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

The Debasement of Love and its Cure in Romance: Psychoanalysis and Healing Through Feminization in Loretta Chase's *Lord of Scoundrels*

Noam Raveh

Published online: December 2025
http://www.jprstudies.org
https://doi.org/10.70138/XLCD1461

Abstract: Romance novels have been often disregarded in literary discussions. Given that this genre primarily explores emotions and internal experiences, it is surprising that psychoanalytic criticism has not been extensively applied to it. This article examines Loretta Chase's iconic work *Lord of Scoundrels*, utilizing Freud's theory on the debasement of love. I argue that the protagonist, Lord Dain, serves as a poignant illustration of psychical impotence, a condition rectified through his connection with the heroine, Jessica. Beyond being a mere love interest, Jessica acts as a catalyst for his healing, enabling him to embrace femininity without compromising his masculinity. This process of feminizing the hero while preserving his masculinity aligns with the genre's rhetorical conventions, as suggested by Catherine M. Roach. Consequently, this analysis provides a fresh, specifically feminine perspective on psychoanalytic literary criticism, addressing a question Freud leaves unanswered: how to overcome psychical impotence.

About the Author: Noam Raveh is a graduate student at Tel Aviv University in the Department of English Literature and American Studies. Her thesis explores the rhetoric of the popular romance genre and its relation to virtue ethics and seeks to describe contemporary romance novels as conduits for feminist cultural critique.

Keywords: Freud, Lacan, Loretta Chase, masculinity, psychical impotence

Introduction

Love is central to romance novels. This is hardly a controversial statement. However, many scholars, readers, and authors continuously grapple with the term. For example, Francesca M. Cancian asserts that love is a combination of instrumental and expressive qualities; love is indicated through both actions and words (693). According to Victor Karandashev, love comprises particular behaviors, feelings, and interpretations in different

cultures alongside its more universal understanding (264). In Western culture, love is often seen as connected, but more spiritual and superior, to lust, in particular when contemplating "true love" as a romantic love for the one person we are meant to be with. And love is believed to reach its pinnacle with a soulmate, with whom one can experience transcendent passion, emotion, and unparalleled intimacy (Teo 462). Additionally, as Cancian has pointed out, love has been considered a feminine emotion by most men and even feminists nowadays (695). Elaine Baruch, who claims that some forms of love can disrupt social power dynamics and structures, thinks that the only place where love could be expressed unabashedly is in literature by both men and women (9–10).

Romance novels contend with a multilayered and culturally complex idea of love, as Hsu-Ming Teo shows in her entry "Love and Romance Novels" in *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*. Jayne Ann Krentz's influential essay collection *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance* (1992) raises the issues of love as healing and taming the romance hero, refutes the accusation that romance turns male figures into women, and rejects the claim that it is a simple fantasy of revenge and power. In these novels the heroes become gentler, learn to care and be tender, and emerge as well-rounded people who can acknowledge and express emotions. Their masculinity must remain intact for the full effect of the romance. The shift the heroine exacts in the hero is to turn him from aggressor to protector (Krentz 6). Even more, the reader's insight into the hero's mind "provides the reader with the addictive promise of power *over* patriarchy" (Frantz 21). In this article, I focus on the iconic 1995 novel *Lord of Scoundrels* by Loretta Chase as an example of this dynamic, where the heroine heals the hero by gentling him toward her, his environment, and himself.

I agree with Cancian's conclusion that current discourse feminizes love (695). So too do some circles of psychoanalysis. This paper concentrates on a Freudian theory and some Lacanian continuations thereof dealing with the inception, in some men, of what has culturally been known as the Madonna–whore complex: seeing women as desirable or lovable, but not both. Jonathan A. Allan, drawing on the work of Eva Illouz, confronts the question "Why is traditional masculinity pleasurable in fantasy?" ("Healing Toxic Masculinity" 18; "Mourning and Sentimental Heroism" 1161). In articles such as "Self-Improvement as Proof of Love in *The Bromance Book Club*," Allan examines recent novels that have fairly nuanced attitudes toward masculinity and emotionality. I look back further to a more traditional hero whom the heroine can cure and thus overcome patriarchy.

I believe that *Lord of Scoundrels* shows how the adoption of a feminine perspective is key to the healing of the hero and the happy ending. This novel's lasting power shows that exploring such a fantasy of masculinity remains relevant. Exploring a hero such as Lord Dain, and the way he is healed by his heroine, can still help to answer the question of what makes traditional masculinity appealing.

In an interview on love, Jacques-Alain Miller, Lacanian psychoanalyst, writer, and the editor of Lacan's seminars, described his understanding of the concept of psychoanalysis: "Lacan used to say, 'To love is to give what you haven't got.' This means: to love is to recognize your lack and give it to the other, place it in the other" (116). This very cryptic definition of love as the basis of psychoanalysis is apt since love remains a riddle. In a letter to Carl Jung in 1906, Freud claimed that psychoanalysis is essentially a cure through love (Charura and Paul 5). Both Freud and Lacan offer theories, but love remains opaque to some degree (Fink xi). Romance scholars are justifiably wary of psychoanalytical theories, as they

were used to shape romance criticism in the 1980s while patronizing the readers and writers of the genre. However, as Eric Murphy Selinger points out, romance research has evolved and moved past this phase (2), and literary use of Freudian theories to analyze a text is now possible without the disparaging baggage of early romance scholarship. If romance does indeed unveil the phallus that must, according to Lacan, remain veiled, so that the heroine knows and controls patriarchy (Frantz 22), it is worth exploring how it is done. Here I will tackle only one kind of psychical problem regarding love: psychical impotence as Freud defines it in his essay "On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love." This problem occurs when the subject has a split image between the love object and the sexual object. In Freud's words, "Where they love they do not desire and where they desire they cannot love" (3). Lynne Pearce has pointed out the incongruousness between the ideal, unrepeatable love depicted in romance novels and Freud and Lacan's insistence on the tendency of the psyche for repetition over love and sex (Pearce 2–4).

