Even Sociologists Fall in Love: An Exploration in the Sociology of Emotions

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What is This?
EVEN SOCIOLOGISTS FALL IN LOVE: AN EXPLORATION IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF EMOTIONS

STEVI JACKSON

Abstract While the institutionalisation of love in marriage and its representation in romantic fiction have been the focus of considerable attention in sociological and feminist writing, the cultural meaning of love as an emotion has been neglected. This paper explores the possibility of developing a sociological approach to love based upon the assumption that emotions are culturally constructed. Existing sociological and feminist work is suggestive of themes which the paper seeks to develop: the distinction commonly made between being ‘in love’ and love as longer term affection, the mysterious power accorded to the former emotion, the contradictions between these two forms of love and the ways in which the ideology of romance has been associated with women’s subordination. As a means of theorising these aspects of love, a conceptualisation of subjectivity as constituted through narrative or discourse is considered. This perspective may enable us to account for the cultural specificity of emotions, but there are questions which it leaves unanswered.

Key words: love, emotion (social construction of), romance, sexuality, narratives (of self).

Love, like other emotions, has received little attention from sociologists although there have been a few recent publications, written from diverse perspectives, which indicate a new interest in this area (Bertilsson 1986; Brunt 1988; Cancian 1991; Douglas and Atwell 1988; Luhmann 1986). Given that sociologists are wont to theorise on any and every aspect of everyday life, are generally interested in demonstrating that all relationships and institutions are social, why has ‘love’ escaped serious scrutiny?

It may be that love is seen as too personal, too individual to be subjected to sociological analysis. As Sarsby says:

The very idea that social forces, rather than one’s uniquely personal needs and desires, might have shaped the form of one’s love seems like an infringement of personal liberty, an intrusion into that mysterious, private world, the irrational splendour of one’s finer feelings (1983:1).

Sociologists have, however, been questioning the boundaries between public and private, social and personal for some time. There has been no reluctance to theorise other, equally personal, areas of life. Sexuality, in particular, has been a fashionable area of theoretical debate for nearly twenty years, yet love, which
we might expect to be treated as an aspect of the sexual, is rarely mentioned. Within these debates feminist work on love, such as that of de Beauvoir (1972) and Firestone (1972), has largely been ignored. It is tempting to conclude that much of this theorising has taken place within masculinist discourses which maintain a separation between love and sex and within which the former is seen as a peculiarly feminine concern, of little import for serious critical analysis. Even within feminist theory, however, the critiques of love developed early in the second wave of feminism have not been elaborated further. Romance as a popular cultural form has received far more attention than love itself (see, for example Griffin 1982; Modleski 1984; Radway 1987; Taylor 1989; Fowler 1991; McRobbie 1982, 1989; Christian-Smith 1991).

Far from being just a personal, private phenomenon, love is very much a part of our public culture. We are surrounded by representations of love in what is deemed ‘great’ art and literature as well as in soap opera, popular music and fiction and advertising. The pervasiveness of love as a representational theme is related to its institutionalisation in marriage and family life. Feminists and non-feminists alike have recognised the centrality of the concept of ‘love’ to familial ideology, to the maintenance of heterosexual monogamy and patriarchal marriage. Love may also serve to bind us to the existing social order in a more subtle and more general way. The point which Heath (1982) has made about the ‘sexual fix’ could be just as applicable to love: that we are continually enjoined to seek fulfilment in personal relationships and to treat these as unrelated to, outside, the social. Hence we strive to improve our personal lives rather than the structures which constrain and limit them.

Any speculation on the sociological importance of love rests upon the assumption that ideologies in some way connect with individual subjectivity. The idea of romantic love would have little effect if it did not have some resonance for individuals, did not make sense in term of our felt emotional states and personal relationships. The capacity to ‘fall in love’ thus itself requires explanation.

Love cannot be treated as if it has an existence independent of the social and cultural context within which it is experienced. The idea that emotions are somehow pre-social, and therefore outside the sociologist’s field of vision, is beginning to be challenged. It has been suggested that feeling is subject to individual and social management, that ‘in managing feeling we contribute to the creation of it’ (Hochschild 1983:18)), that our sense of what emotions are is culturally specific (Lutz 1986; Rosaldo 1984), and that ‘there are complex linguistic and other social preconditions for the . . . existence of human emotions’ (Jagger 1989:151).

