

My Life as a Romance Reader - From Devotee to Skeptic?

1. Introduction

When the students of the seminar “The Seduction of Romance - From Pamela to Twilight” were asked to write a final paper, it was possible to choose between different options. Quickly, I knew that I did not want to write a term paper. The decision had to be made between writing a romance and writing an essay about the reading experiences in the course. As it turned out, writing an essay was the more appropriate solution.

I considered myself a preferred reader of romances before attending the course. This assumption was about to be discarded during the semester. I started to ask myself if I was indeed a negotiated reader of romances since many romances I came across did not appeal to me at all or I kept finding parts in romances I used to like before but which I did not like any more.

In the following essay these reading experiences will be documented. The focus will be on my personal interests concerning romances and the works read in class. Finding out how the reading behavior has been changed during the course of the seminar is an important part of this essay. The question whether the reading position has altered- from preferred to negotiated or even reluctant- shall be answered in the end.

2. Romantic Reading Experiences - From Devotee to Skeptic?

I can still recall my first encounter with *Twilight*, the movie, not the book. It was on an afternoon in the summer of 2009. For lack of a better activity, I decided to watch a movie. As it happens the DVD of *Twilight* was lying on the table, and since I did not know what movie to watch instead I started to watch *Twilight* for the first time.

I had heard of *Twilight* before, of course. But I had not been interested in either watching or reading it. I used to think that it was another kitschy teenage movie I would not like. And I did not want to be one of the many millions of teenage girls who were totally crazy about the *Twilight* series. But finally I gave in. I was willing to see what it was that fascinated so many readers and viewers. As it turned out I was also one of those fascinated people. I could not take my eyes off the television. I needed to know who Edward was. I wanted Bella to tell Edward she knew who, or what, he really was. But above all I wanted them to be together. At this point, my obsession with *Twilight* began. I read the four novels of the series within two weeks; I watched the first movie several times until I knew its dialogues by heart. I was not embarrassed to admit that I loved *Twilight*. I tried to persuade myself that I could allow myself for once to feel like a teenage girl, even if I was already 22.

But what I discovered with *Twilight* was not new to me. I have always been a fan of vampire fiction and romances. This was limited to movies, though. I have always enjoyed watching romantic movies. Concerning vampire fiction my knowledge and experience was based on TV series like *Buffy - The Vampire Slayer* and movies like the adaptation of Anne Rice's *Interview with a Vampire*. There is a certain kind of fascination that emanates especially from vampire fiction. And this fascination affected me in the case of *Twilight*.

By the time I chose the course "The Seduction of Romance - From *Pamela* to *Twilight*" I considered myself a romance devotee. The description of the course's outline seemed to match my reading preferences, except that I was not familiar with *Pamela*. But I was willing to get to know other romance novels apart from *Twilight*. Of course, *Twilight* was the initial motivation to attend the course. Furthermore, I was very interested in finding out how to deal with *Twilight* on an academic level since it had not occurred to me that the novel series could be of any academic interest

whatsoever. Thus, I was glad that this seminar would offer me the opportunity to occupy myself with *Twilight* academically. Furthermore, the romantic novel genre was not as familiar to me as I had thought. In fact, I could easily name ten romantic movies I had seen but not ten romantic novels I had read. This was another reason for me to attend the romance seminar: to explore the essence of romances. What exactly is it that arouses my interest in watching or reading romances? Are they just superficial novels not worth reading twice? What is the motivation of preferring romances to detective stories or science fiction novels? In the course of the seminar, I was hoping to find some answers to these questions.

Being faced with a romance which turned out to be very repellent to me right at the beginning of the semester did not seem like a good start in the seminar. *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded* sounded like a promising romance from the eighteenth century. I was fully expecting to be introduced to one of the most romantic stories I had ever read. Instead Richardson's novel let me down to that extent that I seriously began to doubt whether I truly liked romances in general or if it was only *Twilight* that I loved.

The identification process Sally Goade describes in her essay did not seem to work for me (cf. Goade 2007: 221). I could not identify either with the heroine or with the hero. Pamela's situation evoked compassion, at least in the beginning. Later on it was anger and incomprehension that fueled my aversion to this romance.