Freud describes psychical impotence in detail, but he doesn't really give a road to recovery. Bruce Fink has summarized the seemingly unachievable conditions for a man's love and desire to converge on the same woman, but in short, the man has to come to terms with his own castration, meaning a psychical lack within him (24). Reconciliation with castration is extremely hard for most men. It goes back to Lacan's definition of love as giving someone your lack, regardless of one's sex or gender. Love thus comes from a feminine position because it requires first acknowledging the existence of said lack and admitting something is missing within you, that you are inherently dependent on others in achieving fulfillment (Miller 118). Everyone must acknowledge this kind of "femininity" in themselves. However, culturally and in psychoanalysis, the physical surplus of the male and the threat of castration are at the base of psychical masculinity and femininity.

I propose that this connection between love, a feminine attitude, and psychological healing is not coincidental. As Allan notes, there is a tradition in romance genre scholarship of applying psychoanalysis to the genre: Janice Radway has used a Chodorovian framework, and Catherine Belsey has a more Freudian and Lacanian reading of the genre. As part of the first wave of romance criticism, they did not engage with queer texts and theories (Allan, "Gender and Sexuality" 434). Likewise, this article does not center queer theories; rather, it takes into account that we have a cultural understanding of gender, that we are situated in gender ideology (Vivanco and Kramer 5), and that the Madonna–whore complex is still a specter hovering over femininity. Given that sexuality is a central arena for men to prove their masculine prowess (5), exploring a romance novel as fundamental as Chase's through a psychoanalytic lens may yield an answer to the conundrum at hand: How can a man overcome psychical impotence? How can he overcome culture's binary division of women into either lovable or desirable (Bareket, et. al.)? How can a man be taught to see beyond this divide and achieve a more complex idea of femininity and masculinity?

I claim that through adopting a feminine psychical position, the hero of *Lord of Scoundrels* can heal from psychical impotence and achieve unrepeatable love; this book's heroine, as the perfect love object, forces the hero to overcome his aversion to emotions when he accepts he has fallen in love with her. Sebastian Ballister, the Marquess of Dain, suffers from psychical impotence. Through his relationship with Jessica Trent, the heroine, he overcomes it. Having Jessica is a powerful enough motivation for Dain that he must find it in himself to heal his psychical wounds and face his lack. She is also insightful enough to open his mind to the possibility of perceiving reality and himself in a different light. By

changing Dain's perspective to resemble her own, Jessica provides him with the means to rethink his self-image and accept his "feminine" tendencies. She manages this feat through the rehabilitation of his mother's image, which was shaped by the insults of his father and by the trauma surrounding her abandonment. Love becomes healing because the hero has to face his own lack—his shortcomings, his vulnerability, his fallibility—and thus adopt her position and include femininity as part of his own psyche. In other words, he feminizes himself, becomes more at peace with his emotions and what he saw as flaws, and as a result, is healed.

But before we start, we must account for something important when applying psychoanalytic theory to literary texts. Any critic can mix and match the psychoanalytic approach, the literary approach, and the subject analyzed to reach different conclusions about a text. According to Norman Holland, in order for us to do a psychoanalytic reading of a text we must have some sort of person-like subject as a substitute for the analysand, whether that be the writer, the characters in the text, or the audience (9). While Holland advocates for a reader-response approach and dismisses Lacanian literary analysis as old-fashioned and "de-humanized psychoanalysis" (13), I endeavor to show here that such a literary analysis can yield worthwhile results. Here, the text will act as a projection of a shared fantasy of the readers and writer of healing psychological wounds with love. The inherent fantasy of the romance is the feminization of the hero, not to dominate him, but to heal him. Once the union is achieved, security and freedom for the couple are realized. They can live authentically (Roach 126–7)—and, in the context of the present discussion, without the burden of psychical impotence.

I start by delving into Freud's essay and the problem of psychical impotence's split between the affectionate and sensual currents in the psyche. Following that, we can then delve into Chase's novel and see how Dain overcomes his psychical impotence through his relationship with Jessica. As the healing agent who exposes his lack, Jessica makes him confront his psychological wounds surrounding the split image of the mother and lets him experience love and lust in unison.

The Debasement of Love

Although "On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love" is a relatively short essay, it describes what Freud claims is a widespread phenomenon: the inability to both love and desire the same object. First published in 1912 as one of his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* written between 1910 and 1917 (Hewitson), the paper names two "currents," the "sensual" and the "affectionate," that must combine to have a "normal attitude in love" (Freud 1). Even though many of Freud's theories have become obsolete, this one seems to align with current understanding of sexual disfunction. Freud's psychical impotence works in harmony with the "most promising models of sexual dysfunction [which] is the dual-control model developed by John Bancroft and Erick Janssen. . . . [B]oth Freud and the dual-control model propose that sexual dysfunctions are due to a dominance of inhibitory forces" (Hartmann 2337). In an article for *The New Statesman*, Megan Nolan observes how this problem is still present today in straight men and has sinister implications: the dehumanization of sexualized women and the resulting violence (34).

Freud describes how psychical impotence develops in an individual and insists that it must be cured for one to have a loving romantic relationship. However, he does not elaborate on specific steps required to amend this condition, only giving a general direction to be taken. The result of the separation of the currents is something that became a little cliché: the Madonna–whore dichotomy (Hartmann 2335). For men suffering from this condition, a woman can be either a pure love object and therefore maternal, or profane and therefore sexual. Dain, representing a heightened image of masculinity, exemplifies this binary view of women in the beginning of the novel.

Fink offers a concise suggestion as to what "normal" (or undisturbed, desirable) development that doesn't generate this split of the two currents would look like. As with everyone, a man's first love object is usually the mother, but he does not make her into a sexual object because his true sexual awakening happens only after the hormonal changes of puberty. By then, the incest taboo and Oedipal complex have been resolved, the father has made the mother a forbidden sexual love object, and the primary love is repressed and becomes unconscious. Crucially, the desire for the primary love object is repressed, but not all sexual desire, since he never had sexual desire for his mother. His castration complex put an end to the Oedipus complex before puberty and true sexual awakening occurred. These men can love and desire the same woman because the sensual and affectionate currents can fuse; they were never at odds (Fink 16–18).