Following those who maintain that emotions are socially and culturally constructed I want to argue for an approach to ‘love’ which regards the emotion itself as just as much cultural as the conventions which surround it, but which still takes seriously the subjective experience of love. I will begin by looking critically at some existing sociological and feminist perspectives on love. I will
then go on to explore the possibilities for building on the insights of these analyses, while avoiding the essentialist conceptualisations of emotion which often informed them. Whilst not pretending to have developed a wholly adequate theorisation, I suggest some lines of enquiry which I think it worthwhile to pursue. After all, even sociologists fall in love and perhaps we should recognise and make use of this in exploring theoretical possibilities.

Sociological Perspectives on Love

One aspect of love which has received some attention from social theorists is the link between romantic love and marriage. The idea that the former is a necessary condition for the latter has frequently been identified, by anthropologists and historians as well as sociologists, as a peculiarity of modern Western societies. Generally this is explained in terms of a decline in obligations towards kin beyond the conjugal unit and the rise of capitalist individual freedoms (Goode 1959; Shorter 1976; Stone 1977; Luhmann 1986). As Bertilsson puts it, summarising Luhmann, ‘the economic market finds a correspondence in the market of free emotions’ (1986:28). What Luhmann states explicitly is often implied by others – that there is a functional fit between romantic love and modern society. It provides a means of communication and self-realisation in a complex, impersonal and anonymous world. Weber (1948) ties love to modernity slightly differently, as simultaneously a product of and a reaction to rationalisation. For Weber love is a way of seeking personal salvation in this world (as opposed to other-worldly salvation), but it is also an assertion of the irrational in opposition to the rational, although the threat this potentially poses is neutralised by the domestication of love.

The extent to which all this is modern has been challenged. In Europe free choice of marriage partners long pre-dates both industrialisation and the rise of capitalism (Macfarlane 1978, 1986, 1987; Sarsby 1983). Macfarlane (1987) endorses the orthodox view that marriage for love is related to a lack of extended kinship obligations and to market oriented individualistic values but, in keeping with his general historical thesis (1978), argues that these conditions were present, at least in England, long before the rise of capitalism. Sarsby (1983), on the other hand, argues that the long history of free choice marriage does not necessarily mean that love has remained unchanged throughout this history.

If love has changed historically then it cannot be a pre-given constant feature of human life (Sarsby 1983; Luhmann 1986). Yet paradoxically arguments concerning the historical and cultural variability of romantic love are frequently underpinned by essentialist, or even downright biologicist, assumptions. Macfarlane for example, while claiming that romantic love is a culturally specific phenomenon says:
Something about the kinship system in parts of Europe, and the way it is interlocked with politics, economics and religion, gave the biological drives a great deal of freedom. Indeed the economy and society seemed positively to stimulate the natural emotions (1987:142).

Here it appears that ‘falling in love’ is a natural emotion which happens to people when social controls upon it are lifted, that love is suppressed where it is dysfunctional and allowed to flourish where it is functional. Goode’s cross cultural analysis similarly regards love as a ‘universal psychological potential, which is controlled by a range of . . . structural patterns’ (Goode 1974:156). His basic thesis is that, left to their own devices, young people everywhere would fall in love. In some societies they are prevented from doing so, while in others social control takes the more subtle form of ensuring that the young fall in love with appropriate partners. Like those who focus on social change, Goode accounts for this variation in terms of the importance of marriage relative to other kinship ties.

The essentialism underpinning these analyses involves taking the concept of ‘love’ as unproblematic, proceeding as if we all know what it is and can recognise it whenever and wherever it occurs, even in societies very different from our own.¹ The fact that free choice of marriage partners has existed in other cultures or in our own society in the past should not lead us to claim some universality for the experience of romantic love.

A further, and crucial, issue here is that of gender. It has often been claimed that romantic love results from an equalisation of relationships between men and women (Shorter 1976), or is only truly attainable where material equality between partners prevails (Engels 1884). Weber is unusual among pre-feminist theorists in raising the possibility that love might not be experienced in the same way by women and men and that it might involve the subjugation of women. This, of course, was central to the critique of heterosexual love developed by de Beauvoir (1972) and later elaborated by others in the early years of ‘second wave’ feminism (Firestone 1972; Comer 1974). These analyses opened up the possibility of theoretical debates on love, but the way in which they were framed subsequently silenced further explorations. Once the oppressive nature of love for women had been exposed, to try to explore it further seemed at best banal and at worst ideologically unsound.

