Forever Isn't Long Enough to Love You: The Happy Ending as an Endorsement of Progressive Love in 21st Century Romance Fiction

An essay submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for graduation from the

Honors College at the College of Charleston

with a Bachelor of Arts in

English

Colleen Etman

May 2013

Advisor: Conseula Francis, PhD.
Associate Professor of English
College of Charleston

Why do people like romance novels? What is it about this one specific type of fiction that draws people in? Is it the fantastic settings, the characterizations, the emotion? The fact that romance as a whole is an immense and diverse genre, one that appeals to many different types of readers? Or is it the knowledge that a reader has, going in, that there will be a happy ending? Structurally speaking, a reader knows, right from the start, that their novel will end happily. Happy endings are an integral part of the romance novel, a guarantee for the readers that they are not wasting their time and emotional investment in a novel.

Romance novels are immensely popular. Even in the midst of a recession, people are still spending; sales from romance fiction totaled $1.368 billion in 2011 (RWA, "Industry Statistics"). In 2008, 74.8 million people read at least one romance novel (RWA, "Industry Statistics"). Romance fiction dominates the fiction market. The genre accounted for 14.3% of the fiction market in 2011, taking the largest portion of sales. The $1.368 billion dollars romance fiction accrued in 2011 is almost twice that of the next largest portion of the market, with religious and inspirational fiction coming in at a distant second with only $715 million (RWA, "Industry Statistics"). There are well over 150 writers on the Romance Writers of America's "honor roll," authors whose novels have appeared on numerous best-selling lists, including the esteemed *New York Times* bestsellers' list. Romance novels, according to the RWA, constantly "crowd" bestsellers' lists.

Romance readers, once drawn in, frequently return. According to a survey done by the Romance Writers of America, 75% of readers read either frequently or avidly. While the other 25% identified as more casual readers, they turn to romance fiction when they want to relax, such as when they are on vacation (RWA, "Reader Statistics"). Romance readers are also long-term fans; 41% of those surveyed responded that they had been romance readers for 20 years or

more, becoming life-long fans of the genre. What makes these fans so devoted? Why do they return, again and again, to a genre that can be formulaic? Why do they read so voraciously when they already know the ending?

What Makes Romance – And a Happy Ending?

How do we define romance fiction, other than as the most popular genre of fiction? The definition of a romance novel has been under much debate. Romance author and literature PhD Jennifer Crusie relates how at the turn of the century, the Romance Writers of America struggled to come up with a concise yet complete definition that would satisfy everyone – an impossibility, according to Crusie ("Defining the Romance Genre"). The definition the RWA came up with claims that a romance novel is comprised of two basic elements: "a central love story and an emotionally-satisfying and optimistic ending" (RWA, "About Romance").

A central love story, according to the RWA, means that the main plot of a romance novel is a story of two protagonists coming together in a courtship and eventual relationship. Pretty straightforward. What is not so straightforward, according to Crusie, was the definition of the "emotionally-satisfying and optimistic ending." Why not just a happy ending? When everyone thinks of a romance novel, they think of a happy ending, so why did an association like the Romance Writers of America neglect to use that wording? Crusie, who was a part of the definition process, claims that many on the committee did not want to exclude many great love stories that did not have precisely happy endings. Their big example was *Gone With the Wind*, classically defined as one of the greatest love stories of the 20th century, but which has more of a bittersweet ending than a truly happy one ("Defining the Romance Genre").

Crusie explains how the committee debated over the concept of a happy ending. While the happy ending is something that cannot be removed from a love story, it also defied the RWA's attempts to define it. You want the hero or heroine to be happy at the end, but as Crusie argues, you cannot have a "Disney ending" added to the end of a serious novel ("Defining the Romance Genre"). She argues that a good ending is one that makes the reader feel good at the end of the novel, though this is a nebulous concept. Some readers might feel good at the end of *Gone With the Wind*, while others may find the ending lacking. Crusie's definition edges towards the truth of the happy ending, but she also seems reticent to qualify it.

Even after that long and difficult struggle to come up with a good definition, Crusie admits that the committee was not going to satisfy everyone. What the committee might not realize, however, is just how many people they did not satisfy. The fact that the committee could not reconcile themselves to including a happy ending in their definition turns off many readers. When queried, readers and writers alike (quite angrily) insisted that a happy ending was integral to a romance novel[1]. An ending that is "emotionally-satisfying and optimistic" does not cut it for many readers – you need the happy ending. You are not reading a romance novel solely for emotional satisfaction, and you want more than "optimistic," these readers and writers argue. You read a romance novel because the ending will be *happy*.

Crusie and the committee did build a good base for a definition of a romance novel, but clearly their definition was not amenable to many readers or writers. They were correct in boiling down the definition to two elements, but they do romance fiction a disservice by

[1] When discussing the RWA definition, the question of whether or not a romance novel without a happy ending is possible was posited to a Listserv for Scholars and Teachers of Romance Fiction. Many members of the listserv responded that it was not possible. Several mentioned the RWA's attempts to come up with an inclusive definition but did not agree with what the RWA came up with, stating that a happy ending was a necessity.

excluding the happy ending. A more satisfying definition of a romance novel would be a novel whose central plot is a love story and whose ending is defined by the protagonists coming together as a couple, with an indication that they will remain together. This definition provides more specificity than the RWA's "optimistic ending" or Crusie's claim that a romance novel should make a reader feel good. This definition pins down just what it is that readers are searching for in a romance novel – love being realized and commitment being ensured.

Still, the committee's inclusion of emotionally-satisfying, though it complicates what should be a simple issue, also has some merit. Emotional satisfaction is an important component of a romance novel; this concept is what Crusie is referring to when she says that a novel should make the reader feel good. Crusie briefly brings up emotional satisfaction on her website for readers. She defines it as "a less grandiose" version of emotional justice, the belief that good things happen to good people. But emotional satisfaction is more than that. It is a connection to the characters and events happening in a novel, where the reader becomes genuinely emotionally involved. Emotional satisfaction comes in two parts, catharsis and payoff. Here, catharsis is when the reader can relate to the characters on an emotional level. The struggles and victories of the characters resonate with the reader, and produce an emotional reaction similar to if the reader had experienced these same things. Thus when a person reads a romance novel, they can vicariously experience the emotions of the characters, while also feeling real emotions due to their connection to the story. When they reach the happy ending, they are not only happy because the characters are happy, but also because their emotional connection has been given them a real sense of emotional fulfillment and happiness.

This reward – the payoff – is crucial to make the catharsis worth the reader's time. Payoff is when the reader's investment in a book – time, money, becoming emotionally involved

with these characters – is rewarded. This is integral; a reader who invested in and connected with a character, only to have them fail to achieve a happy ending, will be put off and disappointed. They are betrayed when their investment does not pay off. One of the main ways a reader receives a payoff is with Crusie's idea of emotional justice, where good things happen to good people, and bad things happen to bad people. In the end, the hero and heroine find love, get good jobs, have a happy family environment, etc., while the antagonist receives their comeuppance. The reader can rejoice for the protagonists who have received their rewards, while delighting in the well-deserved suffering of the villains.

These components are integral to have an emotionally-satisfying ending, but go somewhat beyond what the committee envisioned. While these definitions discard stories such as *Gone With the Wind*, readers are okay with this – *Gone With the Wind* is not a romance, but a love story, two distinctly separate things. The indication that the protagonists have come together and will remain together is what makes the novel worth reading for many romance fans. It gives the readers payoff, to know that all the energy they (and the characters) have invested has been worth it.

So what does this definition say about readers of the romance genre? Obviously, they care very much about their happy endings, to the point of excluding novels that do not meet these requirements. Romance readers are fairly open; they do not require, for example, heterosexual love in their stories. The protagonists do not need to enter into a traditional marriage to satisfy the definition, they only need to be together in a committed relationship with the expectation that their romance will live on. A romance novel could tell the story of a homosexual couple that stays together despite society's restrictions on marriage, or even a progressive heterosexual couple that disregards the traditional notion of marriage. Some novels end with the couple

engaged, some with them buying a house together. As long as the couple will stay together when the book is closed, readers are happy with the ending.

But if the definition that most satisfies romance readers is so open, why is the genre itself so stereotypically closed? While there are publishers and subgenres that focus on same-sex love, the vast majority of romance novels feature heterosexual protagonists entering into a very heteronormative relationship. Many novels feature marriage as either a major plot point or the ending, and those that feature marriage as a plot point also frequently end with the heroine pregnant or a new mother. This is not to say, of course, that a romance novel cannot feature marriage as a plot point; one major trope of romance fiction is the marriage of convenience. And if a large majority of readers are heterosexual and wish for a heterosexual love story, why should they not receive it? Marriage and motherhood are not negative situations, and novels that espouse these are not inherently negative.

It is only when happy endings, and romance novels in general, feature outdated, stereotypical ideas about marriage and motherhood – and women in general – that they become problematic. The vast majority of readers are female; according to the RWA, 91% of romance readers are women ("Reader Statistics"). So when these novels are almost exclusively marketed towards women, and when these novels feature distressingly sexist ideas, it seems like romance fiction can be a detriment to a progressive, feminist society.

By focusing critical attention on the "happy endings" of romance novels, we can see that outdated ideas about what women want – marriage, motherhood, romance, to the exclusion of all else – are still pervasive in our society. When a novel features a poorly done happy ending, it enforces outdated beliefs that hold women back. Some of these novels assume that what a

woman really wants is marriage, not a promotion, and that she cannot have both. Others argue that a woman cannot be satisfied by her career, friends, and family, without a grand romance, or that having a cat is not as good as having children would be. These assumptions are harmful, and often pervasive in the romance fiction genre.

However, happy endings in romance novels are not all poorly done. When done properly, a happy ending celebrates the positivity in life, and gives hope for a brighter future. A happy ending can celebrate a strong, powerful woman getting romance in her life, without detracting from everything else she has to celebrate. If done well, these novels can expose outdated ideas while also providing a progressive love story for readers to enjoy. These novels feature progressive ideals like equality, where neither character has greater power over the other, without sacrificing a belief in true love. They show compromise without domination, sacrifice without destruction, and a love story that celebrates two individuals becoming one. This is what romance novels – specifically their happy endings – can give to readers.

Methodology

To get a better idea of how romance novels treat the concept of happily ever after, we need to take a closer look at novels from different subgenres. There are many different types of romance novels and subgenres that cater to different niches. As the Romance Writers of America put it, “whether you enjoy contemporary dialogue, historical settings, mystery, thrillers or any number of other themes, there's a romance novel waiting for you!” Romance novels follow a basic structural format, and all tell a love story, but they are not all the same novel; there are all sorts of romance subgenres, designed to appeal to all sorts of readers, giving romance fiction a very broad appeal.