Other men experience "total impotence" or the less severe "psychicalal impotence" (Freud 4). They describe some internal barrier or a "counter will" that prohibits their ability to have an erection. It also pertains to men who have sex but are unable to experience pleasure from it, as well as to so-called frigid women (4). Freud claims that the reason for these phenomena is an unconscious fixation on the mother or the sister of the subject that was never accepted or overcome. He feels both the attraction to this object and the inability to act on the incestuous impulse. At some point in his development, the subject could not shift his desire from an incestuous beloved object to a suitable sexual object, which made the two currents divide, since there was no option for the subject to sublimate his attraction to a suitable object.

The affectionate current develops first: as a result of self-preservation, the child experiences love for those who take care of him (Freud 2). The sexual instinct follows the ego instinct in his object choice, connecting these feelings to the first sexual satisfaction in bodily functions that are necessary to preserve life. The first object the child loves becomes his first sexual object, as they are connected to the pleasure he experiences in bodily functions: intake of food and outtake of excrement (Golan 11). The child continues to invest some libido in these objects throughout his development.

At puberty, the affectionate current is joined by the sensual current and, at first, finds the primary object of the child. For men who develop psychical impotence, sexual awareness starts before the incest taboo is internalized, and since they never give up their mother as the love object, sexuality becomes associated with their mother. She falls off her pedestal now that she has become dirty, and her image is split into the pure mother from before the fall and the profane mother, resulting in the idea that there are two types of women—the Madonna and the whore. The more attached the boy is to the mother before the split, the further apart the two currents would be. The threat of castration is interpreted by the boy as prohibiting sexual contact with women similar to the pure mother, and therefore he will be able to perform sexually only with women similar to the profane mother in some way. He

cannot comprehend sexuality in relation to the love object, whom he values very highly. Therefore, he debases the sexual object, whom he cannot love. The result is psychical impotence, which is the "failure of the affectionate and the sensual currents in love to combine" (Freud 3). Dain demonstrates exactly this separation as a result of his childhood trauma.

To be cured, such a man has to come to terms with his mother's presumed love for his father, as well as the fact she has sex with his father; he has to overcome the shock of his incestuous tendencies and accept the fact that there is something incestuous in all sexual relations; and he has to learn to live with the separation from his primary love object, which is the source of primary pleasure. In other words, he has to admit and accept his castration and the creation of an inherent lack in his psyche (Fink 24). This can resemble the idea of the Phallus, Incomplete and Complete. Dain starts off with an Incomplete Phallus, meaning his idea of himself as masculine lacks caring and responsibility for others as aspects of his masculinity (Vivanco and Kramer 15–16). By coming to terms with the parts of himself deemed feminine, he will have a Complete Phallus (20).

The healing process Fink describes might seem impossible. However, *Lord of Scoundrels* shows that such a case might not be doomed. Dain experienced a severe split of the mother's image and seems to be a hopeless case, but he eventually does get over his condition. Even though Carl Goldberg protests Freud's dismissal of mature love and his interpretation of it, claiming that "failures in mature intimacy are not due to inherent infantile patterns, but to lack of knowledge and skill in negotiating equitable and balanced relationships" (437), I agree with Uwe Hartmann's assessment that, overall, Freud's observations still resonate. In the case of Dain, Jessica is exceptional in her ability to evaluate and reevaluate Dain's mental state, then determine how to redirect it to create a balanced relationship and even balance Dain's psyche. As a model for ideal recovery from psychical impotence, the protagonists in this romance novel are individuals who, motivated by romantic love, work hard to reorder their values and priorities. And as Goldberg claims, romantic love is a strong motivation to become more skilled in creating equitable relationships, which eventually turn into intimate love (450).

Going back to Miller's observation that love is a feminine mode of being, it is no wonder that a genre most concerned with love will require its characters to adopt a feminine psychical position. The condition of psychical impotence can only be cured by acknowledging and incorporating one's lack into his self-image, to see and appreciate as valuable that which seemed void-like and hollow. Therefore, what seems to be an impossible condition to get over—the split of the sensual and the affectionate currents—can be solved if the hero incorporates a feminine position into his self-image and learns the skills required to create a balanced relationship. We will see that Dain learns just that from the most skillful heroine.

Lord of Scoundrels

Loretta Chase's award-winning *Lord of Scoundrels* has been well-loved by readers for thirty years ("*Lord of Scoundrels*"). It is a Regency romance set in 1828 in Paris, London, and the English countryside. The reader is introduced first to the hero, Sebastian Leslie Guy de Ath Ballister the Lord Dain, in the prologue, where we see his traumatic childhood unfold. His trauma had split his view of women as either pure or, most often, profane. The Marquess

of Dain—known as Lord Beelzebub, among other devilish epithets—is determined to live up to his reputation as the most debauched man alive. Jessica Trent is a beautiful spinster determined to save her imbecilic brother, who has fallen into Dain's crowd and is on his way to self-destruction. Their courtship and eventual marriage are strategic battles, where each one tries to outmaneuver the other based on assumptions that often turn out to be wrong. While he is very attracted to Jessica, a respectable lady he cannot touch without soiling her reputation, he experiences a form of impotence: first, his left hand becomes paralyzed for no apparent medical reason, and then he either gets drunk or simply prevents himself from having sex with Jess. Only when his view of his mother is rehabilitated can he overcome his condition. Jess exposes Dain to his own shortcomings, she shows him his own lack—every trait he attributed to his mother's legacy. Once he accepts these parts of himself, when he finally learns to feminize himself, he is healed.

