate historical aspects in a way that was organic to the story, but that impacted the plot in many ways. For instance, the whole reason Galen ends up in Hester's care in the first place is because of his role in freeing slaves. Of course, there are certain cliches, such as Hester the

> blushing virgin versus Galen the experienced man … but I still enjoyed the moments they shared, plotting against slaveowners. (Patsy M.)

By this time, students had started browsing online sources independently, not only articles in the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* but also dedicated websites, blogs, and portals such as Teach Me Tonight and Smart Bitches, Trashy Books. I received assignments on online articles and podcasts, such as the following one by Carmen on Alyssa Cole's *An Extraordinary Union*:

> I have only read the first three chapters so far, and I think it is interesting, although I had to look up some names and facts about the Civil War (Pinkerton Detective Agency; Union Intelligence Service…) …. Alyssa Cole, in the podcast, discusses how much research this book required – since the story is based on real events and people – and her difficulties along the ways, for example, how she was sceptical of her own abilities to write a book in this genre and finding the balance between historical accuracy and keeping the suspense … (Carmen P.)

> [*An Extraordinary Union*] opens a window onto the Civil War (it made me notice that I lack historical knowledge of it) and describes many secondary characters and plot twists that keep the story alive and moving forward …. It was so easy to get lost in this beautiful and moving narration… already after the first chapter I was totally under its spell. The characters seem so realistically human and imperfect, their love story is beautiful and convincing …. Elle, the female main character is a brilliant, strong woman and I love the author's idea of giving her photographic memory, which makes her so unique. (Melissa V.)

Laura, to the contrary, considered Elle's photographic memory "quite a lazy way for an author to depict an intelligent protagonist" (Laura S.).

Established and Emerging Subgenres of the Romance

The last module introduced the contemporary panorama of the romance novel. It was, perhaps, the most "fun" segment of the course, as by then students had acquired a certain autonomy in looking for texts that were of interest to them. I received assignments on f/f and m/m romances, we briefly looked into other new emerging sub-genres – such as polyamory and YA romances – and, in class, we discussed Ellen Carter's article on ace romances. On this last topic, Nina M. observed: "I think it's very interesting and important that we addressed the topic of asexuality … I must admit I did not have that much knowledge of asexuality and what this exactly entails, so I was very intrigued by the article we discussed in class."

As regards the erotic novel, however, it was important for the students to appreciate how much academic critical approaches to popular romances had changed since the first

and second waves' scholarship. Therefore, students were assigned to choose one reading between Hannah McCann and Catherine M. Roach's chapter "Sex and Sexuality" (2021) from the *Companion*, and a selection of chapters from Illouz's *Hard Core Romance: Fifty Shades of Grey, Best Sellers and Society* (2014).[11]

This short treatise effectively complicates the students' opinion of this (in)famous trilogy which is usually – and understandably – grounded on condemnation on the one hand, in a perceived dismissal, by the narrative, of female consent, and, on the other, in the disputed but very persistent notions of what constitutes literature that is good to read – especially for young people – or potentially harmful. Elodie summarises this view very well:

> I find it very worrying how many young people, myself included, read the book and might have been influenced by its glorification of abuse and toxic relationships. As in *The Sheik*, the horrible actions of the male protagonist are excused by his traumatic past. The stalking, controlling, and gaslighting are totally ok because he had a rough childhood. And the fact that the female protagonist stays with him through all this is considered romantic. (Elodie T.)

> Although I loved the way Illouz used the example of BDSM to highlight how consent works within such practices through the elimination of all anxieties tied to insecurities … her discourse on BDSM is not unproblematic … Not only Illouz erases the queer history behind it, she dismisses the fact that Christian, in the novel, uses it to manipulate Anastasia into doing what he wants her to do; gaslighting and abuse paraded as consensual sexual practices … Once Christian realizes he loves Anastasia, he no longer desires to engage in BDSM practices, which feeds into the narrative that these practises are perverse, unnatural, and nasty. (Maria G.)

Although Illouz's work was usually met with interest by the students, several of them criticized the lack of academic focus beyond the heterosexual world. Vivienne, for instance, thought that romance novels and secondary literature about them "should discuss non heterosexual relationships and include the vast spectrum of sexualities people identify with" (Vivienne H.). Maria felt that Illouz's assumption on lesbian couples not being interested in the academic investigation of heterosexual experiences *(Why Love Hurts* 10) was oblivious of the fact that homosexual people do not live outside heteronormative society: "it would be thoughtless to dismiss the construction of one's identity as something happening on a queer spectrum sealed off from the heterosexual experience" (Maria G.).