However, despite the fact that there are so many different types, all romance novels can be broken down into two broad categories: historical romance and contemporary romance. Historical romance is romance whose setting is an era of the past, be it prehistoric, medieval, Victorian, or (very) early 20th century. Generally, the most important aspect of a historical romance is a sense of romance and nostalgia, and thus a historical romance cannot take place in an era readers could have lived through. Therefore it is not likely to have a historical romance set in the 1950s, as there are still readers alive who have lived through an era. Most historicals take place before the start of the 20th century. Historicals may take different forms, from a soft historical, which takes a nostalgic setting and no more, to a strong historical, which would use actual events and people from a time period to create a realistic, fully immersive experience.

Contemporary romance, on the other hand, is set in the here and now. Contemporary romance takes place in a modern-day setting (this varies by the date published) and reflects modern situations. Contemporary romances generally reflect changing times and social upheaval experienced by the writers and readers, giving them something familiar to relate to. The situations in these novels reflect more progressive ideas than most historicals, and often try to respond to criticism that romance is outdated and anti-feminist by proving that some situations allow for a feminist, progressive heroine dealing with modern, realistic situations. These novels can also be easier for a writer, as they do not have the pressure of historical accuracy. While historical writers need to establish the parameters of their historical setting for the readers, a contemporary writer can assume that the reader will be familiar with the setting.

While all romance novels fall into one of these broad categories, they are not necessarily defined by these categories. There are, of course, pure historicals and pure contemporaries, novels who have no other defining characteristics than their setting. These novels do not fit into

any specific sub-genre. However, there are also sub-genres with specific characteristics, such as paranormal romance, inspirational romance, and African-American romance.

The different subgenres all have the standard formula of a love story and happy ending, but may add different elements to satisfy their particular criteria. For example, an inspirational romance will have a major religious plot, often centered around one (or both) character's conversion. African-American romance always features an African-American heroine. Paranormal romance often features a type of bonding or the concept of life mates. These additional elements are not intended to detract from the love story, but rather add a new level of experience to the story. Ultimately, what draws readers is that standard story – the courtship and happy ending, guaranteed for any romance novel, no matter the subgenre.

For our purposes, we will focus on different subgenres and the way these novels portray both good and bad happy endings. At the least, one would expect a historical romance to have more outdated ideals than a contemporary, given that historicals are set in less progressive times than the present. Going off that logic, contemporaries would have more appealing endings, eschewing stereotypical and outdated conventions for a new happy ending. In theory, this makes sense; in practice, however, this is not always true. Some historicals give the heroine more of a voice, while some contemporaries shut the heroine down. Therefore it can be interesting to look at how a variety of subgenres, from historical and contemporary to more specific genres like paranormal, inspirational, and African-American, can manage a good happy ending versus an unsatisfying happy ending.

I will look at five novels from five different subgenres: a pure historical, Mary Jo Putney's *Thunder and Roses* (2002); a pure contemporary, Jennifer Crusie's *Strange Bedpersons*

(1994); Francine Rivers' historical inspirational *Redeeming Love* (1997); a historical African-American romance, *Midnight* by Beverly Jenkins (2010); and lastly, *Love Bites*, a contemporary paranormal romance written by Lynsay Sands (2004). We will be evaluating both the effectiveness of the happy ending structurally and how satisfying the ending is. This is fairly subjective, as the quality of satisfying is itself a very subjective quality. In order to make this more objective, several categories based off of standard definitions will be used to evaluate each book – concepts drawn from Crusie and the RWA like emotional justice, catharsis, and payoff, as well as concepts that were defined for this project, like character (and reader) vulnerability and compromise.

These five novels were chosen with an eye to the genre as a whole. Three of the five authors selected are on the RWA's Honor Roll, meaning they have appeared on the *New York Times*, *Publishers Weekly*, or *USA Today's* best-selling lists. The books are all fairly recent, all five published in the last twenty years. They are not wholly representative of the romance genre; the romance genre is so large and diverse that a far larger sample size would be needed. However, these five novels are a good indication of larger values of the genre, and serve as useful examples of ways romance novels can use the convention of the happy ending in ways that support and uplift the genre, or in ways that reinforce outdated notions and hold romance fiction back.

Structurally Speaking

In order to understand how the happy ending functions as a part of the romance novel, you need to have an understanding of the basic structure of romance novels. Not many people

are talking about the structure of romance novels.[2] Perhaps this is because romance novels are seen as formulaic – what is there to talk about structurally when every romance novel has the same structure? However, while romance novels are comprised of similar elements, they are not all the same. There are basic elements that every novel must consist of, but the manner in which they are arranged can vary widely. This allows for romance novels to appeal to a wide variety of readers, who wish for different scenarios in their fiction.

Obviously structure is a huge part of romance fiction. When coming up with a definition for romance novels, the RWA defined them structurally – a central love plot and a happy ending. The most concise way to define an entire genre hinged upon a basic formula. Every romance novel must have a love story as its main plot, and it must have a happy ending. Pam Regis, who wrote the essential scholarly text on romance fiction – *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (2003) – spends some time discussing the structure of a romance novel. Regis' definition of a romance novel hinges upon the same elements as the RWA's definition, though she phrases it differently. In Regis' definition, a romance novel consists of a courtship and a betrothal. While this phrasing can be a bit problematic – how do we treat a novel where there is no betrothal – it seems to underscore the point that the best way to define a romance novel is by its structure.

However, Regis' definition can be more useful if some of the phrasing could be changed. Rather than using the term betrothal as a definition of a happy ending, which limits romance

[2] People are talking about romance novels – but most seem to be defending the romance genre against a shadow villain, a vague cultural perception that romance novels are bad for society. Many romance novelists have written critical work about the merits of romance fiction, even as they seem unable to pin down a concrete antagonist for their arguments. This paper will not be about this conversation. For more on this conversation, see Jennifer Crusie's essay "You Go, Romance Writer: Changing the Public Opinion," Pam Regis' *Natural History of the Romance Novel* or several other writers' arguments, seen in the collection of essays titled *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women* edited by romance author Jayne Ann Krentz.

novels to only those which contain a marriage or engagement, a more neutral term should be used. Regis' definition does not explicitly demand a marriage; her definition calls for rather a romantic commitment – she argues that "in romance novels from the last quarter of the twentieth century marriage is not necessary" – but her phrasing limits her definition (38). A better way to phrase it would be to call it a commitment – a coming together of the hero and heroine in a way that connotes that they will remain together long-term past the end of the novel.

Another structural element that Regis discusses is the "point of ritual death," the point at which it seems most possible that the hero and heroine will not end up together, when the promised happy ending seems "absolutely impossible" (35). With a romance novel, readers know that they are going to get a happy ending. However, at the point of ritual death – or climactic crisis – something happens to separate the hero and heroine and it seems as though they may not be able to come back together. This something can be as straightforward as a kidnapping or illness or some other crisis that separates the hero and heroine physically, forcing them to keep their love alive even as they cannot be together. In other cases, however, the climactic crisis is more internal, where personality differences, miscommunications, or poor choices on the characters' part keep them apart.

This is the point that can separate a great novel from a poor novel. If the author can make the reader believe that there truly is a chance the protagonists will not end up together, the novel is deemed a success. Readers have a guaranteed happy ending in their hands, but a well done climactic crisis can shake the faith, make them worry about what they are getting in to. Some readers skip ahead to the end of the novel to ensure that they are not wasting their time, so that when they get to the crisis they can rest easy, knowing that it will not last forever. They have a guarantee. Others put their trust in the unspoken agreement that is the basis of the romance

genre – that there will be a happy ending, that the time a reader puts in to the novel will pay off with a happy ending.

There are other aspects of the romance novel's structure that merit a mention. Though a romance novel is primarily a courtship and a commitment, there are various other elements that form the story. The protagonists meet and fall in love. At some point, one or both of the characters will make a confession, a declaration of their love. In many cases, the characters will be forced together in some way, made to spend time together in a way that draws them closer and reinforces (or in some cases, sparks) their relationship. In a secular romance, there is usually a point of consummation, where the two protagonists come together sexually. In Christian romance, this aspect is almost always removed, but it is a common component for a mainstream romance.

However, despite a common set of components, romance novels are not one-size-fits-all. Romance novels are not always boy-meets-girl, fall in love, confession, climactic crisis, and finally commitment. There are a number of ways to combine these elements, different orders, different manifestations of crises and confessions that belie the perception that romance novels are all the same.

The Hathaways series, by Lisa Kleypas, tells the stories of five siblings and their loves. These siblings – the Hathaways – find love in stories that utilize these common structural elements but in widely different ways. These novels are fairly conventional historical novels: set in Victorian England, these siblings are newly a part of the upper classes; the one brother is a viscount and a dashing rake; the four sisters are unconventional beauties who exist outside of the narrow confines of the *ton* (upper-class British society). However, Kleypas sets the novels apart

by writing compelling stories, believable characters, and using the structure of the novel in a variety of ways. These five books are not all the same, even as they tell very similar stories. Three of the books in particular showcase how this approach of using a common structure – utilizing elements like the meeting, courtship, confession, consummation and commitment – can result in different stories.

Tempt Me At Twlight (2009) tells the story of Poppy, the fourth Hathaway sibling. In a family of unconventional people, all Poppy desires is a quiet, normal life. She hopes to marry a nice, if a bit boring, gentleman, and retire to the countryside with him for a nice, if a bit boring, life. More than that, though, she desires acceptance – something that her family has never achieved in high society. All of Poppy's aspirations come to naught, however, when she ends up married to a mysterious hotel owner, Harry Rutledge. Harry is not only a commoner, but he is the opposite of Poppy's prior suitor – rather than a nice, quiet gentleman, Harry is a ruthless business man, used to controlling everyone and everything around him. Harry desires Poppy, and decides he wants to marry her, so he tricks her into a compromising situation, forcing her to marry him or be ruined. Not realizing what he has done, she agrees to marry him and try to make the best of her situation. When she finds out what Harry did to force her into marrying him, however, all bets are off. She becomes a stronger character, fighting for her place in their marriage.

Harry and Poppy's meeting happens at the beginning of the book, when Poppy gets lost in the hotel where she lives, which Harry owns. She has no clue who he is, though he recognizes her immediately, having watched her in the past. After their meeting, Poppy is happy to finally put a face to the mysterious man, but Harry is up to no good; he is already plotting how to force

her into marriage. For Harry, having Poppy's love is completely unimportant; he simply hopes to possess her.