This novel clearly resonates with readers and scholars of the genre to this day. In a discussion on "The Power of the Romance Heroine" with romance authors Sarah MacLean, Adriana Herrera, and Esi Sogah, moderator and podcaster Erin Leafe asked the first and only question: "Who do you think the prototypical romance heroine is, and why is it Jessica Trent?" (05:48-05:50). Nattie Golubov has dedicated a full chapter to the novel as an exemplary romance novel on the cusp between Old School and New School romances ("La estructura de un clásico: *Lord of Scoundrels*"). Eric Murphy Selinger and Sarah S. G. Frantz open the introduction to the book *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction* with a short analysis of the metatextuality in the novel (1–3). Laura Vivanco mentions Jessica in her study of ring symbolism in romance (Vivanco 100, 102, 103). However, few academic studies are dedicated to this book specifically, and none have applied psychoanalytic theory to this text. Therefore, a serious textual analysis of this novel is due.

How Dain Came to Debase Love

The prologue describes the circumstances of Lord Dain's birth and childhood. His father married a young Italian woman after losing his first wife and their children to typhus. The age and cultural gap between the father and mother were significant. As a result, his father hated Sebastian—who inherited his mother's dark looks and long Italian nose— and thought he was ugly and demonic from birth. His mother, only nineteen when he was born, loved him and cared for him, but she could not see enough of his hurt or harness the power to do something about it. His father was the main source of misery for both mother and child: "He knew he couldn't ask his mother what was wrong with him and how to fix it. Sebastian had learned not to say much of anything—except that he loved her and she was the prettiest mama in the world—because nearly everything else upset her" (Chase 4). Sebastian's primal love object is his mother, who has to remain perfect and pristine, and any other view of her by her son leads to her tears.

That changed when he was eight and his father informed him that his mother had left with her lover. He tells the boy, "She is an evil, godless creature. Her name is Jezebel, and 'The dogs shall eat Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel,'" and he calls her a whore (5). Sebastian understandably takes it very hard. Thus the dichotomy of his view of women began: his mother was split into two, the one who was his primal love, and the whore who left him with his abusive father, who sent him away to Eton promptly after.

The consequent whores Dain chooses to bed are usually vastly different from his mother in looks. They are the only acceptable source from whom he can receive physical love. He tends to take a woman with light hair, in contrast with his mother's (and his) dark hair and eyes. The first whore he has sex with is a "gift" from his schoolmates for his thirteenth birthday: "The room contained one reeking oil lamp, a dirty straw mattress, and a very plump girl with golden ringlets, red cheeks, large blue eyes, and a nose no bigger than a button. She stared at Sebastian as though he were a dead rat" (12). The whore's button nose is a key contrast to Dain's long nose, a defining characteristic of his maternal legacy and the object of frequent mockery as ugly and demonic. It becomes a symbol of his self-image as evil and profane, as his mother had become. In his first sexual experience, his sensuality is completely divorced from his affectionate current, which is trampled by the whore who calls him ugly and demanded additional monetary compensation from him.

This experience teaches him to replace affection with money, as a way to achieve his goals in life and as a substitute for genuine connection. He spends his money on "women, diverse other vices, and private Italian lessons" (14). The Italian language, the last connection he maintains to the primal love he had for his mother, remains a hidden, private way to relate to his mother's legacy. When he becomes emotional later on, Italian will be his way to express it, offering a direct connection to emotions and femininity he can bear to call his own.

Thus, to put it in psychoanalytic terms, we have a man whose primal love object in his mother was ruined by his father's declaration that she was a whore. Sebastian's mother as a love object became split; he could never have pure or affectionate love since his love object became profane, and the profanity stuck to himself. The sexual objects he had were as removed as possible from the primal object in looks and social status. His problem begins once he encounters Jessica, whom he finds irresistibly attractive, yet forbidden to him. She is respectable; therefore, she cannot be a viable sexual object for him. She also has dark hair, which is one of his mother's attributes. While he is initially unable to act on his desire, his attraction to her causes a crisis in his psyche that forces him to confront his psychical impotence.

The Symbols of the Split

The split in Dain's sensual and affectionate currents is represented in three ways. The first takes the form of icons of the Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus in a maternal embrace, combined with a portrait of his mother. The second example is the Italian features he embraces—his use of the Italian language to express genuine emotion, even when he tries not to—and the ones he rejects—his temperamentality, sensitivity, and especially his nose. The third is what most directly resembles Freud's description of psychical impotence: he feels arousal towards Jess, but loses physical control over his hand with no medical reason and gets too drunk to maintain an erection. He can only overcome this condition once his mother's image is rehabilitated in his mind by Jess, and he accepts his bastard son, the product of sex with a blond "tart," not as a personification of his profanity but as his child. I will now describe the symptoms and their eventual healing through the care and love of Jessica, who facilitates Dain's acceptance of his own femininity and what he used to see as feminine traits and values.

The Madonna and the Whore in the Icon

The first icon Dain gravitated toward belonged to his Catholic mother: "After she had gone, Sebastian sat up and took from his bedstand the small picture of the Blessed Virgin and the Baby Jesus his mother had given him. Hugging it to his chest, he prayed" (Chase 7). The holy picture of a mother holding her baby consoled him and replaces the mother he had just lost. The icon Dain is interested in as an adult was found and discarded by him in a used items shop in Paris, concurrent with his first meeting with Jessica. Dain immediately finds her attractive but cannot handle his feelings very well since she is a lady and therefore needs to be treated with respect, that is, not sexually. Jess finds the icon, which is in very bad condition, and buys it very cheaply. The linking of his encounter with Jessica, her finding the tarnished icon, and his strong attraction are the first signs of Dain's problem with the separation of the sensual and affectionate currents. When he lusts after Jessica, a dark-haired respectable lady, his emotions come forth, and he experiences a crisis.

Jessica, however, is an unusual lady, a beautiful spinster who shares qualities with her grandmother, who is a famous *femme fatale*. Genevieve, Jessica's grandmother, is a twice-widowed woman who enjoyed her long widowhood with discreet lovers. Jessica might be a virgin, but she is not ignorant about sex. Dain has some difficulty resolving this contradiction to himself on numerous occasions.