At this point, authors and texts were introduced that are currently changing the panorama of the contemporary romance with their exploration of the construction of love and sexual relationships within the LGBTQ+ world. As a first example of writing romance today beyond heterosexual conventions, the students read K.J. Charles's *Wanted, A Gentleman* (2017). The narrative elicited a variety of participant responses, mostly positive, especially praising: "The dynamics between the two characters [which] felt very natural and equal" (Patsy P.).

Below are several further comments by students:

> I thoroughly enjoyed reading this novel. It incorporated many interesting topics: slavery and the difficulties of a free slave's relationship with their previous owners, being black in a white dominated country, homosexuality in a time when it was a punishable crime, social expectations that emphasized the search for a suitable match, and the notion of freedom. (Nina M.)
>
> Servitude and inequality were some of the main themes in the novel and they were discussed quite explicitly. I found the combination of concepts of slavery and debt and the related discussion of the monetary worth/value of a person very interesting … Secondly, the love story was the most believable and relatable, perhaps because human feelings were not depicted as all-powerful, consuming, and raging passions, but as affection and attraction. (Laura P.)
>
> I really liked the fact that Theo showed his support rather than pitying Martin. Martin's anger was also extremely refreshing and, of course, justified. Theo supporting Martin in his anger rather than telling him to get over it, or, even worse, forgive his former masters, was a welcome part of their dynamic. Obviously, I can – as was the case with *Indigo* – only speak from my perspective as a white woman, but I thought that Theo was not portrayed as the typical 'white saviour' who is able to show Martin his self-worth. He was portrayed as quite an imperfect character, someone who did not like to get involved in politics, and while strongly against slavery, he never spoke against it. (Patsy M.)

Concluding Remarks

The reason why I designed and taught this seminar is simple: I was offered the prospect to plan one, and as a scholar of the Anglophone popular romance, I saw this as a unique opportunity to introduce students to the genre, organize my own knowledge of it, and test my capacity to sustain an introductory course over a term. As already mentioned, this experience was personally rewarding as well as professionally productive, as it opened the door to two more affiliated seminars: one on sentimental "literary" fiction (offered the following term), and one, to be taught in 2022, on YA literature and romance in the 21st century.

Naturally, not everything worked perfectly.

What Worked Well

As I have already pointed out, this seminar opened a door, for undergraduate students in Basel, on a largely unknown genre and its attached field of expertise. The academic study of popular romance is virtually absent in continental Europe, and therefore students generally did not know that the Anglophone popular romance novel had been, for decades, the object of consistent and academically sound investigation. Consequently, one

aspect of the seminar that worked particularly well is that, as they got exposed to the genre as well as its scholarship, students familiarized themselves with a novel and intellectually stimulating cultural and artistic context. My impression is that they were gratified to see that they could achieve, in just a few weeks, a decent understanding of the genre's main history and problematics.

Students embraced the topic and came up with their own ideas to develop. So far, I have received proposals and full seminar papers that, for instance, apply linguistic analytical methods to the Bravo photo love story (a German popular youth medium with over sixty years of history), a paper that analyses *A Room with a View* in light of Regis's essential elements, an essay that discusses the novel *If I Never Met You* (2020) by Scottish author Mhairi McFarlane, one that discusses elements of the romance novel in the thriller *You* (2014) by Caroline Kepnes, and a discussion of masculinity in Julia Quinn's *The Duke and I* (2000).

Also, several students were pleasantly surprised to discover, mainly through the *Research Companion*, that there exists a brand of scholarship devoted to very popularized genres, such as, for instance, the YA series they used to love as teenagers (*Twilight*, *The Hunger Games,* etc.). It was a refreshing experience for them to learn they could seriously discuss and write about texts that are not usually considered suitable objects for academic inquiry.

Their curiosity in this regard inspired me to design a new seminar on YA literature and romance to be offered to students in the winter term of 2022. My hope is that the Department of English will soon be able to offer a small cluster of undergraduate seminars focusing on the romance genre, thus inaugurating an outpost for the structured and organized academic study of the popular romance genre in Continental Europe.[12]

What Did Not Work So Well

I often struggled to make students see the importance of familiarizing themselves with obsolete or even disturbing points of view concerning gender politics. Students tended to hold clear and passionate views on these topics. For instance, they often condemned or rejected "patriarchy" without fully acknowledging its enduring and far-reaching effects as a regime of power relations we have all partaken in and sustained, a system that is still in place – albeit in continuous mutation – and is formative as well as damaging, to women as well as men.