Interestingly, in Poppy's novel, the commitment does not happen at the end, but rather early on in the story. Poppy and Harry have a forced marriage, rather than a love match. Knowing that she is consigning herself to a lifetime without love, Poppy nevertheless agrees to marry Harry because it is the best answer to a difficult situation. At this point, she knows that he has tricked her, but it is too late to change her mind – they are literally at the church for the ceremony. So, fairly early in the story, the two are married, irrevocably connected. However, the usual follow-up to marriage in a historical novel, the consummation, does not happen for a while. As a result of Harry's duplicity, Poppy does not feel like she can give of herself in such a personal manner, and Harry, both uncharacteristically for the time period and uncharacteristic of his ruthless character, does not force his marital right. Instead, they grow closer together as a result of living together. Poppy eventually forms an attachment to Harry, worrying over his unhealthy habits and trying to take care of him. The two form a tenuous friendship.

When they eventually do consummate their marriage, it becomes a major part of the climactic crisis. Poppy is physically hurt as a result of her deflowering, and Harry leaves her rather than cause her any more pain. Confused by his seeming rejection, Poppy flees to her family. This separation seems as though it may destroy what little hope their marriage had, but Poppy uses the time apart to clarify her feelings. Realizing she loves Harry, she resolves to fix their marriage. When he comes after her, she makes her confession. While Harry is afraid to admit his love, he is touched by her confession and they grow closer together.

The other major crisis that happens in this novel is more physical. Having made considerable progress toward a healthy relationship, Poppy and Harry's marriage is still strained by his inability to admit his love. However, everything changes when he is kidnapped by an enemy. Refusing to sit back and let the men handle the situation, Poppy goes to rescue him herself, along with her brother and one of Harry's trusted servants. When she finds him, he is overcome by how much he does actually love her. He confesses his love, which is the ultimate end of the novel. The two have come together, but in a slightly unconventional way. The process of the novel is inverted by having the commitment before the confession, allowing Kleypas to tell a different story. Even though the common structural elements are used, the fact that a writer can rearrange the story allows for diversity.

Another of the Hathaway novels, 2010's *Married by Morning*, is in some ways more conventional than Poppy and Harry's story. This novel is the story of Leo, the eldest Hathaway sibling and the Viscount Ramsay. Leo's story has elements of tragedy, as both protagonists have a chillingly depressing backstory. However, they are able to come together and use their love for each other to overcome their pasts and find a happy future.

Leo's story starts off interestingly, as he does not meet his heroine in the beginning of the novel. Leo has known Cat, the female protagonist, for two novels already. Catherine Marks has been the governess and companion to his younger sisters for several years by the time *Married by Morning* takes place. Obviously, this scenario is possible because it is a series of books, which assumes that the reader is familiar with the other novels and would therefore recognize continuing characters. However, the continuing connection between Cat and Leo, which has been building for several novels now, allows for an interesting story line.

The two protagonists are extremely antagonistic, constantly bickering in a way that is supposed to connote sexual tension – and succeeds. Leo is a supposedly heartless rake, doing what he wishes with no regards for societal values, especially when it comes to women. Cat is a stick in the mud manhater, who constantly derides Leo for his caddish ways. However, when you learn the backstories for each, you realize that there is much more to each character. Leo was an idealist before he became a viscount. He trained as an architect and has an artist's soul. He was engaged to a local girl and looking forward to a happy and simple life, when tragedy struck. His fiancée died of scarlet fever, and Leo lost all hope and sense of the good in life. He began to drink and take opium in an effort to forget, and only ended up hurting himself and his family. Though Leo has turned over a new leaf, he does not attempt to hide his checkered past. This is why Cat hates him – for what he has done in the past in an attempt to forget – because she does not know what is in his past.

Cat also has a tragic backstory. She is an illegitimate child, the daughter of a whore. In an unexpected twist, Cat's erstwhile mother is also the mother of Harry from *Tempt Me At Twilight*, and the two have a difficult relationship. Cat's mother died when Cat was a child, leaving her in the care of her aunt and grandmother, who run a brothel. Cat knows nothing of their true occupation, but when she reaches puberty, her aunt reveals that she will soon work in the brothel. Due to Cat's beauty, she will make a large sum of money when her grandmother sells her virginity. Distraught, Cat runs away to a boarding school under an assumed name, and, when she graduates from the school, becomes a governess. She becomes a harsher person because of her experiences, but deep down yearns for closer connections with people. She becomes very close with the Hathaway sisters when she becomes their governess and is

extremely devoted to their family, with the exception of Leo, with whom she has a confrontational relationship.

Cat and Leo's story begins several books earlier, but really takes off at the end of *Tempt Me At Twilight*, when the fraternal relationship between Harry and Cat is revealed. Leo is determined to uncover Cat's history, while she is terrified to have her past revealed. The sexual tension between the two of them increases to a fever pitch, culminating when Cat runs away. The two are then forced to spend time in isolation together when Leo follows her. At this point, their relationship is consummated, and Leo attempts to convince Cat to marry him. This is not, however, either a commitment or a confession, because the problems between the two are unresolved. Leo says nothing of love, focusing only on the attraction between them. Cat refuses his proposal, not wanting to enter into a shallow relationship with someone who had until very recently been an enemy.

There is a long period where Leo attempts to woo Cat, though in a surprisingly non-romantic way. Instead, he attempts to break down her barriers with friendship, taking her to an oculist to find new glasses for their "first date." They are coming closer and closer together, when the climactic crisis occurs and it seems that they will be separated forever. Cat is kidnapped by her aunt, who attempts to force her back into prostitution. Leo and Harry band together to rescue her, but the situation seems dire. When the two find her, she is high on opium and in a dangerous situation. At this point, Leo finally makes his confession – that he loves Cat and will do anything to keep her safe and happy, just so long as she will have him. The confession is particularly entertaining in this case because there are prostitutes from the brothel watching and sighing at the romantic situation.

This occurs very close to the end of the novel, and this is the definite climax. The novel winds down quickly after this point, as Cat and Leo come together in love. Both have admitted their love and agree to marry. Their commitment is agreed upon, and the novel ends with a poignant epilogue showing that Cat has given birth to twins. This situation is very typical of the genre, as they come together in a fairly straightforward manner. However, the situations can be played with, as Kleypas does when she somewhat mocks Leo's confession (through the mouths of the prostitutes). The situation is very different from Poppy and Harry's story, even though they contain the same plot elements. The elements are in different orders, with Poppy and Harry committing very early on in their book, whereas Leo and Cat do not commit until their book's conclusion. Both novels show how a relationship can progress through these common elements without following a formulaic path. These novels are about different characters going through the common experience of finding love, but in their own unique ways. Both, however, are satisfying novels, as Kleypas does a good job making her characters relatable, and her situations, while somewhat unrealistic and outrageous, are poignant.

However, some novels can use these same elements, but fall somewhat short of the mark when it comes to a romance. Kleypas' final Hathaway novel, *Love in the Afternoon* (2010), breaks with the pattern of the earlier books. Most obviously, the title is different – all the other novels are alliterative, but this one is not "Love in Late Afternoon" or "Amour in the Afternoon." On the surface, this story uses a similar pattern to Leo and Cat's, following a straightforward order of the story elements. Beatrix, the youngest Hathaway sister, is different from the rest of the family and society. She is an outsider, but in this novel still manages to find love. Christopher, her paramour, had previously derided her as an outcast, someone not fit to be a part of the *ton*. But when he goes to fight in the Crimean War, Beatrix writes to him in the guise of

another woman, who had been his suitor. Beatrix and Christopher fall in love through letters, their relationship deepening, only to end when Beatrix grows too guilty over the deception.

Christopher eventually returns from war determined to reconnect with the woman from his letters, only to find out that she wrote nothing. He is still derisive of Beatrix, but eventually she wins him over with her patience and calming nature, a huge benefit to his undiagnosed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. They end up marrying, and working through his PTSD in the early stages of their marriage. The novel ends when Christopher receives a medal from the Queen for his valiant efforts in the war.

The characters do not have a meeting in this novel, because at the beginning it is established that they are already acquainted. However, unlike Leo and Cat in prior books, Christopher is never properly introduced to the reader. When the reader enters and first meets Christopher's character, he and Beatrix already have some sort of a relationship, antagonistic as it may be. Their courtship is endearing, but too short, as it is told almost exclusively through letters in the prologue and first three chapters, less than fifty pages of a 330 page book. There is still a climactic crisis, when Christopher returns and discovers that the woman he had been corresponding with was actually Beatrix. He grows angry, and it is revealed that the war has made him ruthless. The reader feels a sense of trepidation, as Christopher implies he will make Beatrix pay for making a fool of him.

However, the crisis ends almost anticlimactically and fairly early in the book. Christopher seems to forgive Beatrix very easily, and their marriage is a smooth progression. There are no difficulties at their wedding, and their marriage is consummated with ease. When they confess their love for each other, it is less of a huge moment of declaration than a simple

expression of fact. They have reached their commitment, their happy ending – and it should be satisfying for the reader. The only problem is, at this point the reader is no more than halfway through the book, and there is still a lot of story to happen. The remainder of the story focuses on Christopher's PTSD and dealing with the aftermath of the war. This is a compelling story, and a good historical look at the Crimean War and the fact that Victorian society did not fully understand the ramifications of warfare, and the traumatic effects on the soldiers. However, this is not romance.

Despite the fact that *Love in the Afternoon* uses the same elements as *Tempt Me At Twilight* and *Married by Morning* – the same elements that every romance novel should have – the fact that the story continues after the commitment and confession tends to dilute the effect of the happy ending. The happy ending does not come when Beatrix and Christopher have realized their love and come together in marriage, but when Christopher finally shows some signs of overcoming his trauma. The main focus of a romance novel is supposed to be a love story. This is the fundamental truth of romance fiction. This novel, though it tries to be a romance, becomes a psychological novel rather than a romance through its focus on war and trauma.

Though all these novels use their own arrangement of the standard romance story structural elements, they share one fundamental truth – the happy ending is crucial to each of these stories. A reader wants to know that Harry and Poppy will reconcile after their fight, and that Harry will be rescued from his kidnapper. They want to know that Cat will be saved from prostitution and that Leo will find love again. To have gone through so much story, so much emotion with these characters, and to have the ending not follow through would be devastating. The reader has opened themselves up, made themselves vulnerable in their emotional connection to the novel. If Harry and Poppy had never realized their love, and spent the rest of their lives in

an affectionate but ultimately empty marriage, the reader would be let down. If Cat had been raped and Leo unable to save her, the reader would be distraught. The reader needs the happy ending to reward their own vulnerability and emotional connection.