During their first encounter, at the used items shop, Jess looks at a clock with a lady on it. Dain, in an attempt to shock her, reveals that the clock conceals a sexual scene: underneath the lady's skirt, a man is performing a sexual act on the lady. Instead of being shocked, Jessica buys the clock, claiming it as the perfect gift for Genevieve. While there is no question that Jessica is pure, Dain struggles with her ability to remain pure despite her surprising sexual knowledge. Jess knows about sex, and even more shocking to Dain, she feels sexual attraction to him of all men. Therefore, he thinks something must be wrong with her: she is a "creature" (28), neither a lady nor a whore but something beyond his comprehension.

He comes to appreciate the value of the icon properly only after Jess has cleaned it and had an expert appraise its value. It turns out to be an extremely valuable Russian icon (50). Once he sees its revealed beauty, he realizes what he missed in the shop and covets the icon—the dirty whore of an icon becomes a valuable Madonna. Jessica is capable of transforming the image of the Madonna (the symbolic mother), thus proving the superiority of her comprehension and judgment. Her feminine perspective proves to be worth emulating and adopting.

We see here the road to his healing in a nutshell: Jessica, throughout the story, will be able to see the value of the image of his mother and rehabilitate it in Dain's mind, from the whore she had become to a loving mother who did her best, thus giving him the ability to merge the two currents and experience full love with Jessica. Jessica has an eye for hidden gems, and she can see that the icon, and Dain, are more valuable than they seem at first glance. Dain has the same reaction to the icon and to Jessica: he doesn't know why, but he must have them. However, he must come to see himself through her perspective and adopt her values and judgment—in other words, feminize himself—if he wants to possess them both.

Dain's attachment to the icon is also the instrument that brings him and Jessica together. In his attempt to buy the icon from her, she negotiates that instead of money, he

will cease his association with her brother. This infuriates Dain, who has learned that money is the only way he can get what he wants and that any other way to relate to others ends in disappointment, and he refuses the terms. On a deeper level, it is clear that anything profane, like the money he pays whores with, cannot be associated with the icon that symbolizes maternal love or with Jessica. By refusing to sell the icon, Jess blocks his usual way to have a human connection. However, by suggesting a nonmonetary exchange, she also prevents him from debasing the pure icon. Thus, she reveals to him the lack in his psyche, confronting him with how far he is willing to go to have the symbol of pure love, even if it means debasing it and ruining its purity. This enrages him because he can't handle the hurt the renewed loss causes him. Even if he could have bought the icon before Jess, it would have ceased being a symbol of pure love; it would remain dirty with a rotting frame as it was, without Jess to refurbish it and reveal its beauty and value.

Later in the novel, after they are wed, Jessica gives Dain the icon as a birthday present. She asks him why this icon meant so much to him, and his answer is very revealing. He becomes very emotional and remembers that "[t]he last birthday present he'd received had come from his mother, when he was eight. The tart Wardell and Mallory had supplied on Birthday Thirteen didn't count" (264). The distinct divide is present again: presents are a token of love, and the whore's profane sexuality, and the disgust and shame of that experience, cannot exist within the same framework. Whether it was his friends' intention or the whore's reaction to him, this experience has drawn a sharp line between presents and acquirement of goods and services in his mind. Therefore, when Jess asks him why he wanted the seemingly worthless icon she bought and then gifted him, he describes the image:

> Baby Jesus looks truly cross and sulky, as though he's tired of posing, or hungry—or merely wants attention. And his mama doesn't wear the conventional tragic expression. She's half-frowning, yes. Mildly irritated, perhaps, because the boy's being troublesome. Yet she wears a glimmer of a smile, as though to reassure or forgive him. Because she understands that he doesn't know any better. Innocent brat, he takes it all for granted: her smiles and reassurances, her patience . . . forgiveness. He doesn't know what he has, let alone how to be grateful for it. And so he frets and scowls . . . in blissful infant ignorance. (266)

His description of the mother and child is like a confession or a psychoanalytic session. He describes himself through the image, as a child who didn't know any better, was troublesome, and could not notice his mother's forgiveness. He essentially projects his relationship with his mother and her absence onto the icon. The lack in him is revealed to be genuine emotion—love from his mother, even when he is "bad," and even when it is inconvenient. Jessica of course, notices this, and it arouses loving feelings in her. Going back to Lacan, once Dain gives Jess his lack, they can experience love.

The icon becomes a bargaining tool again when Jessica discovers Dain's bastard son, who was conceived in his father's ancestral bed after his funeral (57), an overtly defiant act. The mother, a blond "tart," wants the icon, thinking it is more valuable than it is. She is willing to exchange her neglected son. Dain refuses to simply take his child, because his son represents his own profanity, but Jess is unwilling to give up the child. She gives Dain an ultimatum: either he confronts his issues and takes his son himself, or she will give the icon,

symbolizing maternal love, to the mother of his son, the profane whore. The thought of losing the icon, or Jess, drives him to overcome his physical revulsion at the prospect of taking his son and becoming a father in truth. Thus, he must permit the ugliness of sex, which Dain sees in the ugliness of his child and himself, to become acceptable, wanted, and even lovable. Jessica is unwilling to let the child go, and the result of her acceptance is Dain's self-acceptance, seeing his lack as part of himself, coming to peace with what he thinks are his weaknesses. He lets himself be more similar to Jess, more feminine.

Lastly, Jess prevents the attempted theft of the icon by physically attacking the thief and almost killing him. Dain comes home with his son to see her fighting savagely for the icon. This cements Jess as the one to heal the rift in Dain: she proves she will never let affectionate love leave him. Moreover, she acts in a masculine way, physically beating a man, further complicating Dain's image of her and reflecting back on him. If Jess is the image of femininity united, having strong emotions and performing forceful actions, then Dain's masculinity can have more femininity in it without making him weaker, ugly, or profane.