It is important to understand where we come from, historically and culturally. Therefore, reading narratives that, for instance, feature an insecure and passive heroine, subdued to male authority, does not serve the purpose of promoting that organization between genders, but aims at illustrating the point that the epistemic world we currently take for granted when discussing romantic relationships, based on consent, accessible self-knowledge and affirmation and the transparency of feelings did not constitute a perspective always shared and available to everyone.

To the contrary, private histories have always been, and still are, fraught with conflicts, violence, and abuse. As such, the narratives that recount these aspects should be analysed without prejudice, so as to better appreciate the complex and contradictory history and makeup of our personal interactions, too often conceived of as a transparent "object of scrutiny and control through formal and predictable procedures … subsuming

the erotic and romantic experience of love under systematic rules of conduct and abstract categories" *(*Illouz, *Why Love Hurts* 177).

However, I often suspected, as I was trying to elucidate these points, that several students felt I was trying to surreptitiously sell them a point of view that they deemed dissonant, fundamentally conservative, and, as such, unhelpful.

I would like to close this report with some students' reflections on the seminar I received at the end of it:

> The main reason I took this course is because I need a seminar paper and a certain amount of credit points in literature if I want to get a teacher certificate after my MA studies – and because I was intrigued by a course in literature that is dedicated to a genre that is usually frowned upon, ridiculed, and not deemed worthy of literary analysis. Now I am very happy that I took this course. I feel like I have learned a lot, both on an academic level and on a personal level. Never having even touched a popular romance novel before, this course has broadened my literary horizon and introduced me to an unknown world with all its complexities, debates, and theories. The fact that a student of literature can attain a MA degree without ever dealing with one of the most popular and influential genres, the romance novel, seems very strange to me … I understand that some texts may have more literary value than others, and that within an establishment such as the university not all texts can be treated equally. To completely ignore widely popular and influential texts such as *Fifty Shades of Grey* or novels by Nora Roberts, however, seems to severely limit both the scope and the value of literary studies themselves … All in all, I am very glad that my probably last course in English literature was such an enlightening, thought-provoking, and fun experience." (Laura P.)

> This seminar created a space for discussing topics I have never discussed before in my entire studies. Furthermore, so many interesting aspects regarding feminism, gender, and social studies were raised in the discussions. I am still a little critical towards the books – mostly considering the aspects of representation, gender norms and sexism – but I think the romance genre deserves more attention. The (mostly female) authors of romance are doing a lot to keep the genre alive and meaningful and deserve more credit. (Vanessa K.)

> Before this seminar, I had internalised the stigma against romance novels. Although I greatly enjoyed them as a child and as a teenager, in the last few years I thought of myself as being too old and educated to enjoy romance novels … I think it was very interesting to see how many contemporary social issues can be tackled and discussed through the academic perspective on romance novels … I take home a lot of thoughts and I am keen to learn more about this contemporary genre. (Carmen P.)

> I really enjoyed all the different aspects we were able to look at and discuss during this seminar. I discovered that I don't actually hate romance novels … I can definitely understand their appeal and I discovered some new favourites. That we were able to discuss so many topics, from rape culture to racism, from LGBTQ+ content to asexuality shows the enormous impact romance novels have as a genre and why they should be included in English Studies curricula. (Patsy M.)

> To this day, I told people how romance novels were okay and nothing too exciting, although I enjoy reading them. I now know it is because people tend to judge you for enjoying this genre and its subgenres. However, seeing so many women open and passionate about this genre made me re-think my previous attitudes. From now on, I will just tell people that I like romance novels. (Sumeyya K.)

---

[1] Fifteen students consented to their work and comments being included in this article, and to be identified by their first name and surname initials.

[2] I also wish to thank Professor Ina Habermann who, as Head of Department, approved and supported the teaching of this seminar and allowed me to design both syllabi (the "popular" as well as the "literary") in complete autonomy and freedom.

[3] The reason why I only discussed Harlequin short contemporaries at the end of the seminar is because the category is often identified as the equivalent and sole representative of the popular romance novel. I wished for the students to have a much more accurate idea of this rich and composite genre before discussing this specific category. In a recent article published by this journal, Nilson and Ehriander discuss an analogous issue within a Swedish context.