The happy ending makes or breaks a novel – these stories are compelling, but ultimately meaningless to a reader without the crucial ending. When Beatrix and Christopher reach their happy ending early on, and the novel continues, it seems to drag on. What story is there left to tell after the happy ending? As a historical novel, it is great, but for someone who thinks that they are reading a romance, to have their expectations denied when the novel does not end with their "happy ending," really changes the experience of reading. Reader expectations for romance novels hinge on that happy ending – the love conquers all, happily ever after, ride off into the sunset happy ending.

Thunder and Roses

Thunder and Roses, written by Mary Jo Putney in 2002, is a pure historical romance. Set in Regency England and Wales, the novel toes the line between a soft historical – where the only historical element is the setting – and a stronger historical, with real historical events and people. In some ways, the novel dismisses historical concerns and just uses the time as a pretty backdrop. At times, however, real events are made note of – for instance, one of the characters is a soldier fighting in the Napoleonic Wars, and a real marker of time is given when Napoleon's surrender is announced during a party the characters are attending. A major concern of the novel is also the social anxiety of changing times with the industrialization of a coal mine.

The novel tells the story of Nicholas Davies, the Earl of Aberdare, and Clare Morgan, a local schoolteacher. Nicholas is half-Gypsy and has a somewhat shady past, so the local town

calls him the "Demon Earl." Everyone there is afraid of him, but when the village is in danger, Clare knows there is no one else she can turn to. She attempts to blackmail Nicholas into helping her by forcing him to honor a promise made to her father, Nicholas' first teacher. However, Nicholas does not care about honor and instead makes a Faustian bargain with her – he will help her for a price. She thinks he will demand her virtue, but he surprises her by choosing something "so shocking she would flatly refuse to consider doing it" (Putney 20). He will help the village only if she agrees to live with him and let the whole town think they are lovers. This would force Clare to give up her pure reputation in the town, but she decides that helping the village is worth more than her reputation.

The problem in the village that needs solving is the local mine, the only major source of employment. The mine is old and outdated, using dangerous methods that could easily be updated. In addition, the manager of the mine skimps on safety features to make more money. It is only a matter of time before catastrophe strikes, and Clare knows well the tragedy of the mine – it is where her father died. Nicholas agrees to try to fix the mine, but cannot overstep his boundaries; although the mine technically belongs to him, it has been leased to someone else. Instead, he agrees to open a new source of employment by creating a slate quarry nearby. When Clare sees how well he is taking this, she proposes leaving him, saying that he does not need her assistance and he clearly has ideas and passion for helping the village. Nicholas swears that if she leaves he will do nothing.

The distress of living with Nicholas wears down on Clare. He is sensual and wicked, and she tries to remain pure. Nicholas is determined to seduce Clare, although he cannot pin down the reason for his determination. He knows he wants to bed her, but he also wants to make her his mistress so she will stay with him. He does not even once consider marriage – a disastrous

marriage in his past has sworn him off. However, he desires Clare's companionship and is terrified at the thought of losing her. For Clare, the most tempting thing Nicholas has to offer is not his body, but his friendship. She has long been lonely in the village, and Nicholas understands her like nobody else. He attempts to wear down her resistance by taking her to London, removing her from stiff and disapproving Wales. In London, disaster nearly strikes several times; Nicholas is attacked by a former friend, and Clare nearly gives in to his seduction. Rattled, they return to Wales and try to fix their relationship, but it is off-kilter.

Catastrophe does then strike when the mine explodes, and one of Nicholas' friends is missing and presumed dead. He blames himself for the tragedy, claiming that if he had paid half as much attention to the mine as he did to seducing Clare, this would not have happened. Seeing him so hurt, Clare has a moment of clarity – she loves Nicholas, and she will do whatever it takes to comfort him. When she proceeds to give herself to him, it is not because of his seduction but rather a gift of her love, a "sharing of flesh and spirit [that] was the truest act she had ever done" (Putney 292). The next morning, Nicholas decides they must marry, but Clare is wary because of his former hatred of marriage. Nicholas talks her into it, but says nothing of love; he is still afraid to love and, though he appreciates Clare and cares about her, does not want a loving marriage. Though Nicholas promises fidelity, Clare knows that she will have to "accept the fact that [Nicholas] would be marrying [her] without love" (Putney 298).

On their honeymoon, they are attacked again and nearly killed. They return to Aberdare and attempt to solve the mystery of who is trying to kill them. Nicholas decides the attack was plotted by his former friend, and decides to confront him. However, when they meet in a deserted location, they find themselves both walking into a trap, as the manager of the mine had been pitting them against each other and was determined to murder both. Clare shows up in an

attempt to stop a duel and finds herself in the midst of a murder about to occur. In a moment of panic, Nicholas realizes he does love her, and that she cannot be killed; he claims that it is "remarkable how the prospect of death focuses the mind" (Putney 376). He tells her that he loves her and that he "should have said so sooner" (Putney 360). He then attempts to fight off their attackers. In the ensuing scuffle, Clare receives a surface wound from a bullet, but will recover.

Nicholas resolves his struggle with his former friend, and realizes that love has not abandoned him after all. He learns that his mother had not abandoned him for mercenary reasons, but to ensure that he would have a good life. Clare has brought him reconciliation with his past, and he now can trust in his future. Though he previously feared love, he knows that with Clare, once he had her love she "would never betray [him]" (Putney 276). He tells Clare he loves her and is willing to receive her love, and the two can now live happily ever after. The epilogue for the novel reveals that Clare is pregnant, and that she will soon "tell Nicholas that she was almost sure that the next Gypsy Earl was on the way" (Putney 380).

This novel's ending is satisfying, in large part because of the gender roles and relations throughout the story. Clare is by nature a passive person; she is a practicing Methodist, a schoolteacher, and someone known for her peaceful nature. Nicholas, on the other hand, is perceived to be masterful and controlling. When they come together, however, each brings unique strengths to the relationship. Clare stands up for herself to Nicholas, and constantly defies his expectations. She is a spitfire at times, refusing to be cowed by his title or his brooding personality. At one point, she even reveals that she thinks "women are the equal of men," a very progressive opinion for the novel's setting (Putney 380). Over time, it is also revealed that Nicholas' brooding façade hides an easy-going nature, and he is willing to let Clare

lead when she needs to. Their consummation really shows this dynamic. Nicholas is constantly trying to seduce Clare, but when it comes right down to it, he cannot force her to do anything she does not want to. When they finally do consummate their relationship, Clare is the active one. She initiates this move, telling him that she is "willing now"; rather than being acted upon she is actively making choices herself (Putney 290). She ultimately makes the choice that her love for Nicholas is strong enough to warrant the sacrifice of her virginity. He does not take anything from her but what she gives freely.

Another major component of the novel that is satisfying is the emotional connection to the characters. Nicholas is a good man, but one who has been hurt repeatedly in his life, and thus tries to make himself a bad man. He cannot succeed, however, because deep down he is still a good man. He thinks he was abandoned by every person who should have loved him – his Gypsy mother sold him to his abusive grandfather; his grandfather never loved him because he was half-Gypsy; his first wife cheated on him with everyone, including his grandfather; and in the end, even his close friend abandoned him. He turns away from love not because he does not want it, but rather because he wants it so desperately, yet finds himself unworthy. He knows that he needs Clare, and comes to rely on her for emotional fulfillment, but claims that he wants her "not as a mistress, but … as a friend" (Putney 218). When, in the end, Nicholas realizes he can love and that he does not need to be afraid of Clare's love, it is an extremely touching moment. Nicholas also redeems his past by reconnecting with his friend and learning the truth about his mother – she never touched the money from his grandfather, but left him there because she was dying and wanted Nicholas to have a good life.

Clare is a less purely emotional character, but her growth throughout the novel is also impressive. At the beginning, she struggles with the burden of being the preacher's daughter and

finding herself lacking in faith. She does not fit in with her village and, while she has good friends, has no one she can truly confide in. She finds a friend in Nicholas, but still holds herself apart. When she realizes her love for Nicholas, however, she claims it is as if her soul clicks into place, "an inward wrenching, a splintering of fears and doubts" that brings "not fragmentation, but breathtaking wholeness" (Putney 290). Her love for Nicholas allows her to overcome her spiritual failings because it fills her with a love she has never felt before; "feeling unloved by her earthly father," Clare had a hard time accepting any form of love, but "admitting her love for Nicholas had opened the gates to her heart" (Putney 293). Somewhat less than Nicholas' fear of love, Clare still struggled with her sense that her father did not love her. When she falls in love with Nicholas, she no longer feels unworthy of being loved and becomes whole as a person.

Both of these characters are so touching because of how they deal with their insecurities. Both characters struggle to find themselves worthy of love, but in different ways. This allows Putney to show depths of character in different ways, even though she is using typical romance conventions. They are terrified of being vulnerable at the same time that they so desperately want to be open to love. Nicholas, who was once open and free, was burned and now determined to never open himself up to that kind of pain again. But because he is innately a loving soul, he eventually makes himself vulnerable to Clare. Clare finds peace much more quickly than Nicholas, and at that point she is able to start giving peace to Nicholas. When the two characters realize that the love they have for each other does not limit them, but instead frees them and opens them up to more love, it is a touching portrayal of human nature.

The justice in this novel is also very satisfying. Emotionally speaking, good things happen for the good characters. Nicholas and Clare find love and get married, fix the mine and therefore find acceptance in the village, and are even expecting a child. In a more pure sense of

justice, however, it is extremely satisfying to see the manager of the mine get his comeuppance. He was a nasty, scheming man who not only embezzled money from the mine but plotted several murders. In the end, he overreaches, and when he attacks Clare he finds himself losing. His plans fail and he ends up dead.

Structurally speaking, this novel contains all the classic elements of a romance novel. Though the characters have met before the beginning of the novel, it is not done in the same way as the Hathaway series, where the characters simply met in an earlier novel. Rather, in *Thunder and Roses*, Clare and Nicholas met when they were children, though Nicholas does not remember at first. Clare reminds him of how he would come to study with her father, and how the village perceived of him as a child. He, in turn, remembers "a grubby brat," as he calls her, though he means it affectionately (Putney 15). However, though the characters met when they were children, the real meeting between them is as adults. It is at this point that they are real characters, rather than memories. Still, Putney plays around with the meeting, showing that characters can have some sort of past together in only memories and flashbacks, rather than explicitly stating their past in an earlier novel or the beginning of the story.

The courtship in this novel is fascinating because of its unconventionality. The only reason the two are together is because of a sham – Nicholas hopes to convince the town that Clare is his mistress, though they are almost completely platonic. However, he seeks to make it truth and embarks on a determined course of seduction. This is fairly stereotypical; the man wants the woman, so he seduces her. He is not interested in marriage, but instead wants to have her as a mistress. However, Nicholas is not avoiding marriage because he enjoys bachelorhood, but instead because he fears opening himself up to another person. In the end, however, the time of courtship serves its true purpose – making the characters fall in love.