Another layer to the maternal symbols is a different portrait, that of Dain's mother. Jessica explores her new house, Dain's ancestral home, and finds the only portrait that resembles Dain. She asks the servants to dust it and bring it to her room. When Dain sees it, he feels the pain of looking at the image of his beautiful, cruel mother, as he thinks about her:

> "I'd much rather look at her." He would, too, though it was eating him alive to do so. He would have been content merely to look at his beautiful, impossible mother. He would have asked nothing . . . or so very little: a soft hand upon his cheek, only for an instant. An impatient hug. He would have been good. He would have tried. . . . Mawkish nonsense, he angrily reproached himself. It was only a damned piece of canvas daubed with paint. It was a painting of a whore, as all the household, all of Devon, and most of the world beyond knew. All except his wife, with her fiendish gift for turning the world upside down. "She was a whore," he said harshly. (233)

Dain secretly laments his mother's fall. He mentally goes through the process of the tarnishing of the image of the mother, and shows his feelings of guilt and shame surrounding her. Jessica commences the healing process by changing the way he views his mother, complicating the simple division in Dain's mind. She is shocked and scolds him for calling his mother a whore:

> "How dare you, of all men, call your mother a whore? You buy a new lover every night. It costs you a few coins. According to you, she took but one—and he cost her everything: her friends, her honor. Her son.". . .
>
> "You don't know what her life was like," she said. "You were a child. You couldn't know what she felt. She was a foreigner, and her husband was old enough to be her father." (233–4)

Jessica correctly assumes Dain's mother was abused, took one lover, and fled. She left her son in a safe, if hostile, environment. Only once Jess makes him confront the pain of the loss and he can see his mother as more than a whore who left him, as a person with her own

needs, flaws, and conflicts, can his affectionate and sensual currents begin to meld together. He can be reconciled with his feminine legacy, own it, and have sex with Jessica.

At the end of the novel, we see the completion of Dain's healing when he looks at his mother again. They hang the portrait in the dining room above the fireplace, proudly presenting her to the world. Her image no longer hurts Dain; he sees her beauty and her love, but also her temper and shortcomings. At last, he can forgive her and accept her part in himself. Thus, uniting the two currents is done through Dain's reconciliation with his mother—the feminine parts of himself—by rehabilitating her split image.

The Italian Nose

Dain looks nothing like his father and very much like his mother. Once she became profane, anything that connected him to her became a sign of his own profanity: his dark hair, his long Italian "Usignuolo" nose, and his big body. Only Jessica recognizes that his sensitivity and "high-strung" character are also part of this heritage (202, 250). Dain believes himself to be able to fully control his emotions, but Jess proves otherwise. There is also an aspect of racism and xenophobia in deeming anything un-English in him as bad.

Throughout the book, his dark looks and nose symbolize his wickedness in his own eyes—that is, until Jess rehabilitates the image of his mother. As a child, he resembled the villains in the picture books, his schoolmates called him ugly and taunted him for his nose, and the whore refused to have sex with him initially because of his ugliness. Consequently, his self-image is low. Still, Jessica finds him very attractive, and once she reveals this to him, he is surprised. "You were not supposed to have the face of a dé Medici prince," she tells him. "You were not supposed to have the physique of a Roman god" (258). She cannot resist him, and this turns his worldview on its axis. Again Jessica turns what he deems profane into something lovable, breaching the wall separating the two currents in his mind. His feminine heritage is deemed irresistible instead of repulsive.

On their way to Dain's estate from London, the couple's kiss is interrupted by a crow, generating shame in Dain, who was teased for his beak nose at school. He doesn't offer much explanation to Jess for his mood change, but she sees his blush and infers the truth. She then calls him high-strung and emotional. His reaction is indignant:

> "I'm not romantic," he said tightly. "And I most certainly am not *high-strung*. As to thoroughbreds—you know very well I'm half-Italian."
>
> "The Italian half is blue-blooded, too," she said. (202)

For Jessica, all of these traits are part of him in equal measure, and they are not reasons for him to be unlovable. Jess is determined to find out what has made him so upset and why he dislikes his Italian heritage. His self-image as an unemotional man is rattled by Jessica's discernment of the underlying Italian-ness he tries so hard to hide. But he is sensitive, and his Italian side is part of the nobility. Those two things are shameful to him, but they are not inherently shameful. Only when Jessica rehabilitates those qualities in him can they cease being shameful and feminine like his mother and become part of himself.

The Italian language Dain insists on learning is the only maternal element to remain pure in his mind. Dain uses it as the language of emotions. The first time he speaks Italian to

her, he tries to win a semi-playful dare competition with Jess. He starts by talking about gutters and other inconsequential things while unbuttoning Jessica's glove in public. But when more of her pristine skin is slowly revealed, he starts to confess his feelings for her, his wish to touch and be with her. The Italian language remains associated with his mother as a pure love object and is the only way he can voice his deepest emotions. This continues throughout the book, especially when it comes to his feelings for Jess. After his mother's portrait is revealed and his emotional turmoil overflows, "[h]e pulled her to him, and dragged hot kisses over her face. '*Baciami*. Kiss me. *Abbracciami*. Hold me. Touch me. Please. I'm sorry'" (241). Eventually, when he is finally ready to tell Jess he loves her, he begins in Italian: "'*Ti amo,*' he said. And so ridiculously simple it was that he said it again, in English this time. 'I love you, Jess'" (367). He does that in front of his mother's portrait, signaling his ability to love with the sensual and affectionate currents fully merged. The turn of the Italian from a shameful secret to an attractive attribute has rehabilitated his mother, femininity, and thus, his psychical impotence.

Dain's Impotence

During their competitive courtship, Dain and Jessica are caught kissing in public. Dain refuses to marry her, thinking she has set him a trap. In response, Jessica shoots him in his left arm. It is known she is an excellent shot, and therefore it is obvious that she aimed there to send a message and not inflict major harm. Dain, however, falls ill with a fever for a few days and loses his ability to use his arm. He doesn't lose sensation, only the ability to move it. The doctors are all at a loss since there is no physical damage after the graze from the bullet has healed. This is a clear symbol of his impotence, and the fact that Jessica makes it happen is no coincidence. His inability to comprehend how to both lust after and respect her petrifies him.