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Feminist Critiques of Love

It starts when you sink into his arms and ends with your arms in his sink.

This slogan sums up the central tenet of feminist critiques of love. Love was seen as an ideology which legitimated women’s oppression and which trapped them into exploitative heterosexual relationships. Some accorded it
even greater effectivity than this. Firestone, for example, asserted that ‘love, perhaps even more than childbearing, is the pivot of women’s oppression today’ (1972:121).²

What was so dangerous about love was women’s tendency to become totally immersed in it. For de Beauvoir women’s self abnegation through love not only reinforced their subordination but resulted from a subjectivity constituted through that subordination.

There is no other way out for her but to lose herself, body and soul, in him who is represented to her as absolute, as the essential . . . . She chooses to desire her enslavement so ardently that it will seem to her the expression of her liberty . . . she will humble herself to nothingness before him. Love becomes for her a religion (de Beauvoir 1972:653).

Being so obsessed with love was seen as diverting energies from other possible achievements. Moreover, making one person the centre of one’s emotional universe was taken as symptomatic of emotional impoverishment elsewhere, the exclusivity of love meant quantifying and confining our emotions. As Lee Comer expressed it:

monogamy has come to be the definition of love, a yardstick by which we measure the rest of our emotions. ‘Real’ love is only that which is exclusively focused on one person of the opposite sex – all else is labelled ‘liking’. Like so much butter, romantic love must be spread thickly on one slice of bread; to spread it over several is to spread it ‘thinly’ (1974:219).

Love was also seen as making women vulnerable, not just to exploitation, but to being hurt by men. As de Beauvoir said ‘the word love has by no means the same meaning for both sexes’ (1972:652), a view endorsed by Firestone (1972). Although these two theorists differed in their analyses of the meaning of love for men and women, they agreed that women invest far more in love and that they give far more affection to men than they receive in return.³ This was not seen as part of women’s nature, rooted in some essential way in the feminine psyche, but as a product of the material conditions of women’s lives. Love was linked to women’s search for a positive identity, a sense of themselves as valued, in a society which undervalues and marginalises them.

For feminists romantic love was not a constant feature of human nature, but was the product of society and culture. It served to tie us to monogamous marriage which, given the power relations between men and women and the ways in which femininity and masculinity were constituted, was a relationship doomed to failure. This position was stated forcefully by Lee Comer:

Any glance round society reveals that the sexes are placed on opposite poles, with an enormous chasm of oppression, degradation and misunderstanding generated to keep them apart. Out of this, marriage plucks one woman and one man, ties them together with ‘love’ and asserts that they shall, for the rest of their lives, bridge that chasm with a mixture of betrayal, sex, affection, deceit and illusion (Comer 1974:227).
Underlying such critiques of the link between love, monogamy and marriage was often a belief in some ‘purer’ form of love, freed from power relationships and bourgeois institutions, which would be more diffuse, more widely spread throughout our social experience. Firestone and Comer, writing from very different points on the feminist political spectrum share similar assumptions here. For Firestone romance is love distorted by power. She asks:

Why has all the joy and excitement been concentrated, driven into one narrow, difficult-to-find human experience and all the rest laid waste? (1972:147).

She argues for the rediffusion of ‘sexual joy and excitement . . . over the spectrum of our lives’. Similarly Comer suggests that:

In rare moments, when the external categories which fragment our emotions fall away, we glimpse the possibility of whole feelings (Comer 1974:219).

These ‘whole feelings’ involve a plurality of loves directed towards a multiplicity of others. Monogamous, heterosexual love is seen as a false solution to the fragmentation of the self which binds us to oppressive relationships. It is:

The means by which we are allowed to recompose the fragmentation of our selves into an apparent whole. So that jealousy comes to be regarded as the objective proof of love instead of an excrecence of the emotions. So that sex is legitimised, so that attraction and warmth and affection can be called ‘love’, which can then be parcelled into marriage (Comer 1974:220).

Compared with more recent feminist analyses of the ways in which our subjectivities our constituted, much of this seems rather naive. The very possibility of ‘whole selves’ is the product of particular humanist discourse which now seems highly questionable (Weeden 1987) and the notion of a pure love uncontaminated by cultural and social structures has become untenable. More than this, the tone of Firestone’s and Comer’s critiques suggests that this quest for love is an illusion which, once ‘seen through’, can be easily discarded. This simplistic conception of ideology and its relation to subjectivity, the implication that all we needed was an effort of will to break out from the shackles of exclusive romantic love, effectively precluded the possibility of confronting the potency of this emotion and seeking for an explanation of it.