The consummation is teasing, as Clare constantly toes the line between her convictions and giving in to Nicholas' advances. "Ever since [they] struck [their] bargain," Clare claims, Nicholas has "been doing [his] best to seduce" her (Putney 296). She nearly gives in once, and is extremely shamed by how close she came to giving in to his seduction. Yet, when their relationship is consummated, it is not because of seduction but because of love. She does not have her virginity taken from her, but rather gives it freely to comfort Nicholas; she is "not offering pity" but "friendship" (Putney 290). Her virginity is still used as a commodity in the novel, but the act of giving it rather than having it taken from her gives Clare some independence that is refreshing in a historical character. She owns her virginity, giving her a large degree of power.

Because the two marry before the end of the novel, the happy ending is not defined by commitment (betrothal), but rather the confession of love from Nicholas. Their marriage is a simple ceremony, with few attendants, but it makes both characters happy. It is not, however, the conclusion of the novel – there is still more story to happen. The climactic crisis comes when Nicholas goes off to confront his friend and instead finds himself in a trap. At this moment, it seems as though Nicholas and Clare might be severed forever – not because of any personal notions or conflict of personalities, but simply because one or both of them might die at any minute. The fact that he has admitted his love – made himself vulnerable to hurt – is what makes it so satisfying when he realizes he has always had love. The happy ending of this novel – Nicholas' confession of his love – nicely wraps up events. Clare and Nicholas are already married, but now they are in love and happy to be together. The mine issue has been solved with the death of the manager, and it is implied that the mine will not hurt anyone in the village again.

Nicholas and Clare are surrounded by friends, but most importantly, they have each other, and they will soon have a family together.

Overall, there are many reasons why this is satisfying. For a historical, it shows how an outwardly strong male and an outwardly passive female can come together to make each other better. It shows how a woman did not need to always be the victim, but could take control of her own life, particularly her sexuality. Following conventions of romance fiction, it uses structure to its advantage to make the happy ending more satisfying. Putney writes a good story by shaking up convention a bit, but still telling a basic love story. All the components of a satisfying ending are there – these characters are vulnerable and their story is compelling, and emotional justice wins the day. On the whole, however, the novel is satisfying because it is satisfying to see two such well-written characters go through such an emotional story and come out stronger because they are together and in love. This is a progressive love story in its best form – though it is a historical romance, and the characters are very unequal in theory, they come together as equals, each holding their own.

Midnight

On the other hand, *Midnight*, written by Beverly Jenkins in 2010, shows how a historical can end very unsatisfyingly. *Midnight* is an African-American novel set in Revolutionary America. In theory, this novel should be very interesting. Jenkins writes a strong historical, using a lot of research to create a historically accurate narrative. She references actual characters and pays strong attention to the events occurring at the brink of the Revolutionary War. Placing a story about Black characters in 18th century America is an interesting narrative choice, as slavery was still a major institution. Jenkins gets around this by showing free characters, but

leaves them in the context of their actual social standing, rather than sugarcoating the racism that was very much a part of these characters' lives. The realism in this story is excellently done, and Jenkins provides a bibliography to show where her research came from, demonstrating her dedication to historical accuracy. Yet while the background for the story is very well done, and should provide a good context for a great story, the love story is lacking.

Faith Kingston is the unloved daughter of a free Black man in tumultuous pre-Revolutionary Boston. She works all day to keep his inn running and receives no appreciation from her Tory father. However, Faith has a secret: she is a rebel spy. She receives information from working in the inn and passes it on to the higher ups in the rebellion. When Nick Grey comes to town and seeks out his father's murderer, Faith tries to stay away from him. Their fathers were great adversaries, and Faith fights her physical attraction to the infuriating man. She attempts to keep her distance, worried about her double life and not wishing for the complication of a romantic attachment.

Over time, however, things in Faith's life begin to get worse. Her position as a spy is jeopardized by the murder of her confidante, Nick's father. Her father becomes increasingly harsh and attempts to force her into a marriage with a man she cannot love. She finds it increasingly difficult to fight off her attraction to Nick, who proves himself more than just a pretty face. And to top it all off, war is looming just over the horizon. When things reach the breaking point and her father tries to sell her into marriage, she leaves his house and wanders out with only the clothes on her back, into a desperate storm. She loses consciousness right at the gate to Nick's house, and he finds her and nurses her back to health.

Over time, she learns more about him; she finds out that he is only half-tamed, as she puts it, and that he is a supporter of the rebellion. Upon learning of her situation, kicked out of her father's house, with no belongings and no hope, he offers her a position as his housekeeper. Though Faith is initially scandalized by his request – she asks "in what capacity" she will serve him – she accepts (Jenkins 189). By the next afternoon, however, he has offered her something far more shocking: the position of his wife. After spending some time together during the day, Nick admits that he is "near the point of asking for [Faith's] hand" (Jenkins 224). Faith agrees, giving in to the attraction between them; as Nick has claimed, "it's been inevitable since the day [they] met" that they would become lovers (Jenkins 223). They marry quietly, and live in the shadow of the approaching war. Faith's father has been growing ever more irrational, and he reveals the reason why he was feuding with Nick's father: Nick's mother had originally been engaged to him instead, and left him for Nick's father.

As war approaches ever faster, Nick and Faith realize that they are in love. Nick leaves to serve with the minuteman militia, occasionally popping back in to spend time with Faith. The novel ends when Nick returns after a few months at war to discover that Black men are no longer allowed in the armed forces. He is cheered, however, to note that Faith is with child, and while he hopes to return to battle, he wants to wait until after his child's birth. He gets just this wish when his daughter is born and he returns to battle a month later, a proud father.

In this case, the happy ending is an example of how a poorly written ending can reinforce outdated ideas. Faith and Nick are in an outdated heteronormative relationship because they are overly heteronormative in a traditional sense, with Faith being the very submissive and obedient wife to Nick's dominant husband. Nick is clearly the head of the family and Faith continues to be submissive, just as she was with her father. When she marries Nick, she gives up her spying,

the one thing that made her character different and interesting. Instead of espionage, she bakes bread. She tends the home when Nick goes off to war and welcomes him home faithfully when he returns. While this may be historically accurate and a good portrayal of free Black characters in this time period and the struggles of their lives, this is not satisfying as a romance novel. For a modern-day audience, watching the overly heteronormative construction of Nick and Faith's relationship can be troubling. Modern audiences are accustomed to more progressive ideas about marriage and relationships, and this novel falls short of these expected customs.

Part of the reason that this novel defies readers' expectations for a progressive love story is because it lacks a progressive heroine. Faith's life is exciting and interesting; Faith, however, is neither. For a rebel spy, she is quite a boring character. She puts up with an abusive father because that is what she has to do, rather than out of familial affection or love. Her most interesting attribute is that she is a spy, but there is nothing else to back this up. It is not even very clear why she is a spy; she seems to quiet and timid and her courage is never satisfactorily explained. She is not like typical historical romance heroines, who are generally outspoken and unconventional for their time periods. Rather, Faith is a historically accurate portrayal of a female Black character in Revolutionary America, but she is not a romance novel heroine. Consequently, it is hard to emotionally invest in Faith's story.

The relationship between Faith and Nick is not satisfying either. Their initial attraction can be believed, children of two feuding fathers fighting an unwelcome attraction. However, while that premise could inspire countless novels, in this novel it is just passed over. Faith initially does not want to get close to Nick because of the conflict between their fathers, and because she is not sure who she can trust. She is fairly puritanical in nature, and constantly derides the sins of the flesh, even going so far as to bathe clothed, claiming that "no God-fearing

woman would lounge in the tub fully unclothed" (Jenkins 213). She fights off her attraction, believing that giving in would be sinful.

Yet when Nick kisses her, rather than sparking a fierce argument or a dialogue on her values, Faith gives in with little resistance, "all she could do was surrender" to Nick (Jenkins 115). This shows a conflict between Jenkins' focus on historicity and romance. Faith's puritanical nature fits in well with her time period and assumed upbringing. Jenkins also makes comments like "being a female of her times" when describing Faith's ideas of sexuality (Jenkins 145). However, while historically accurate, this attitude does not fit in with a romance novel that can be assumed to contain sexual themes. Historical romance novels frequently feature sexually innocent heroines, but they are also innately sensual. Faith's sensuality is miniscule – she is overly passive in terms of her sexual relationship with Nick.

The marriage comes across as odd and unsatisfactory. Nick asks her to marry him seemingly at random, admitting that he does not know why he is saying the words coming out of his mouth. She says she needs time to think it over, but actually accepts him almost immediately. Within the space of a few paragraphs, they go from friendly strangers, to employer and employee, to engaged. Even other characters think this is strange. One of Faith's friends visits them in the morning, and his wife visits that afternoon, shocked to hear that Faith has gone from housekeeper to engaged in mere hours. Faith's only explanation is that "things changed" (Jenkins 237). The explanation is vague, but accurate. The characters just decided to marry. There is no drama, no conflict, nothing of interest in their marriage. There is just a marriage, seemingly because that is what should happen in a romance novel. There is no love between them at this point, but there is also no lack of love. There is just friendly apathy there, and suddenly they are getting married.

The marriage truly seems as though it was an afterthought, included to appease readers who insist upon a romance novel including this idea of a happy ending. Just as with Harry and Poppy in *Tempt Me At Twilight*, a marriage is not enough; the two must be in love. Unlike with Harry and Poppy, however, when Nick and Faith realize they are in love there is no struggle to reach this point. There is, again, no drama in this confession. The confession is spurred by Nick's imminent departure for war; however, rather than an impassioned, sudden realizing of their love, there is only a simple "I love you." There is no controversy, no dramatic reveal. There is a simple declaration of love, nothing exciting. While this is far more realistic a scenario than most novels, it is not particularly satisfying narrative. It also leaves the reader lost; the confession does not mark the end of the novel. The protagonists have come together as a couple, are in love and already married, yet Jenkins has more story left to tell. However, this story is not romance, but historical.

The child is thrown in just the same. Almost a throwaway, Faith informs Nick that she is pregnant shortly after jumping on his horse when he returns from battle. This is only three pages before the end of the novel, and on the last page, the baby is born and Nick is back to war. Before this point, there is no mention of the child. Nick has been at war for a time, and rather than revealing it before he leaves or while he is gone, Faith's pregnancy is not revealed until she tells him. It seems rather as if the child was thrown in because they needed a baby to wrap up their clichéd happily ever after. It all feels very formulaic, as if Jenkins was following an outline of requirements for a happy ending – marriage, check, motherhood, check. These plot elements do not seem to fit in with the story well, and are completely unnecessary.