[4] This is how the syllabus of the seminar explains the learning journal the students were asked to keep: "You should write as simply and concisely as possible, letting the instructor know if you enjoyed the reading, why you did and/or why you did not…you could mention, for instance, some passage/episode you particularly enjoyed, or you could criticize the author's ideas on any particular matter. Please do tell if you found the reading especially challenging/exciting/boring, and please explain why. In these short assignments, your goal should NOT be that of impressing the instructor with extensive knowledge and beautiful language; you should aim at writing a simple paragraph or two in which you show, writing simply but correctly, that you have truly engaged (or tried to engage) with the text(s), and that you are able to organize and articulate your thoughts neatly." Students, in time, produced increasingly long compositions. A selection of them was read in class, prompting the weekly discussion on the readings assigned.

[5] Pamela Regis's *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (2003) has played a fundamental role in re-routing scholarly approaches to romance from ideological and psychologising to straight-forwardly academic. As Eric Selinger explains, "by doubling back to pre-feminist, non-Freudian approaches to the romance novel, Regis essentially hit the reset button on the whole enterprise of popular romance studies" ("Rebooting the Romance" 3). Her work does not only put together a modern canon of the romance novel, sketching its history and pre-modern literary affiliations, but also individuates eight essential narrative elements to be employed as analytical categories for understanding the

romance, several "events" in the storyline which must occur for a romance novel to be defined as such.

[6] Here are two passages from Elodie's assignments: "I actually really like *Rebecca* and I am in general a big fan of gothic literature, so it was very interesting to look at the novel from a different perspective. The fact that a gothic novel can also be a romance novel is not something I would have guessed, as those two genres seem so far away from each other." Concerning *Jane Eyre*: "After reading Regis' chapter on *Jane Eyre* I remembered why I liked this novel so much when I read it for the first time a few years ago … While the story presents all the aspects of a romance novel or even a fairy-tale, there also is a very modern and feminist side to it. For example, Jane's education and independence are main focuses throughout the novel. At the same time, Jane's relationship with Rochester is also important. I think this is what Regis (via Cynthia Carlton-Ford) means when she argues that Brontë wrote two separate stories … When reading the book, one can focus on either one of these stories" (Elodie T.).

[7] Angela Toscano, in her seminal article "A Parody of Love: The Narrative Uses of Rape in Popular Romance", isolates and analyses three kinds of rape that recur in romances: "rape of identity", rape of possession", and "rape of coercion".

[8] The importance of these critical works was stressed, as for the first time in the history or popular romance scholarship, specific methodologies and critical approaches were developed. However, it was also discussed how "the deployment of a sophisticated critical/theoretical apparatus … served not as a means to illuminate the complexity of subtly crafted artifacts … nor to demonstrate the cognitive processes instilled by the genre and its readers … but rather to identify unconscious, otherwise invisible tensions, complexities, and ambivalences in popular romance novels and in readers' interaction with them" (Kamblé et al. 2021: 7).

[9] The quotes Melissa comments upon are the following: "It is the constant impulse and duty to mother others that is responsible for the sense of depletion that apparently sends some women to romance fiction" (432) "By immersing themselves in the romantic fantasy, women vicariously fulfil their needs for nurturance by identifying with the heroine who is nurtured by the hero as she, the reader, is not (sufficiently) nurtured in her own heterosexual relationship" (Janice Radway quoted in Allan 432).

[10] Dandridge's "Interview" presents a clear and concise survey of the different waves of the Afro-American romance novel, as well as a compelling description of Jenkins's struggle to emerge as an author in her own right, rather than a representative of a culture editors and publishers invested with a set of expectations and racist stereotypes.

[11] In the "Epilogue" of this treatise Illouz, through a short discussion of Pauline Réage's *Story of O* (1954), illustrates the normative implications of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. According to Réage's novel, Illouz observes, "women can experience undiluted sexual pleasure and desire, detached from love, only in a state of abjection" (*Hard Core Romance* 67) This reveals that "at the heart of heterosexual love is the annihilation of women as desiring subjects" (67). This notion is inscribed in numerous other texts – one could add *Rebecca* to the category, a novel that features a female desiring subject who gets punished for her sexual autonomy and unconventionality. To the contrary, *Fifty Shades* "incessantly affirms rather than denies Ana's needs, volition, and subjectivity in the form of a narrative of self-discovery and romantic intimacy" (67) centred on a fundamental combination of two distinct genres: romance and self-help literatures.

[12] To my knowledge, in Continental Europe, there have mainly been sparse and sporadic attempts at teaching popular romance. See the article by Nilson and Ehriander published in this journal for a detailed account of one of these experiences in a Swedish University. On a more permanent basis, there are only two academic institutions that host scholars conducting sustained research on the popular romance novel: University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (Canary Islands, Spain), and University of the Balearic Islands (Balearic Islands, Spain). Research produced in these centres engages critically with orientalist representations of the European South in Anglophone romance novels.