Although flawed, these feminist analyses were more critical than those of conventional social theorists and raised questions which deserve re-examination in the light of more recent theoretical developments. In particular the idea that ‘love’ may be a way in which we seek to resolve some of the contradictions of our existence, the exclusivity and potential oppressiveness of the relationships into which it draws us are themes which should be pursued.

**What is Love?**

Most analyses of love, contrary to normal social scientific practice, do not attempt a definition of the object of enquiry. Romantic convention tells us that
love is in essence indefinable, mysterious, outside rational discourse. Its meaning is held to be knowable only intuitively, at the level of feeling, and cannot be communicated in precise terms. Social theorists have generally accepted this, thus taking for granted what is part of a cultural construction of love. They have refrained from examining the irrational and unpredictable and have concentrated instead on institutionalised expressions of love. Descriptions of the emotion itself tend to be literary rather than theoretical. Emotions, in the sense of what is subjectively felt by individuals, are not observable phenomena.

We have no access either to our own emotions or to those of others, independent of or unmediated by the discourse of our culture (Jagger 1989:148).

There is thus no way of exploring love except through the ways in which it is talked and written about. Language itself, moreover, contributes to the cultural construction of emotions and is a means by which we participate in creating a shared sense of what emotions are.

The cultural construction of romantic love is many layered. Its most superficial elements, those most amenable to challenge and change are such romantic conventions as the celebration of Valentine’s day, gifts of red roses or candle-lit dinners. These are customs of recent origin by no means essential to the experience of love. More fundamental is the link between love and ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (Rich 1980) institutionalised in marriage. Here we have a social relationship and legal contract of considerable importance and which most of the population enter into. Yet not all lovers necessarily marry: many are debarred from doing so if they are lesbian, homosexual or already married. The increased incidence of cohabitation indicates that many are choosing not to marry or to postpone marriage. Even more fundamental and more firmly embedded in our culture are the ideals and hopes of personal fulfilment, contentment, companionship and affection commonly invested in love relationships. This is different again from the mysterious, overpowering emotion of ‘falling in love’ which is deemed such a powerful force. It is being ‘in love’ which for Weber (1948) is the irrational reaction to rationality, for Barthes (1978) creates a sense of ‘disreality’, for Macfarlane (1987) possesses a ‘compulsive authority’. It is this which I wish to explore further.

The adjectives commonly used to describe the experience of ‘falling in love’ mark it as very different from other forms of love. Love for parents, children, siblings or friends is not usually thought of as compelling, overwhelming, uncontrollable, inexplicable and ecstatic – nor even is love in a long-term sexual relationship. Many of the discussions of the history of romantic love, however, rest on the assumption that conjugal love – lasting affection and companionship – is the outcome of falling in love. A distinction is commonly made in our culture between loving someone and being in love with them, as it was by most of the women in Shere Hite’s (1988) study. Only a small minority of those who had been in a relationship for more than two years said that they were ‘in love’ with their partners, but they nearly all said that they loved him or her. This
difference is also noted by other recent commentators on love (Sarsby 1983; Macfarlane 1987; Douglas and Atwell 1988). Macfarlane’s account implies that this is in some way functional:

We need to distinguish between an irrational, passionate love that helps in selecting a partner, and compassionate love that maintains a relationship. Choice . . . is always difficult . . . some external force of desire is needed to help the individual make a choice. Hence passionate love overwhelms and justifies and provides compulsive authority (1987 141–142).

Sarsby, however, stresses the contradictions between these two forms of love.

Love is seen as the bolt from the blue against which one cannot struggle, the pre-ordained meeting of twin souls, the compulsion which allows one to break any of society’s rules as long as one is faithful to the emotion itself. The extraordinary contradiction lies in the fact that love is the almost prescribed condition for marriage in most of Europe and the United States . . . millions of private, potentially socially disruptive, emotional dramas are virtually the only acceptable means of moving towards marriage . . . the ‘taming’ of love into this most conventional of patterns is one of its mysteries (1983: 5–6).

I would agree that there is indeed a fundamental contradiction here. Love may impel us into monogamous unions but it can equally be a threat to monogamy, a reason for changing partners or engaging in extra-marital liaisons (Lawson 1988).