He regains the use of his arm only when he needs it to take care of his ill son, Dominick. Seeing his son in need gives Dain the chance to retroactively take care of himself at the moment of abandonment, and unlike his own father, Dain uses this opportunity to heal the child and, inadvertently, himself. By assuming responsibility over the product of his profane sexuality, Dain ceases to see Dominick as merely the product of profane sex; in turn, he no longer sees the dark aspects of his maternal side as profane, thus reintegrating the sensual and affectionate currents. Jess becomes a mother figure to Dominick, the boy in whom Dain sees everything he hates about himself. By insisting she wants to have that child, to take care of him, she shows Dain that he himself is wanted and lovable.

When Dain expresses his fear that Dominick might want to stay with his mother, Jess understands that he is talking about himself: "'If she truly loved him, she would never subject him to such a risk. She would put his welfare first—as your own mother did,' she dared to add" (320). Jessica provides a more complex way to see his mother, himself, and his son by showing him that his mother was not profane, that she loved him even though she abandoned him, and that her abandonment does not make her a whore or him profane. After realizing that his femininity is not a flaw, Dain can fully become a father to Dominick and regain the use of his arm.

When he first holds his child, Dominick is ill, and Dain thinks he killed him. But of course, the child was only sick and weak: "*Addled*, Dain thought. Jessica would say he was

addled. Or high-strung" (333). Dain finally sees his reactions for what they are: emotion, care, what he would have thought feminine and shameful at the beginning of the novel. But the fact that he is scared for his son shows his strength, his healing, his ability to see beyond the product of his profane sexuality and acknowledge his son, who resembles him, whom he can help shape and guide and care for—unlike his own father.

Another way Dain demonstrates impotence is his refusal to have sex with Jessica until she rehabilitates his mother's image through the portrait and the consequent revelation of his emotions. On their wedding night, he is so frightened to break her with his big body that he gets too drunk to even stand, let alone have an erection. He literally makes himself impotent. Later, he has a sexual encounter with Jess but holds himself immobile for fear of infecting her with his profane flesh: "She trusted him. His own trusting kitten. Innocent. So fragile. 'Oh, Jess, you're so tiny,' he murmured, despairing. He stroked gently inside her, but slick and hot as she was, the way was too small, too tight for him. His lust-swollen rod strained furiously against his trousers, a great, monstrous invader that would tear her to pieces" (223). Even though he desperately wants to have sex with her, he feels cumbersome and clumsy, like he might hurt her. That encounter ends in a reversal of stereotypical gender roles. Jessica falls asleep after orgasming at Dain's hand, while Dain embarks on a one-sided conversation: "Just like a damned man, he thought exasperatedly. She got what she wanted, then curled up and went to sleep. That was what he was supposed to do, blast and confound her bloody impudence" (224). Jessica, not for the first time, demonstrates complicated femininity to problematize his dichotomous view of binaries like male–female, Madonna–whore. Thus, he must confront his own femininity as part of his psychical makeup.

After Jess finally manages to seduce Dain, and he calms down from his irrational fears, she playfully scolds his stubbornness and vows that from now on, he must do the seducing. He then laughs at himself, admitting that he is high-strung, sensitive, and emotional (250). He manages to see these qualities as something alluring to Jessica and thus desirable. He even teases her that she will have to soothe his sensitive nerves by repeating their sexual activities (251).

Only after Jess makes him confront his mother's portrait can he have sex with her, and only after confessing his abandonment to her and seeing it in a new light can he fully recover from his impotence and function as a father and a loving husband. The only path for healing his psychical impotence is through the affirmation of his feminine traits, those of his mother as a person instead of two opposing images.

Jessica can heal him because she manages to be both a sensual and affectionate love object for him. Jessica continues to contain the pure and profane: she laughs at his dirty stories, goads him on when he is fighting, insists on accompanying him to a wrestling match, and reads *Don Juan* to him. She even seduces him in their first sexual encounter. Throughout all that, she remains a lady, respectable and pure. She collapses his view of femininity, which allows him to accept his own femininity now that it has lost its problematic image.

Conclusion

The split image of Dain's mother made him see himself through the same lens. Since he identifies himself with her symbolic profanity, he himself became profane. Jessica returns to him the parts of his mother he maintained as pure. The integration of the two succeeds

once he accepts the profane in himself and transforms it from a lack to an integral part of himself. In psychoanalytic terms, he accepts his femininity and is able to mend his psyche. The structure of a romance novel compels the hero to be healed by the heroine. Therefore, Dain's encounter, courtship, and marriage to Jessica heal him as they fall in love. Jessica manages to contain both the pure and the profane and pushes Dain to experience a crisis.

Romance novels can serve as an optimistic thought experiment. This novel shows the ideal of healing psychical impotence and the divide of femininity into two discrete possibilities. His encounter with Jessica forces Dain to confront his trauma and the resulting worldview he holds. Jessica heals Dain by becoming a true love object. In this sense, psychoanalysis and the romance genre are in harmony. Love is a positive force for change because it frees the protagonists from social constraints and analysands from their own misconceptions that cause them pain. Dain can heal once he comes to terms with his mother and the lack she left in him. He adopts Jessica's values and defers to her judgment because he is confident enough in his masculinity to let femininity exist in him.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Prof. Shirley Zisser, Dr. Nir Evron, and Dr. Dara Barnat for providing guidance in the process of writing, editing, and refining this paper. I would also like to thank Dr. Spencer Morrison for his support. Thanks to Shira Aji and Liz Altshuler for numerous proofreadings.

Works Cited

"About the Romance Genre." *Romance Writers of America*, **https://www.rwa.org/about-romance-fiction**. Accessed 9 March 2023.

Allan, Jonathan A. "Gender and Sexuality." *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, edited by Jayashree Kamblé et al, Routledge, 2021, pp. 428–54.

—. "Healing Toxic Masculinity in *Sweatpants Season* by Danielle Allen." *New Frontiers in Popular Romance: Essays on the Genre in the 21st Century*, edited by Susan Fanetti, McFarland, 2022, pp. 17–30.

—. "Mourning and Sentimental Heroism in Maureen Child's *Lost in Sensation*." *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 53, no. 5, 2020, pp. 1160–78, **https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.12956**.