First of all, while reading the novel, it remained almost completely unclear to me why this novel is supposed to be romance. Of course, there are the narremes that constitute a romance novel. And there is a happy end. Pamela and Mr. B. get married. But is this really a happy end? Will Pamela be content with Mr. B. as her husband? Has he really changed? While reading the novel I began to doubt Mr. B.'s intentions towards Pamela. I could not believe that the sexual attacks on Pamela would never occur again. Can someone who tries to abuse a young girl really change for the better?

But it was not just the near-rape scene that was repellent to the reader. It was also Pamela's failure to leave Mr. B. as she had planned. From the beginning I wanted her to be a strong and independent girl, as far as that was possible in the eighteenth century. I believed she would be, once she had left Mr. B.'s house. And the moment she decided to not run away from him, my disappointment was big. At

that point the romance started to end, if it had ever begun. The identification with the heroine could not take place anymore because of my incomprehension of her actions and feelings.

After having read *Pamela*, I thought that my reading position towards romances was negotiated. According to Goade, a negotiated reading allows the reader to accept parts of the romance, while refusing to like others (Goade 2007: 211). I was more than eager to read the next novel on the schedule: *Lady Oracle* by Margret Atwood. Again, this anti-romance was unknown to me. But very soon I found myself reading it with pleasure and enthusiasm. In *Lady Oracle* the identification process with the heroine happened very quickly. It was my admiration for Joan's decision to leave her husband in order to protect herself that allowed this reader to identify with her. Even though there is not a happy end in *Lady Oracle*, it is not difficult to believe that Joan will find love and happiness in her life eventually. Furthermore, *Lady Oracle* is realistic or, to be precise, its story takes place in a time that seems more accessible to the reader than *Pamela*. Joan does not have to obey any rules, or any man. She still has a will of her own which she uses as she pleases, given that she is allowed to do so - unlike Pamela who has to obey to her master's will and rules.

Again, I kept thinking that I was not as much of a romance devotee as I used to think. I enjoyed reading *Lady Oracle*, I did not like *Pamela*, but still I was looking forward to talking about *Twilight* in class. In which category did my reading preferences fit, I asked myself. I did not seem to be a romance lover, but I really was not a romance hater, either. I was something in between.

When the schedule said that the next few sessions would be spent reading and talking about *Twilight*, I was almost terrified of admitting that I liked *Twilight*. There were so many students who rejected it out of hand. Of course, I would not let them change my mind. But I listened carefully to their points of view. I wanted to know the "other" side of the *Twilight* hype. As it turned out, most of the students could not appreciate the series' representation of the vampires. I do have to admit, it is kitschy and unnecessary that they glitter in the sunlight. However, I found myself attracted to this image because their sparkling skin makes them look so beautiful. I was not any better than the other teenage girls who fell in love with Edward due to his

handsomeness. Was I that superficial? Were all my reading preferences based on a good looking vampire?

I did not let myself be disturbed by the appearance of the vampires. For me, it was absolutely legitimate to discover a world of vampires that differs to a great extent from the one already known to me from Anne Rice's novels, or *Dracula*, or *Buffy*, or *The Vampire Diaries*. I was able to ignore the implausibility of this world, or if not ignore then accept it as a given and unchangeable fact. Moreover, my fascination of *Twilight* was the major topic I wished to illuminate.

Vampires were still interesting to me but were not the only reason I read the novel series. I was also captivated by the sheer power of the love between Bella and Edward. They have to cope with difficulties no one else probably has to face ever in his/her life. The topic of a human-vampire-relationship is not new: Buffy loves the vampire Angel; Elena loves her vampire boyfriend Stefan; and also Louie changes Claudia into a vampire in order to be with her forever. Yet it still feels special in *Twilight*. Maybe this is because of both Edward's and Bella's lack of experience. Not only do they experience their first love but they also grow up together, even though Edward is already an old man. They experience the ritual of getting to know someone, of letting someone know one's emotions, and most private thoughts.

The plot of the fourth novel of the *Twilight* series, *Breaking Dawn*, is really odd. However, the marriage of Bella and Edward and hence a baby to complete their happiness seems to have been the only way to end the saga, at least one that would work well for devoted romance readers. In my case, Regis' argumentation applies: The process of the hero and heroine's love relationship is more important than the ending (Regis 2003: 14). Surely, I would have been sad and maybe a bit disappointed if Bella and Edward had not gotten together or even if one of them had died but I would have accepted it in the end because their relationship requires extraordinary events.