But what is the nature of this exotic, exciting passionate compulsion? It is often described, as it is by Weber (1948), as a form of ecstasy akin to a mystical experience or, in Bertilsonn’s words ‘comparable in force and in momentum to a religious conversion’ (186:28). Yet casting love in such mystical terms as a ‘fusion of souls’ (Weber 1948:347) does not help us to comprehend this emotion. Rather it seems to accord it a special legitimacy by placing it on some higher plane inaccessible to reason or explanation. This, of course, is part of the ideological packaging of romantic love: ‘fools give you reasons, wise men (sic) never try’.

At a more mundane level love is represented in popular culture through well-established romantic formulae of the ‘moonlight and roses’ variety. Lucy Goodison says of these:

They may be the pre-formed moulds which society offers us to pour our love into: but they are not its source. These fantasies are pretty, while the central drive of falling in love seems to be more of a blood and guts affair. It is not just glamorous and appealing. More than wanting to cosset the beloved we may feel we want to eat them alive . . . . Romantic feelings and fantasies may be the blossoms produced by being in love, but its roots lie deeper in the earth. The power it feeds on is not essentially romantic, but one that tears at the innards (1983:51–52).

This description may suffer from the essentialist implication that love at root is somehow asocial, but its emphasis on the powerful viscerality of love captures
the compulsiveness associated with the emotion in a way which neither banal romanticism nor high flown mysticism can. This is, after all, an emotion which is not only experienced as overwhelming and uncontrollable, but is also often described as violent, even ruthless (Bertilsönn 1986) and so powerful as to be almost unendurable (Haug et al. 1987). Even its more cliched symptoms – the can’t eat, can’t sleep syndrome for instance – are more in tune with Goodison’s depiction of love than those descriptions which focus on hearts and flowers or unions of souls.

The power attributed to this emotion is far more difficult to account for than the mere link between mutual affection and free choice of marriage partners which has been the main focus of most discussions of the ‘romantic love complex’. It can neither be dismissed as the simple product of capitalist or patriarchal ideologies, nor should it be accepted as a universal incomprehensible fact of human nature. The capacity to experience this emotion must, like all human experience, be mediated by language and culture. It is also clearly deeply embedded in our subjectivities and must in some way be formed in and through the processes by which our subjectivities are socially constituted. It is an emotion to which both sceptics and romantics can succumb, which is felt by lesbians and gay men as well as by heterosexuals. It is much easier to refuse to participate in romantic rituals, to resist pressures towards conventional marriage, to be cynical about ‘happy ever after’ endings than it is to avoid falling in love.

*Being ‘In Love’*

I now want to specify further what, within Western culture, is understood by being ‘in love’ and how it is differentiated from other, related experiences. It is necessary here to bear in mind de Beauvoir’s dictum that love does not have the same meaning for men and women.\(^5\)

The most obvious way in which romantic love differs from other forms of love is that it is sexual. There are those who consider that this form of love can be equated with sexual desire, that it is merely lust gift wrapped in romantic conventions. A substantial minority of Hite’s (1988) respondents, 28 per cent, equated love and lust and saw the former as an excuse for the latter. Certainly for many women love and sexual desire are more closely associated than is reported to be the case among men. Among Lawson’s (1988) sample of adulterers, both men and women placed sexual fulfilment ahead of love among their motives for engaging in extra-marital liaisons. Yet for women love came a close second while for men it was far less important. Research with young, adolescent women suggests that the very capacity for sexual arousal may be bound up with understanding this sensation as love (Jackson 1982; Lees 1986). Sexual relations are, for young women in particular, still fraught with anxieties about sexual exploitation (see Leonard 1980; Jackson 1982; Lees 1986; Wallace
1987; Thompson and Scott 1991). In this context ‘love’ serves to validate sexual activity morally, aesthetically and emotionally. An act which might otherwise be characteristic of a ‘slag’ is transformed into something beautiful, magical and pleasurable (Jackson 1982). Similarly Leonard says of romantic love that it is:

a means by which women in our society resolve the contradiction between being sexually desirous but not sexually experienced. They sublimate their sexual feelings into a ‘courtly love’ mould, and thereby ignore the passive, dominated role they must occupy in heterosexual courtship (Leonard 1980:262).