There is very little struggle in this novel, especially considering that this is a novel about war and espionage. The closest this novel comes to a true struggle is dealing with Faith's father.

He hurts Faith again and again, showing very abusive tendencies. As the novel progresses, he gets more violent, going so far as to sell her and almost (indirectly) cause her death. Nick is infuriated and wants to kill him, but Faith will not let him. When at last this struggle is resolved, it is because her father has worked himself up to the point of stroke. There is no resolution, only death. While Faith is sad about her father's death, and regretful that it happened, Nick feels nothing but sorrow for her pain. He does not regret her father's death in the least. Still, the father is neatly tucked away after that point. Nick even comments on the fact that he was glad the father was gone before he could come between Nick and Faith. Overall, it seems like this struggle was a shadow of a true struggle. While this seems like a good example of emotional justice, with Faith's father getting his comeuppance for being a horrible person, Faith's emotional connection to her father makes this more depressing than satisfying.

The real problem is that while there are many obstacles in this story that could provide an exciting conflict, none of them can get a fair treatment. The problem with Faith's father comes close, but it still is not handled in depth. At the same time, there is also the struggle between Faith and Nick, which is resolved in a few pages rather than filling the whole novel, as many romance novels do. There is the mystery of who killed Nick's father, and if he will come for Faith because of her spying. However, the culprit is obviously Faith's father from the beginning, and there is no twist to defy your expectations. There is also the struggle of the impending war, but it only pops up from time to time. The separation caused by the war is difficult for Faith and Nick to deal with, but it only comes in at the end of the novel, and even then only briefly. Their separation also causes no growth or change; when they are reunited, it is as if there has been no separation and they slide seamlessly back into their routine.

There is no payoff in this novel, mostly because there is so little to invest in. What struggle do you invest in, when there are so many? How can you vicariously live through the characters' actions when they make no sense, but seem to come out of the blue? There is no connection to Nick and Faith because, as characters, they are shallow and somewhat empty. The biggest investment in this novel is with the setting, which is itself fascinating and well done. A setting cannot carry a novel, however. Without proper characterization and emotional payoff, the novel just sort of leaves readers let down.

Because Jenkins is trying to balance two storylines, one must fall to the wayside. As an African-American historical novel, this book is exemplary. Jenkins provides an unflinching look at the social standing and tumultuous lives of Black characters in this time, even free ones. Readers have the context of the novel in mind when they read it. For example, readers know that Nick's hope that the Revolution will spell a brighter future for Black citizens is in vain. Readers know that Nick and Faith's story could have been a lot worse, if one or both of them were enslaved, and this context makes their story happier. However, this novel focuses too much on the historical context and sacrifices the romance. While it may be a historically accurate portrayal, for a modern audience it is very unsatisfying. Faith's passiveness as a character, the overly heteronormative situation of their relationship and its inherent inequality, and the needless addition of motherhood all contribute to make this novel an example of how some romance novels can be regressive.

Strange Bedpersons

Jennifer Crusie, in addition to being a critical theorist of romance fiction, also writes her own novels. As a progressive feminist, Crusie writes to an audience similar to herself – someone

who wants strong heroines with minds and careers of their own and who are their own characters. She writes contemporary romances, so a reader might assume that Crusie's books are the epitome of feminist romance, with politically progressive gender-neutral ideology. Even the title of this novel seems to imply this is what the reader is getting in to – 1994's *Strange Bedpersons*. The phrase is a point of contention among characters, with feminist Tess insisting upon "bedpersons" rather than the male "bedfellows." However, just like with *Midnight*, *Strange Bedpersons* falls short of the mark of a contemporary feminist spin on romance and happily ever after.

The novel tells of the contentious relationship between broken up couple Tess Newhart, a radical left-wing hippie who grew up on a commune, and Nick Jamieson, a buttoned-up lawyer who schmoozes like he was born to do it. Nick approaches Tess with a Faustian bargain: pretend to be his fiancée for a weekend in order to secure him a promotion, and in return he will help her try to get a job. Tess knows she is in for a rough weekend, but agrees anyway. The weekend goes predictably poorly, with Tess out of her element surrounded by rich lawyers who she cannot respect and Nick watching his chances of promotion slip away.

They return home to find that Tess' apartment in a rough neighborhood has been broken into, and Nick insists she stay with him for a while. They settle into a somewhat easy routine, with Nick going off to work in the mornings and Tess trying to find a job. After the first day, Nick returns with Tess' cat and her favorite Chinese food, and she is smitten by what he does for her, telling him that she is "crazy about [him]" (Crusie 144). She is quickly falling for him, and very shortly thereafter almost admits growing feelings – she starts to say tell him but at the last minute changes "I love you" to "I love… the way you look" (Crusie 147). However, Tess also realizes that she is conforming more and more to Nick's ideals. She dresses more

conventionally, acts more restrained, and finds herself acting in the best interests of his career. Tess claims that because she loves Nick, she will "act like a Stepford wife for [him] and [his] career" (Crusie 155). She becomes depressed at the thought that she is losing her ideals, losing her colorful personality to blend in with Nick's buttoned-down, black-and-white lifestyle.

Eventually, at a make-or-break dinner that could determine the success of Nick's career, things come to a head. Everything goes wrong, and Tess rediscovers her personality at the cost of Nick's job, as he gets fired. The next day, however, their big client reveals that he will only work with Nick, and Nick gets his job back, even getting the promotion he so desperately craved. Tess ends her search for a new job, choosing instead to become a campaign manager for the big client, a Republican running for office. Nick announces that he intends to marry Tess, and Tess is not okay with this. She is not really against being with Nick, but more afraid of how marriage – especially marriage to Nick – will change her. She is appeased when Nick tells her that she can still be her colorful, politically correct quirky self, because that is the person he loves. The book ends with their happy ending – their wedding day. Nick proclaims that they will be together forever, and Tess argues that that is not long enough—she will love him far longer than forever.

Similar to *Midnight*, this novel does not give the required payoff. Instead, there is a sense of betrayal, that the reader's expectations had been blatantly subverted. The reader has invested in this couple's struggle to come together in spite of their conflicting personalities and beliefs. The suspense is heightened because of their conflict; they want to be together but they cannot reconcile. The reader desperately wants to see the two protagonists come together, fully expecting some huge fight that resolves their differences and shows how two radically different characters can find love. When they do come together, though, it is without any sort of fuss, and

it is disappointing. We have invested in these characters, only to reach the end and realize that Tess is no longer recognizable. The investment goes sour. While there is the payoff of seeing Nick receive the promotion he has worked so hard for, this is outweighed by Tess' losses.

Tess seems like she will be a great feminist hero. She is definitely quirky, and was raised on a progressive commune. The book goes to great lengths to point out how different she is from Nick's straight-and-narrow life. She calls her mother by her first name and has sex in public areas. In fact, the reason Tess and Nick broke up is because he would not have sex with her in public, which she claims makes him too bland. She stands up for the little guy and wants to teach the less fortunate. However, Tess is almost *too* quirky. It seems as though her characterization was limited solely to her defying societal expectations. As Nick rightly argues, Tess does not need to be so radical to be different. When the story tones her down at the end, it is in some ways a good thing.

In many other ways, however, this is very problematic. Tess is supposed to be this strong feminist heroine, but she is tamed by this novel, brought into a culturally acceptable role by her love for a man. She goes from this progressive, outspoken, in your face feminist to "Mrs. Jamieson," who never does anything radical, as she describes herself. Throughout the course of the novel, she is very clearly changing. She calms down and does what she thinks is necessary for Nick's career, at one point even admitting that "she was sacrificing everything she believed in for Nick's partnership" (Crusie 211). During this entire time, she has no job. When she finally gets a job at the end, it is one that would make her eschew all her ideals. She tones down her personality, and when she fights back it is desperately rather than logically. Even after having Nick tell her he loves her the way she is, she still insists upon changing for his greater

good. Tess is not just changing for Nick, she is changing for Nick's career, which she previously hated, and not willing to listen to him when he wants her to be herself.

Character change can be a major part of a good romance. It is Harry's willingness to change for the woman he loves that makes him a relatable character in *Tempt Me At Twilight*, Nicholas' willingness to open himself to love that makes *Thunder and Roses* so appealing. However, these characters do not change completely – Harry is still ruthless, just softened somewhat by his love for Poppy, and Nick has always desired love, even if he squashed the impulse. Tess, on the other hand, is like a completely different character at the end. Whereas in the beginning, she disparaged Nick as "Mr. Jekyll," the conservative one, at the end she realizes she has become "Mrs. Jekyll" (Crusie 211). She allows her love for Nick to consume her and become the driving force in her life. She struggles with the change and is not happy with what she is doing, but continues straight through until the end. Even Nick is disappointed by her change, but she seems as though she cannot help herself. She has to change because she thinks she has to. There is no growth in her character, only change, and needless change at that.

The fact that Tess so willingly gives in is very bothersome. She does not stand up for herself. Even from the start, when she agrees to help Nick despite knowing it is not in her best interests, she gives in to his persuasion. As the novel goes on, even as Nick becomes more accepting of who she is, she seems determined to change anyway. She loses track of herself by trying to be the best for Nick, disregarding his own wishes. She completely changes and rearranges her life for his benefit. When she realizes what she has done, she gets angry and nearly ruins their relationship. Finally, Tess is standing up for herself, but in the wrong way – instead of finding a compromise, Tess becomes more radical and almost ruins both her and

Nick's lives. When she finally relents, she sacrifices her beliefs because she does not want to "destroy [his] life" by doing what she feels she must (Crusie 223).

Compromise is a big part of a good romance story and a healthy relationship. In *Strange Bedpersons*, Crusie tries to show the two protagonists compromise – Nick becomes more accepting of who Tess is, and Tess becomes less radical in her ideals. If this were a true compromise it would be acceptable. But in reality, Tess gives so much more than Nick, so the "compromise" is completely unbalanced. Tess changes her career aspirations, moves into Nick's apartment, and changes who she is. All Nick does is admit he loves her. In the end, Nick has gotten many components of a happy ending – he's gotten his promotion, he's defeated his boss, and he marries the girl he loves. But what does Tess get?