Works Cited

Allan, Jonathan A. "Gender and Sexuality" in *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, edited by Jayashree Kamblé, Hsu-Ming Teo and Eric Murphy Selinger, Routledge, 2021, pp. 428-453.

Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. Modern Library Classics, 2000 [1813].

Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Penguin Classics, 2003 [1847].

Byatt, A.S. *Possession: A Romance*. Chatto and Windus, 1990.

Carter, Ellen. **"Asexual Romance in an Allosexual World: How Ace-Spectrum Characters (and Authors) Create Space for Romantic Love."** *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, vol. 9, 2020, pp. 1-19.

Charles, K.J. *Wanted, A Gentleman.* KJC Books, 2017.

Cole, Alyssa. *An Extraordinary Union*. Kensington Books, 2018.

Crusie, Jennifer. *Bet Me*. St. Martin's Paperbacks, 2004.

Dandridge, Rita B. **"The African American Historical Romance: An Interview with Beverly Jenkins."** *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2010, pp. 1-12.

Driscoll, Beth. **"Review: Love Between the Covers, Produced, Written, and Directed by Laurie Khan."** *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2016, pp. 1-3.

Dugger, Julie M. **"'I'm a Feminist, But…' Popular Romance in the Women's Literature Classroom."** *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2014, pp. 1-19.

du Maurier, Daphne. *Rebecca.* Little, Brown and Company, 2013 [1938].

Faircloth, Kelly. "The Sweet, Savage Sexual Revolution that Set the Romance Novel Free." *Jezebel, A Supposedly Feminist Website*, 12 June 2016, **https://jezebel.com/the-sweet-savage-sexual-revolution-that-set-the-romanc-1789687801**

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. London: Allen Lane, 1977.

Forster, E.M. *A Room with a View.* Edward Arnold & *Co.,* 1947 [1908].

Fowles, John. *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Little, Brown and Company, 1969.

James, E.L. *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Bloom Books, 2012.

Jenkins, Beverly. *Indigo*. Harper Collins, 1996.

Hull, E.M. *The Sheik*. Small, Maynard & Company, 1921.

Huyssen, Andreas. *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. Indiana University Press, 1986.

Illouz, Eva. *Why Love Hurts*. Polity Press, 2011.

– – -. *Hard-Core Romance: Fifty Shades of Grey, Best-Sellers, and Society.* Chicago University Press, 2014.

Kahn, Laurie, dir. *Love Between the Covers*. Blueberry Hill Productions, 2015.

Kamblé, Jayashree et al. "Introduction" in *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, edited by Jayashree Kamblé, Hsu-Ming Teo and Eric Murphy Selinger, Routledge, 2021, pp. 1-23.

Kepnes, Caroline. *You*. Atria/Emily Bestler Books, 2014.

McCann, Hannah and Roach, Catherine M. "Sex and Sexuality" in *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, edited by Jayashree Kamblé, Hsu-Ming Teo and Eric Murphy Selinger, Routledge, 2021, pp. 411-27.

McFarlane, Mhairi. *If I Never Met You.* Harper Collins, 2020.

Moody-Freeman, Julie. "Afro-American Romance" in *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, edited by Jayashree Kamblé, Hsu-Ming Teo and Eric Murphy Selinger, Routledge, 2021, pp 229-251.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1987.

Nilson, Maria and Ehriander, Helene. **"Love in a Cold Climate? Teaching Popular Romance at a Swedish University."** *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, vol. 10, 2021, pp 1-16.

Quinn, Julia. *The Duke and I*. Avon Books, 2006.

Radway, Janice. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984.

Regis, Pamela. *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.

Rooney, S. *Normal People*. Faber & Faber, 2018.

Selinger, Eric M. **"Rebooting the Romance: The Impact of *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*"** *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* vol. 3, no. 2, 2015, pp. 1-5.

Selinger, Eric and Sarah Frantz Lyons. "Strange Stirrings, Strange Yearnings: *The Flame and the Flower*, *Sweet Savage Love*, and the Lost Diversities of Blockbuster Historical Romance" in *Romance Fiction and American Culture: Love as the Practice of Freedom?*, edited by William A. Gleason and Eric M. Selinger., Routledge, 2016, pp. 89-110.

Toscano, A. R. **"A Parody of Love: The Narrative Uses of Rape in Popular Romance."** *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2012, pp. 1-17.

Woodiwiss, Kathleen. *The Flame and the Flower*. Avon Books, 1972.