It has been suggested that part of the attraction of romantic fiction lies in the way in which it resolves such contradictions (Radway 1987; Finn 1988). It also articulates the strong association between love and sex felt by many women. Romance has been described as ‘pornography of the feelings, where emotions replace sexual parts’ (Wilson 1983:43). Radway’s (1987) romance readers certainly seemed to gain pleasure (arousal?) from reading of sexual encounters represented as the consummation of love, although as McRobbie (1991) points out, these women readers reveal little of their sexual desires.

Even so, it is not always the case even for women that lust and being in love are experienced as one and the same, and scepticism about romantic love has been reported even among the very young (see Griffin 1987; Wallace 1987). As Goodison (1983) comments it is possible to feel powerful sexual attraction, ‘magnificent lust’, without it necessarily being accompanied by the dizzying, stomach churning sensations/emotions associated with being in love. She suggests one peculiar feature of the lust felt while in love, that is not concerned with purely physical gratification. Ordinary lust or arousal is capable of satisfaction; lust when in love is insatiable.6

That love is not really about caring for another, but is a very self-centred emotion, is suggested by a range of theorists from Firestone (1972) to Luhmann (1986). Love has generally been associated with individualism in terms of free choice of partners, but it may also be individualistic in a deeper sense. To be in love is to make one unique other the centre of your universe, but it also demands the same in return. Desire demands that we should be the ‘only one’ for the other. This exclusiveness may be a product of a culture which encourages us to think of individuals as unique beings who are somehow essentially ‘ourselves’ independent of the social milieu within which our selves have been forged (see Geertz 1984; Errington and Gewertz 1987). Yet paradoxically the other whom we love, this special person, is frequently our own creation: the ‘real’ individual we imagine we love may be little more than a pretext around which our fantasies are woven (Wilson 1983, 1988).

The self-centredness of those in love can be seen as straightforwardly anti-social. Ros Brunt comments that she has never been convinced that all the world loves a lover:

This most highly prized form of love has a selfish indulgent and extraordinarily egotistical aspect. . . . It . . . encourages a massive self absorption that ‘makes the
world go away’ to an extent that can be quite disturbing to anyone else in the immediate vicinity, and devastating to what are seen as other, less important social affiliations (Brunt 1988:21).

Being in love in some way places the lover outside the mundane, everyday world. It is this which Barthes calls ‘disreality’, a state in which ‘any general conversation which I am obliged to listen to (if not take part in) appalls me, paralyses me’ (Barthes 1978:88). As the title of Goodisons’s (1983) paper expresses it ‘really being in love means wanting to live in a different world’. This, of course, is part of the attraction and excitement of love, what Brunt calls its utopian aspect, which has led others to liken it to a mystical ecstatic religious experience.

The lover knows himself (sic) to be freed from the cold skeleton hand of the rational orders, just as completely as from the banality of everyday routine (Weber 347).

Such ecstasy and self-absorption centred exclusively on a single other renders the lover extremely vulnerable. This vulnerability, often manifested as jealousy, is associated with the chronic insecurity of the lover. If being in love is, as I’ve suggested, fuelled by a desire that cannot be satisfied, then insecurity may be fundamental to it. This impossible desire is part of the excitement of being in love, an excitement which cannot be allayed so long as the gratification it seeks is denied. Romantic love is played out around themes of ‘compulsion and denial’ (Wilson 1983:42). Love stories end at the moment of final consummation since ‘gratification destroys the compulsion little by little’ (Wilson 1983:42).

Freud was not without insight in arguing that love thrives only when obstacles are put in its way (Freud 1912). Feeling insecure is not, I think, merely a result of being in love but is fundamental to its continuance. This is recognised in commonsense folkways in ‘playing hard to get’ as a means of arousing another’s interest. It is why being ‘in love’ appears to wear off once lovers feel secure with each other (Douglas and Atwell 1988), and why long-term relationships cannot provide the excitement we prize so highly leading some, perhaps, to taste the novel, forbidden fruits of adultery (Lawson 1988). There appears to be something about romantic love as described in both social scientific and literary writings which suggests that it is the product of restriction and unattainability.