What Tess gets is a letdown. At the climax of the novel, she realizes that "all she had was… now and Nick" (Crusie 227). She does not want to marry Nick, but has to be talked into it, because she believes that marrying Nick would be giving up her ideals. When she does agree to marry him, it is for his sake, not hers. She gets a career at the end, but it is not the one she has been trying for all novel. Rather, it is one that comes out of the blue and seems to make no sense with her character. The epilogue is supposed to be the happy ending, yet Tess reveals that she is "feeling a little melancholy" due to her marriage (Crusie 246). The only thing missing in this depressingly outdated ending is Tess getting pregnant because Nick wants a baby.

This story does have many required components for a happy ending. There is an emotional struggle, as the two protagonists' clashing personalities prevent them from an easy path to happily ever after. Both sides must be willing to compromise for love, and this makes them vulnerable. At the end of the story, the two are together, and their marriage implies that

there will be a lifelong commitment. But this story shows how those simple elements can go off track, and how the story needs more than just formulaic elements to achieve a successful happy ending and a satisfying love story.

There is no sense of equality in this novel. Where *Thunder and Roses* takes place in a historical moment in which a reader can expect a man to be dominant, and instead featured two characters in an equal, loving relationship, *Strange Bedpersons* features the exact opposite. Tess does what Nick tells her; he is clearly the dominant one in the relationship. When it comes time for Tess to take action, and stand up for her beliefs against Nick's big client, she stops herself because she loves Nick and does not want him to resent her for ruining his career. Instead, he confronts the client himself, saying he has "nobody to resent but" himself (Crusie 225). Tess tries to assert herself, but instead of directly addressing the problems, she becomes bitter and tries to subvert their relationship. To Tess, the only way she can be herself is to stay away from Nick. If she is with him, she becomes subsumed into his identity – she becomes "Mrs. Jamieson." She literally loses her identity when she marries him, despite the fact that this is a modern romance with a feminist hero who quite possibly would have kept her maiden name.

There is also no real vulnerability in this novel. Neither party becomes very vulnerable due to their emotions. The closest we come to real vulnerability is when Nick shows how his love for Tess is more important than his career. But even then, he is not emotionally open, and there is minimal risk involved. Instead of making herself open to rejection, Tess changes to fit what she thinks Nick would want. She cannot trust him enough to love her as she is, and she cannot allow herself to be vulnerable. Without the sense of vulnerability, there is a lack of reward. The characters have done nothing to really merit a happy ending, and it is just given to them.

The interesting thing about *Strange Bedpersons* is that Crusie states on her website this was originally a different book (Crusie, "Strange Bedpersons"). She claims that the storyline ran away from her, and the two stories became two separate books. She later finished the other story and published it in 1996 as *The Cinderella Deal*. The two stories have a similar basis – stuffy straight-laced protagonist needs quirky heroine to pose as his fiancée to secure a job. But the two stories diverge after this point. Whereas Tess seems to give up, the heroine in *The Cinderella Deal* keeps her spunk throughout the story. There is more of a genuine compromise between the two protagonists, as both must change their lives in small ways to accommodate the other. *The Cinderella Deal* has its problems, to be sure – the heroine still fulfills a mostly homemaking role while the hero makes the money – but this novel shows how with a few changes *Strange Bedpersons* could have been a much more satisfying romance novel.

Love Bites

Lynsay Sands 2004 novel *Love Bites* is a contemporary paranormal. Set in modern-day Toronto, the novel tells of a supernatural family, the Argeneaus. Though the novel is more or less about vampires (and the title references this fact), Sands goes to great lengths to set this novel apart from the deluge of other vampire fiction. She calls her characters "immortals" rather than vampires, and suggests that they prefer this terminology. She comes up with a scientific explanation for them being the way they are, using nanogenes in the way other authors might rely on a curse. Still, these characters consume blood to sustain their lives, are supernaturally strong and fast, and cannot be killed except by beheading or staking.

Love Bites is the story of Etienne Argeneau, a vampire who designs computer games, and Rachel Garrett, a coroner who hates the night shift. Etienne is being pursued by a rival named

Pudge who has discovered Etienne is a vampire and vows to kill him. When Pudge attempts to "re-kill" the corpse brought into Rachel's morgue, she attempts to stop him and instead receives an axe to the chest. Grateful that she tried to help him, Etienne turns Rachel into an immortal to save her life in return. Rachel's new life is difficult for her to handle, at first. She stays with Etienne while he shows her the ropes. She and Etienne develop a friendship, and move toward something more to address the simmering sexual tension between them. They enter into a confusing relationship, and neither Etienne nor Rachel know how to handle it.

All the while, Pudge is still at large and the media thinks Rachel has been kidnapped. In order to remove the threat, Etienne's family wants Rachel to pretend that she was kidnapped so as to send Pudge to jail. When she balks at lying, she is threatened and told not to mess up their plans. Rachel is also led to believe that all of her relationship with Etienne is based on lies – that he was only with her to manipulate her into agreeing with his family, to "woo [her] into doing what [he] wanted" (Sands 250). Determined to sneak out, she instead finds Pudge breaking in to kill Etienne, and despite her anger she attempts to stop him. Pudge takes her captive and attempts to get her to turn him, all of his actions and conversations hinting towards a dangerous obsession bordering on insanity.

Rachel is rescued by Etienne before she comes to any great harm, and now that she has actually been kidnapped by Pudge agrees with the family's plan. She is happy to see Etienne and willing to forgive him for their fight, full of "warm, gushy feelings that rather alarmed her" (Sands 331). However, before she can reconcile with Etienne, she learns that by turning her, Etienne "had given up any chance at a life partner" because the vampires are only allowed to turn one person (Sands 340). Rachel is horrified at the thought that she has cost Etienne his chance at love, and convinced he must resent her for this, or that he eventually would once he

"had the chance to think about the sacrifice he'd made" (Sands 340). Rachel flees, and Etienne takes this as a rejection; both protagonists avoid each other, thinking it is what the other wants. Eventually, with some manipulation from Etienne's mother, the two run into each other and admit the truth – they are in love and meant to be together. They are life mates, meant to be, and are bonded forever. The epilogue depicts the two as happily married, enjoying their lives together, as Etienne's brother wistfully observes that "they'll be happy" (Sands 370).

The marriage at the end is interesting. In a novel about immortal vampires, some of whom have lived for millennia, you would expect concepts like marriage to be trumped by the whole lifemate business. Who needs a ceremony and a certificate to signify your commitment when you are obviously meant to be together because of a supernatural bonding? Yet at one point in the story, Rachel and Etienne go to the wedding of his sister, who has also found her life mate. Clearly weddings are a part of this society, and Etienne and Rachel do not get married just to satisfy some formula. Their wedding is placed at the end, in the epilogue, signifying that it is much less important than the climax, their reconciliation. In this case, marriage can be just marriage – not an institution meant to shut either character down or trap them, but merely a way for the two protagonists to underscore their everlasting commitment. Etienne drives this point home, explaining that "marriage among [his] people… is for life. And life for [them] can be a very long time" (Sands 364). Rachel accepts this, and the immortality aspect adds a poignant note when she counters that she hopes they have "an eternity" together (Sands 364).

This is a much healthier view than the other novels' take on marriage. In *Midnight*, marriage is an afterthought, thrown in because that is what the romantic formula calls for. *Strange Bedpersons* forces marriage on Tess, trapping her in a level of commitment she was not ready for and may never have been ready for. In *Thunder and Roses*, marriage is viewed as a

negative state for most of the novel and Nicholas goes out of his way to avoid it. While these marriages all end happily and are used to signify commitment in the same way as the one in *Love Bites*, this marriage seems to fit in with the story in a way that places marriage in a context it should be in this day and age, as a simple way for the protagonists to underscore and celebrate their love.

While the paranormal aspect does complicate the novel in some ways, this is in many other ways a good example of a contemporary romance novel done well. One of the major facets of contemporary novels is a freer attitude toward sex, and this is inherent in both this novel and *Strange Bedpersons*. However, Crusie's novel seems to flaunt the sexual component, making it an almost annoying feature of the relationship. It becomes a bone of contention between the protagonists rather than something to enjoy. In *Love Bites*, however, the sexual aspect of Etienne and Rachel's relationship brings them closer together and serves as a foundation for their eventual relationship. Tess and Nick initially break up over conflicting ideas of acceptable sexuality and it continues to cause arguments between the two of them. Etienne and Rachel's relationship, however, is based upon sex and grows from there. They are initially brought together because of a sexual attraction that opens them up to a deeper, romantic attachment. Sex in *Love Bites* is not problematic or the most important aspect of their relationship. Instead, sex is merely a part of a healthy and loving relationship.

The struggles in this novel are also a lot more captivating than those of *Strange Bedpersons*. While Tess and Nick struggled to get a promotion and settle down, Etienne and Rachel are literally struggling for their lives. Pudge is a serious villain, despite the name, and he could do severe harm to both of them. Their struggle to defeat him is both physical and emotional, as they argue over how to remove the threat. Their relationship is almost derailed by

this argument; miscommunication and hurt feelings drive a wedge between them that only unabashed honesty and openness can fix.

The payoff here is also greater because the stakes are higher. These two are not some mere courting couple. They are lifemates, fated to be together or alone forever. They are immortal, and eternity stretches before them. If they cannot come together as a couple and find their happy ending, their ending will be far worse than bittersweet, it will be tragic. As Etienne has sacrificed his chance at a lifemate to save Rachel, we know that if she will not have him, he will be alone forever. Both characters seem to realize this; Rachel is distraught that she cost him his chance at love and Etienne is heartbroken when his lifemate leaves him seemingly alone for the rest of his life. The lifemate component also makes their eventual reconciliation that much sweeter. With the threat of so much rejection hanging over them, the fact that they are able to be open about their feelings in the end is impressive. They are vulnerable, opening themselves up to hurt, but it pays off in the end, leaving the reader happy about their conclusion.

Love Bites also addresses the issue of compromise that was so poorly handled in *Strange Bedpersons*. While Tess over-compromised, giving up her entire self in order to be with Nick, Etienne and Rachel struggle to compromise. Both think they are right, and both need to give in a little in order to be together. However, neither gives up their identity. This is most clearly seen when Rachel refuses to compromise her ideals and lie about Pudge. The family tries to convince her multiple times, but she stands by her first answer – she will not say he kidnapped her because "that would be lying" (Sands 109). She is willing to tell the complete truth, but she will not lie. She is being overly stubborn, and her compliance would assure the safety of everyone in her new extended family. But she has her ideals and she sticks to them, not giving in. She places herself

in direct danger, and endangers her relationship with Etienne, but is not going to give in and compromise who she is.

