

0.1 Chapter 3: relationships: Romanticism

0.2 Romanticism

1 On the Role of Stories in Love

It sounds strange to ask what a novel might be for. We tend not to wonder too much what role made-up stories should have in our lives. Generally we suppose we just read them for entertainment.



Yet that is to be unstrategic about a major cultural resource. A novel is a machine for simulating experience, a life simulator and like its flight equivalent it allows us safely to experience what it might in real life take us years and great danger to go through. Unaided, we are puny in our powers of empathy and comprehension, isolated from the inner lives of others, limited in our experiences, short of time, and able to encounter only a tiny portion of the world first hand. Fiction extends our range it takes us inside the intimate consciousness of strangers, it lets us sit in on experiences that would be terrifying or reckless in reality; it lends us more lives than we have been given.

There are three ways in particular in which novels deliver their assistance:

As cautionary tales:

They give us early warnings. They alert us to dangers that were not adept at recognising: where envy might lead us, what indifference can do to a relationship, where lust can drive us... They trace the links

between apparently minor errors of personality and the monumental catastrophes they can unleash, in the hope that by showing us the pitfalls, our own tendencies to disaster and folly may be curbed.

As maps of progress:

Fiction provides models of development, demonstrations of triumph over difficulties, case studies in maturation and the acquisition of wisdom. We are carefully taken through ways in which certain people have learned, perhaps over many years and with much pain, how to cope with problems which are, in some ways, also our own.

As exhortations:

There are many good things which we may have not known close-up but which we would benefit from experiencing and which fiction can create for us. It can show us a couple who have understood how to resolve their difficulties with grace and humour, a father who can be at once authoritative and kind; a politician who has overcome vanity and tribal interests. Its not simply that we need to know there are such people at large. Its that by spending time in their company, the more admirable sides of human nature have an opportunity to rub off on us a little.



Unfortunately, there are too many bad novels out there by which one means, novels that do not give us a correct map of love, that leave us unprepared to deal adequately with the difficulties of being in a couple. In moments of acute distress in relationships, our grief is too often complicated by a sense that things have become, for us alone, unusually and perversely difficult. Not only are we suffering, but it seems that our suffering has no equivalent in the lives of other more or less sane people.

Our attitudes to our own love lives are in large part formed by the tradition of the Romantic novel (which

nowadays is advanced not only in literary fiction but in video, music and advertising). The narrative arts of the Romantic novel have unwittingly constructed a devilish template of expectations of what relationships are supposed to be like in the light of which our own love lives often look grievously and deeply unsatisfying. We break up or feel ourselves cursed in significant part because we are exposed to the wrong works of literature.

If this wrong kind is to be termed Romantic, then the right kind of which there are so few might be deemed Classical. Here are some of the differences:

THE PLOT

Romantic novel: In the archetypal Romantic novel, the drama hinges entirely on how a couple get together: the love story is no such thing, it is merely the account of how love begins. All sorts of obstacles are placed in the way of loves birth, and the interest lies in watching their steady overcoming: there might be misunderstandings, bad luck, prejudice, war, a rival, a fear of intimacy, or most poignantly shyness... But in the end, after tribulations, the right people will eventually get into couples. Love begins and the story must end.

Classical novel: This wiser, less immediately seductive genre knows that the real problem isnt finding a partner, it is tolerating them, and being tolerated, over time. It knows that the start of relationships is not the high point that Romantic culture assumes; it is merely the first step of a far longer, more ambivalent and yet quietly far more heroic journey on which it directs its intelligence and scrutiny.



WORK

Romantic novel: The characters may have jobs but on the whole they have little impact on their psyches. Work goes on somewhere else. What one does for a living is not thought relevant to an understanding of love.



Classical novel: But here we see that work is in fact a huge part of life, with an overwhelming role in shaping our relationships. Whatever our emotional dispositions, it is the stress of work that ends up generating a sizeable share of the trouble lovers will have with each other.

CHILDREN

Romantic novel: Children are incidental, sweet symbols of mutual love, or naughty in an endearing way. They rarely cry, take up little time and are generally wise, exhibiting a native, unschooled intelligence.



Classical novel: We see that relationships are fundamentally oriented towards the having and raising of children and at the same time, that children place the couple under unbearable strains. They kill the passion that made them possible. Life moves from the sublime to the quotidian. There are toys in the living room, pieces of chicken under the table, and no time to talk. Everyone is always tired. This too is love.

PRACTICALITIES

Romantic novel: In this genre, we have only a hazy idea of who does the housework. It is not seen as relevant to a relationship. Domesticity is a corrupting force and people who care a lot about it are likely to be unhappy in their relationships. We are unlikely to learn a great deal concerning a couples thinking on homework or television for the under fours.



Classical novel: Here relationships are understood to be institutions, not just emotions. Part of their rationale is to enable two people to function as a joint economic unit for the education of the next generation. This is in no way banal. There are opportunities for genuine heroism. Especially around laundry.

SEX

Romantic novel: Sex and love are shown to belong together. The high point of love is intercourse. Adultery, in the romantic view, is therefore fatal: if you were with the right person you could never be unfaithful.

Classical novel: It knows that long-term love may not set up the best preconditions for sex. The classical attitude sees love and sex as distinct and at times divergent themes in life. And therefore sexual problems do not in themselves indicate that a relationship is, overall, a disaster...

COMPATIBILITY

Romantic novel: The Romantic novel cares about the harmony (or lack of it) between the souls of the protagonists. It believes that the fundamental challenge of romantic life is to find someone who completely understands us and with whom there need never be any more secrets. It believes that love is finding your other half, your spiritual twin. Love is not about training or education, it is an instinct, a feeling and is generally mysterious in its workings.



Classical novel: It accepts that no one ever fully understands anyone else; that there must be secrets, that there will be loneliness, that there must be compromise. It believes that we have to learn how to sustain good relationships, that there are learnable skills, and that love is not just a chance endowment of nature.

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The Romantic novel is deeply unhelpful. We have learned to judge ourselves by the hopes and expectations fostered by a misleading medium. By its standards, our own relationships are almost all damaged and unsatisfactory. No wonder separation or divorce so often appear to be inevitable.

They shouldn't be, we merely need to change our reading matter: to tell ourselves more accurate stories about the progress of relationships, stories that normalise troubles and show us an intelligent, helpful path through them.