Love is often unrequited and rarely balanced. A recurrent theme in Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse* is this imbalance which is played out around the theme of waiting, whether it be the modern Western lover waiting for a telephone call or the Chinese mandarin waiting in the courtesan’s garden for the one hundred nights to elapse after which she has promised herself to him – on the ninety-ninth night he picks up his stool and walks away. For Barthes waiting encapsulates the powerlessness of the lover, being in the power of the other. ‘The lover’s fatal identity is precisely: I am the one who waits’. The other does not wait (Barthes 1978:40).
Yet if love is powerlessness symbolised by waiting, it also holds out the promise of power, of being the loved one, of ensnaring another into this total psychic dependence. This may be part of the specifically powerful attraction that love has for women. It is perhaps the only way in which women can hope to have power over men. This is another common theme of romances and may, as Modleski (1984) suggests, be a way in which women can give vent to some of their anger towards men and a desire for vengeance. In both fairy tales and romantic fiction love tames and transforms the beast: love has the power to bring him to his knees. The ways in which such narratives engage with our desires and fantasies is a theme to which I now turn.

Love Stories: the Narrative Construction of Emotion

Feelings are not substances to be discovered in our blood, but social practices organised by stories that we both enact and tell. They are structured by our forms of understanding (Rosaldo 1984:143).

Our subjectivities, including that aspect of them we understand as our emotions, are shaped by social and cultural processes and structures but are not simply passively accepted by us. As Haug (1987) has argued, we actively participate in working ourselves into structures and this in part explains the strength of our subjection to them. We create for ourselves a sense of what our emotions are, of what being 'in love' is. We do this by participating in sets of meanings constructed, interpreted, propagated and deployed throughout our culture, through learning scripts, positioning ourselves within discourses, constructing narratives of self. We make sense of feelings and relationships in terms of love because a set of discourses around love pre-exists us as individuals and through these we have learnt what love means. As Ros Brunt comments:

The script for love has already been written and is being continually recycled in all the love songs and love stories of Western literature and contemporary media (Brunt 1988:19).

When we fall in love it feels like ‘getting to star in your own movie’ (Brunt 1988:19). What Brunt is describing here is not a passive internalisation of these scripts but an active sense of locating ourselves within them. The idea of love as a narrative or drama is recognised too in a long-running advertisement for the ‘Dateline’ agency which offers its services as chance to be part of ‘your own love story’.

Those who feel themselves to be ‘in love’ have a wealth of novels, plays, movies and songs on which to draw to make sense of and describe their passion. This can manifest itself in the half-conscious self-dramatisation so acutely observed by Barthes in a passage where he once again situates the lover as waiting – this time in a cafe. The beloved is late:
In the prologue, the sole actor in the play, I discern and indicate the other's delay . . . (I look at my watch several times); the prologue ends with a brainstorm: I decide to 'take it badly', I release the anxiety of waiting. Act I now beings; it is occupied with suppositions: was there a misunderstanding as to the time, the place? . . . What is to be done . . .? Try another cafe? Telephone? But if the other comes during these absences? . . . Act II is the act of anger; I address violent reproaches to the absent one . . . . In Act III I attain to . . . the anxiety of abandonment . . . the other is dead: explosion of grief . . . That is the play . . . (Barthes 1984:37–38).

Here we have a sense that emotions can be managed in accordance with certain conventions (he decides to 'take it badly'), that there is some intentionality involved in the expression of emotion (see also Hochschild 1983; Jagger 1989). That Barthes' scenario can be recognised by many as typical of a lover's experience suggests that this emotion called 'love', so often represented as uniquely personal and inexplicable, follows culturally prescribed patterns. Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse* (1978) is constructed from what he terms 'fragments' of others' writings on love. His invitation to his readers to position ourselves within this discourse is something most of us can readily accomplish because, as he assumes, we can recognise ourselves and our own experiences in at least some of the fragments he offers us. This is not because the Western literary tradition has simply recorded some pre-existing emotion, some essential human 'truth', but because that tradition supplies us with narrative forms with which we begin to be familiarised in childhood and through which we learn what love is. Throughout our lives we are exposed to and participate in the sort of drama Barthes describes.

Within our culture public and private narratives often overlap and intermesh. Private narratives become public, for example, in magazines through readers' letters, problem pages and features based on 'real life' emotional dramas. Television and radio stations also offer similar opportunities for narrative disclosure through chat shows, phone-ins and so on. Radio One's regular morning feature 'Our Tune' is a case in point (see Montgomery 1991). With the theme music from Zeffirelli's film of *Romeo and Juliet* playing in the background, a story of an emotional turning point in a listener's life is recounted, usually (although not always) focusing on heterosexual romance. Through these sorts of media products we are invited to construct narratives and to make use of narrative strategies already available through those same media. Often comparisons are made between such fictional narratives as TV soaps and dramas and 'real life' by offering us glimpses of the private lives of their stars, drawing parallels or contrasts between the actors’ lives and those of the characters they play. Implicitly or explicitly we are prompted by such stories to make sense of our own lives and others' lives through narrative.