Rachel is a direct contrast to Tess, showing how a feminist and progressive heroine can find love without giving herself up. Rachel has her own career, and a fairly successful one at that. She has to stop working while staying with Etienne, but this is for the safety of her co-workers. After she leaves Etienne, she returns to work. Rachel can be quirky; she loves video games and hates the night shift. However, Rachel's version of quirky does not depend on defying social conventions to the point of aimless radicalism. Rachel can be quirky without being annoying, and she can hold her own in a relationship with a powerful man, rather than giving up her identity like Tess.

Love Bites gives a good example of a happy ending in a contemporary novel that is satisfying. The novel does not try too hard to be progressive, and actually ends up being more progressive than a book starring a feminist heroine. Instead, the novel focuses on a simple love story (with vampires) and allows the two characters to come together in a way that is both believable and rewarding. The characters have a balanced and equal relationship that also happens to be passionate and loving. This novel gives the readers the emotional satisfaction that comes from investing in a novel and having that investment pay off, without leaving readers feeling betrayed. Like *Thunder and Roses*, this novel makes the reader feel good at the end, just as Jennifer Crusie insists a romance should.

Redeeming Love

Francine Rivers' *Redeeming Love* is a bit harder to quantify as a romance novel, because it is an inspirational novel as well. Usually with a romance novel, the love story is the only main

plot. On occasions where another storyline takes over, like with *Midnight's* historical plot, it undermines the romance and leaves the book unsatisfying. With inspirational romance, however, there has to be a spiritual plotline as well. It must be well done; if the religious plot takes over the romance, you still end up with an unsatisfying romance novel. The love story must have its place as the dominant story. *Redeeming Love* shows how an inspirational romance can focus a lot of narrative attention on spirituality and one character's religious journey while still being a satisfying romance novel.

Angel is a bitter, cynical, older-than-her-years prostitute in gold-rush California. A parallel of the biblical story of Hosea, the novel is really about Angel and her life, but mostly focused on her marriage to Michael, a pious farmer. Michael visits Angel in the brothel but refuses to have sex with her, instead talking to her about the life she could have if she marries him. Michael gives Angel hope, but she is afraid to hope and too cynical to believe this life could ever be true. "Hope was torment; Hope was an enemy" to Angel (Rivers 66). Knowing that Angel is not her real name, Michael calls her "Mara," which reflects her bitter and broken personality. Angry, Angel forces Michael to leave her, but is confused by why this hurts, why she feels like she is "suffocating… dying" (Rivers 81). Utterly broken, Angel instead attempts to commit suicide by taunting a man until he beats her, but he is stopped before he can kill her. Michael rescues her, marrying her and taking her from the brothel to live on his farm with her

Angel hates Michael, viewing him as just another man. No matter how different he seems, he will only hurt her as every other man has. According to Angel, "every man is [evil] when betrayed" (Rivers 201). Once she regains her strength, she runs away, determined to get some gold and buy a house of her own. Michael takes her back and forgives her. She runs away several more times, pushed into it by the people around her and their perceptions, such as when

Michael's brother-in-law hates her for her past. When a pious, Christian family moves nearby, Angel is initially unreceptive but comes to love them as family.

During this time, she is coming to change as a character, warming up to Michael and revealing some of her tragic past. Her changing personality is revealed by the name Michael calls her: Mara at first, Tirzah when he is feeling sexual, Amanda when they become close, and Angel only when he is angry. However, when she realizes she loves him, she flees again, but this time does not return to prostitution as that would be betraying Michael. He takes her back, forgiving her time and again because that is what God wants of him, but Angel is afraid of Michael's God. Finally, Angel reveals that she cannot have children, and knowing that Michael desires children more than anything else, she leaves so that he can be with someone else, someone better than she. She makes her own way in San Francisco, again refusing to turn to prostitution. However, when a man from her past attempts to force her to work in his brothel, she turns to God, terrified of what will happen, and he responds. Angel is terrified to give in to faith, but she is starting to give in. She is rescued by a local banker, a pious man touched by her fledgling faith. He takes her in and she becomes a Christian, rejoicing in her newfound faith and the light it brings to her life.

Angel opens a home for former prostitutes to learn new skills and escape the business, where she is found by Michael's brother-in-law, still hating her. However, when he learns the truth of why she left, and sees what she has become, he is ashamed of himself and begs her to return to Michael, who is still waiting for her to return after three years. Humbled by Michael's love and faithfulness, Angel returns to him and begs forgiveness. She gives him "the one gift she had to offer," and tells him her true name, Sarah (Rivers 462). Michael forgives her and they are reunited. The epilogue reveals that, despite her apparent barrenness, they are able to have

children, and their family becomes prolific and prosperous. Michael and Angel are married for over sixty years and have a long and happy life together, secure in their faith and love.

Unlike *Midnight* and *Love in the Afternoon*, this story manages to balance two main storylines. The novel is not completely about Michael and Angel's love story, but it is also not completely about Angel's conversion. Both plotlines need equal space in the story because they are inseparable; the one cannot happen without the other. Michael and Angel cannot be together without Angel's conversion, but her conversion would not have happened if it were not for her love of Michael. The other novels did not balance their separate plotlines, and this made the stories conflict.

Rather than being undermined by the spiritual subplot, the love story here is bolstered by Angel's struggles to understand Michael's God and come to peace. If satisfaction in a romance novel is partially based on vulnerability and opening oneself to hurt, then this novel is utterly satisfying because of Angel's stubbornness turning into vulnerability. For most of the novel, Angel refuses to open herself to religion because of her tragic past and her innate fear of being hurt. She sees her life as "a war against God and Michael and the whole world" (Rivers 226). When she does come to religion in the end, it is because she has finally realized that being vulnerable will not hurt her, but will bring new meaning to her life. This is in a religious context – Angel must trust God not to hurt her. Yet this is paralleled in her relationship with Michael.

Initially, Angel rebuffs his suit because she does not want to open herself up to hope. Hope is the enemy and will leave her broken-hearted. She cannot open herself up to Michael's affection after they are married because it would leave her vulnerable. Yet she cannot resist; she sees Michael's courtship of her as him tearing down literal walls around her heart. She dreams

that Michael is planting vines around her walls, and as they grew, “the mortar was crumbling” (Rivers 165). When she ultimately comes back to Michael, she makes herself completely vulnerable to him, approaching him completely nude and falling at his feet, without “the trappings of the world” (Rivers 460). She has to trust him not to hurt her in this moment, and when he forgives her, Angel’s vulnerability is rewarded.

Though Michael is a strong character, already faithful and in no need of conversion, he is by no means a cardboard character. He struggles with Angel, dealing with anger and frustration. Michael is strong in his devotion to God but still argues with and fights against religion at times. He, too, makes himself vulnerable by loving Angel when she warns him that she will never love him back. He forgives her time and again when she runs away but the fact that she rebuffs his vulnerability hardens him. When she runs away the final time, even though this time she has good reasons, he refuses to chase after her. He has been burned too many times and wants to protect his heart from any more hurt. His invulnerability separates them, and it is only because of Angel’s ability and willingness to open herself up to potential hurt that they can come back together.

Another reason this story works differently from the other two novels is because of its pacing. *Midnight* and *Love in the Afternoon* both resolved their love stories early in the novel and then continued with the historical plot. *Redeeming Love* has the two stories continuing with each other. In the end, it is the romance that finishes the book. When Angel’s conversion story is complete, her romance with Michael is still ongoing. The happy ending of the book is not Angel coming to religion (although this is certainly a factor). Instead, the happy ending is Angel coming back to Michael and him accepting her. The fact that the novel ends with them getting together is what makes this an effective romance novel.

So What Does This Mean?

Critics of the romance genre decry it for espousing outdated ideals. A happy ending is a sham, a notion best reserved for fairy tales and Disney movies. Adults need to focus on more realistic endings than yearning for a happily ever after. Romance and marriage are a trap that holds women back from their true potential, according to these critics.

Sure, some novels are flawed. Some use marriage as an afterthought, merely a plot device that has become so stereotypically involved with romance fiction that it is unthinkable to not include it. Other stories, however accidentally, use marriage as a way to conventionalize the heroine and put her in a socially constructed "safe" role. In these cases, marriage is at best an overused cliché and at worse a tool for oppressing women. A happy ending can, in some ways, reinforce these outdated ideals and can be problematic.

However, in some cases the happy ending serves as just that – a happy ending. A happy ending does not necessarily mean marriage and motherhood. In some cases, a happy ending means the characters are in love, or that they have agreed to some sort of commitment. In novels where marriage is the happy ending, however, this ending does not need to be oppressive or restrictive. Marriage can function to bring a couple closer together and truly deepen their relationship. Marriage can be a plot point that starts a relationship or a nice bookend to complete a story. In some cases, marriage is completely unnecessary to underscore commitment, but is included to give the protagonists an extra level of connection.

Happy endings do not need to be problematic; they can be positive and uplifting. When done well, happy endings can expose a truth about women – we want good things to happen in our lives. Rather than showing that all women want to be dominated in a relationship, or adding

to the oppressive social mores that hold women back, happy endings can show the satisfaction of good things happening to good people, male or female. The two characters we have watched grow together fall in love and be together. They can have a child, or they can move in together, or they can get a big promotion. But what matters most is that the characters are happy, and the readers who live vicariously through them are happy too. Readers are rewarded for becoming invested in these characters, just as the characters are rewarded for being good people. A happy ending serves to complete a romance novel, to wrap things up nicely and to make a reader feel good.

Bibliography

Crusie, Jennifer. "Emotionally Speaking: Romance Fiction in the Twenty-First Century." *JennyCrusie.com*. 2003. Web. 24 April 2013.

---. "I Know What It Is When I Read It: Defining the Romance Genre." *JennyCrusie.com*. 2000. Web. 24 April 2013.

---. *Strange Bedpersons*. Ontario: MIRA Books, 1994. Print.

---. "Strange Bedpersons." *JennyCrusie.com*. Web. 24 April 2013.

---. "You Go Romance Writer: Changing Public Opinion. *Jenny Crusie.com*. 1998. Web. 24 April 2013.

Francis, Conseula. "HEA without a couple getting together." *[Romancescholar]*. DePaul University, 4 Oct. 2012. Web. 24 April 2013.

Jenkins, Beverly. *Midnight*. New York: Avon Books, 2010. Print.

Kleypas, Lisa. *Love in the Afternoon*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010. Print.

---. *Married by Morning*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010. Print.

---. *Tempt Me At Twilight*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009. Print.

Krentz, Jayne Anne, ed. *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992. Print.

Putney, Mary Jo. *Thunder and Roses.* New York: Penguin Putnam, Inc., 1999. Print.

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

Rivers, Francine. *Redeeming Love*. Chicago: Multomah Publishers, Inc., 1997. Print.

Sands, Lynsay. *Love Bites.* New York: Dorchester Publishing Co., Inc, 2004. Print.