—. "Self-Improvement as Proof of Love in *The Bromance Book Club*." *The Routledge Companion to Romantic Love*, edited by Ann Brooks, McFarland, 2022, pp. 162–72.

Baruch, Elaine. *Women, Love, and Power: Literary and Psychoanalytic Perspectives*. New York UP, 1991, **https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9780814723371.001.0001**.

Bareket, Orly, et al. "The Madonna–Whore Dichotomy: Men Who Perceive Women's Nurturance and Sexuality as Mutually Exclusive Endorse Patriarchy and Show Lower Relationship Satisfaction." *Sex Roles*, vol. 79, 2018, pp. 519–32, **https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-018-0895-7**.

Cancian, Francesca M. "The Feminization of Love." *Signs*, vol. 11, no. 4, 1986, pp. 692–709. *JSTOR*, **http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174139**. Accessed 18 Mar. 2024.

Chase, Loretta. *Lord of Scoundrels*. HarperCollins Publishers, Inc. Adobe Acrobat Ebook ed., 2006.

Charura, Divine, and Stephen Paul, "What Has Love to do With It?" *Love and Therapy: In Relationship*, edited by Divine Charura and Stephen First ed., Routledge, 2018, **https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429476907**.

Fink, Bruce. *Lacan on Love: An Exploration of Lacan's Seminar VIII, Transference*. Polity Press, 2016.

Frantz, Sarah S. G. "'Expressing' Herself: The Romance Novel and the Feminine Will to Power." *Scorned Literature: Essays on the History and Criticism of Popular Mass-Produced Fiction in America*, edited by Lydia Cushman Shurman and Deidre Johnson, Greenwood, 2002, pp. 17–36.

Frantz, Sarah S. G., and Eric Murphy Selinger. Introduction. *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction: Critical Essays*, edited by Sarah S. G. Frantz and Eric Murphy Selinger, McFarland and Company, 2012, pp. 1–20.

Freud, Sigmund. "On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love." Translated by David Pierce. *Freud's Complete Works*, vol. 11, pp. 177–90, **http://math.msgsu.edu.tr/~dpierce/Texts/Freud/freud_debasement.pdf**.

Gammelgaard, Judy. "Love, Drive and Desire in the Works of Freud, Lacan and Proust." *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis,* vol. 92, no. 4, pp. 963–83, **https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-8315.2011.00355.x**.

Golan, Ruth. *Loving Psychoanalysis: Looking at Culture with Freud and Lacan*. Taylor & Francis Group, 2006. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, **http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/taudetail.action?docID=690240**.

Goldberg, Carl. "A Psychoanalysis of Love: The Patient with Deadly Longing." *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, vol. 53, no. 4, 1999, pp. 437–51, **https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.psychotherapy.1999.53.4.437**.

Golubov, Nattie. *El amor en tiempos neoliberales: apuntes críticos sobre la novela rosa contemporánea*. Bonilla Artigas Editores, 2017.

Hartmann, Uwe. "Sigmund Freud and His Impact on Our Understanding of Male Sexual Dysfunction." *The Journal of Sexual Medicine*, vol. 6, no. 8, 2009, pp. 2332–39, **https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1743-6109.2009.01332.x**.

Hewitson, Owen. "Reading 'On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love." *LacanOnline.Com*, 3 May 2010, **https://www.lacanonline.com/2010/05/reading-on-the-universal-tendency-to-debasement-in-the-sphere-of-love/**.

Holland, Norman N. "Psychoanalysis and Literature: Past and Present." *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, vol. 29, no. 1, 1993, pp. 5–21, **https://doi.org/10.1080/00107530.1993.10746788**.

Karandashev, Victor. *Romantic Love in Cultural Contexts.* Springer International Publishing Switzerland, 2017.

Krentz, Jayne Ann, editor. *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance*. U of Pennsylvania P, 1992.

Leafe, Erin, host. "The Power of the Romance Heroine Panel (Ft. Sarah MacLean, Adriana Herrera and Esi Sogah)." *Learning the Tropes*, season 2, episode 45, 2 Feb. 2023, **https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-power-of-the-romance-heroine-panel-ft/id1440272585?i=1000601138929**.

"*Lord of Scoundrels*." *Loretta Chase*, **https://lorettachase.com/lord-of-scoundrels**. Accessed 9 March 2023.

Miller, Jacques-Alain. "We Love the One Who Responds to Our Question: 'Who Am I?'" Interview with Hanna Waar. *Psychologies Magazine* [France] Oct. 2008, no.278, pp. 116–20. Translated by Adrian Price, *AMPBlog*, **http://ampblog2006.blogspot.com/2008/10/millerqui-suis-je.html**.

Nolan, Megan. "The Madonna–Whore Complex Is Still Alive in Straight Men, as I Know All Too Well from Dating Apps." *New Statesman*, vol. 150, no. 5607, 2021, p. 34.

Pearce, Lynne. **"Romance and Repetition: Testing the Limits of Love."** *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2011, pp. 1–14.

Regis, Pamela. *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*. U of Pennsylvania P, 2013. **https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812203103**.

Roach, Catherine M. *Happily Ever After: The Romance Story in Popular Culture*, Indiana UP, 2016. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, **http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/tau/detail.action?docID=4426689**.

Selinger, Eric Murphy. **"Rebooting the Romance: The Impact of A Natural History of the Romance Novel."** *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2013, pp. 1–5.

Teo, Hsu-Ming. "Love and Romance Novels." *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction,* edited by Jayashree Kamblé et al., Routledge, 2020, pp. 454–84. **https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315613468**.

Vivanco, Laura. "One Ring to Bind Them: Ring Symbolism in Popular Romance Fiction." *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction*, edited by Sarah S. G. Frantz and Eric Murphy Selinger, McFarland, 2012, pp. 99–107.

Vivanco, Laura, and Kyra Kramer. **"There Are Six Bodies in This Relationship: An Anthropological Approach to the Romance Genre."** *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2010, pp. 1-35.