In the course of the sessions we read and talked about *Twilight* I noticed things I had not noticed or thought about before. I was shocked to hear that the motif of rape is supposedly in the novel. But on closer consideration, I read *Twilight* for pleasure. I did not reflect certain parts in detail. I did not have to, actually. Now, there was the need to reflect on some motifs in *Twilight*. I would not argue that the

motif of rape is very dominant in the story. It is, moreover, only an initial fear of being raped by Edward. He is still an inhuman creature who needs to control his cravings. Rebecca Housel even argues that Edward can be seen as a stalker. For example, he follows Bella into her bedroom at night and is very protective of her (cf. Housel 2009). I believe that the true romance reader will not interpret his behavior as being too strange or excessive. They will like him for being overprotective of Bella because he loves her so much. As long as he does not hurt or kill her, the romance will work fine for the readers.

Despite all the negative responses in the course, I did not change my mind concerning *Twilight* very much. Hearing and accepting the different opinions and thinking about them was a good way to find out why *Twilight* is fascinating to me. I will not be obsessive about it any more since I became more critical about reading romances in general. But I would not mind watching or reading *Twilight* another time, either. It is still highly enjoyable for me. As for other romances I have not changed my opinion about them, either. I tend to be a more negotiated reader now. I still will not read many romances and I will certainly not read them all the time. Instead, I will read, and watch, for that matter, romances that really interest me and that do not seem to be too kitschy and superficial.

The course helped me to shape my personal preferences concerning literature. It also strengthened my point of view about the romances I like. *Twilight* exemplifies this type of literature. Others could be found in the student presentations held in the course (e.g. *Pretty Woman*, *The Vampire Diaries*, *While You Were Sleeping*, *The Notebook*, to name but a few). The seminar even encouraged me to read more romances. Thus, I became a great fan of *The Time Traveler's Wife* and *Eat Pray Love*.

Finally, to answer the most basic question of this essay: Have I become a skeptic reader of romances? If I was a preferred reader in the beginning, I am now a more negotiated reader, even though romances remain among my favorite literary works. The academic essays we read in the seminar confirmed that I will not deviate from reading romances in the future. Regis' essay "The Romance Novel and Women's Bondage" reflects my point of view very well. Regis explains that critiques of romances argue that romances stand for the values of patriarchy (Regis 2003: 5):

Women are being oppressed by men in them. The heroine has no free will; she cannot make choices of her own. As in *Pamela*, the heroine has to obey her master's rules in order to have a representative role in society. This is to some extent also true of *Twilight*. If Bella wants to get what she wants, namely to have sex with Edward, she has to obey his conditions first, i.e. marry him first (note: this happens in the third and fourth book of the *Twilight* series, *Eclipse* and *Breaking Dawn*).

Nevertheless, I would argue that this cannot be seen as a form of pure patriarchy. Bella still has her own free will. She chooses to be with Edward forever. Therefore, she has to agree to certain conditions and limitations. Edward, on the other hand, has to cope with Bella's way of life, too. He cannot influence her decisions. If she wants to see her best friend, Jacob, then he has to accept this, as in *Eclipse*.

I would argue that the heroes in romances also have to obey the heroines' conditions. They are equal in the relationships. Regis' defense of the romance novel coheres with my opinions. Janice Radway's argumentation against romances, on the other hand, is comprehensible as well (cf. Radway 1991). But a preferred romance reader will ignore all the negative aspects Radway identifies in a romance. It does not matter if the reason for the hero's transformation of harshness into tenderness as caused by the heroine is not explicitly explained (Radway 1991:128). What is important is the fact that the transformation is evoked by the heroine.

The defense of the romance novel here clearly indicates that my reading position towards the genre has not changed into being negotiated or opposed. It is still preferred, even though I tend to be more critical in some ways. Thus, I do not like kitschy and too unrealistic scenes. This is the main criterion for me to choose romance novels. Moreover, I now judge romances not only on the basis of pleasure but also on the basis of my sense of the coherence of the plot and the characters.

3. List of Works Cited

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