Narratives are thus not merely a form encountered in novels, plays and films. They are very much a part of everyday cultural competences. We constantly tell stories: events we have witnessed or participated in are recounted to others in
narrative form and in our fantasies we tell ourselves stories. We learn to do this from an early age and in so doing we also learn to construct and reconstruct our own biographies in narrative form. Hence our subjectivities are in part constituted through narrative (Johnson 1986). As Rosaldo (1984) suggests the stories we enact and tell structure past and present experience and allow us to project future experience.

Where love is concerned such narratives are also differentiated by gender, discursively constructing for us gender specific subject positions. This may be important to men’s and women’s different experiences of love. To be overly emotional for a Western male, particularly within Anglo-Saxon culture, is to bring his masculinity into question. Most discourses around gender, sexuality and love represent women as the more emotional gender: not only as being more nurturant and expressive but also as more deeply emotive beings. Hence, as Hollway (1984) notes, men’s ability to displace fear of their own emotional needs onto women and their tendency when talking about heterosexual relationships to articulate a certain anxiety are centred on a fear of commitment. In talking about their sexual and emotional relationships with women, the men Hollway interviewed drew on two discourses. Within the ‘male sexual drive discourse’, constructed around physical desire rather than love or affection, men cast themselves as subjects and women as objects. Within the ‘have-hold discourse’, however, men positioned themselves as objects in danger of entrapment by the emotionally needy female subject. Men’s distancing themselves from emotion, their fear of loss of control, has been noted by a number of writers and is experienced by women as a problematic aspect of heterosexual relationships (see for example Cancian 1990; Hite 1988; Mansfield and Collard 1988; Rubin 1983).

Western masculinity is not constituted as wholly unemotional; rather, boys and men are not encouraged to develop competence in locating themselves within discourses of the emotions. The narratives woven around love and romance are available to both women and men within our culture, but not equally so. Being constituted as feminine involves girls in discourses of feeling and emotion, and more specifically the culture of romance, from which boys are more often excluded or from which they exclude themselves in order to construct a sense of their own maleness. It is through the idiom of sexual bravado and conquest, not the language of romance, that masculinity is asserted (Wallace 1987; Wood 1984).

Children learn the standard pattern of romance narrative very early in life from such sources as fairy tales. Bronwyn Davies’ (1989) study of Australian pre-school children demonstrates that young children of both sexes have learnt romantic convention to the extent that they are dismayed when it is flouted. Neither boys nor girls were impressed by the ending of a feminist fairytale in which the princess decides that the prince is not worth bothering with and skips off into the sunset alone. Girls tended to view the clever resourceful princess more positively and the spoilt selfish prince more negatively than did the boys,
but they still wished for a conventional conclusion to the story. This perhaps presages the preference of teenage and adult romance readers for spirited heroines who nonetheless do not step far enough outside the bounds of acceptable femininity to alienate the hero (Radway 1987; Christian-Smith 1991).

Reading matter marketed for girls continues this acculturation into romance. Even comics for young girls with no romantic or sexual content, as Walkerdine (1984) notes, construct narratives around feminine self-sacrifice and the good-girl/other-girl dualism which continue into teenage and adult romance fiction. Through such media sources, as well as through conversations with other girls and adult women, girls are learning nuances of meaning through which they make sense of emotions and relationships.

This is certainly culturally specific. The anthropologists Errington and Gewertz' account of the gulf of understanding which separates their teenage daughter Alexis from Lucy, a young New Guinea Chambri woman with whom she had been close friends in childhood, illustrates this. Alexis, who had been reading *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* found it 'incomprehensible' that Lucy, having chosen to remain with her own kin rather than live with the father of her child 'was neither distraught nor even distressed by the loss of her Heathcliffe' (Errington and Gewertz 1987:128). They note that such novels are not simply a means by which we make sense of our own and others' experience 'but are among the many cultural mechanisms which lead individuals to regard themselves and others as having a subjective self' (Errington and Gewertz 1987:166). This sense of individual subjectivity was alien to Chambri culture, where people saw themselves in terms of their position within social networks rather than in terms of assumed interior feelings and motives. The sense of a unique individual essence identified as central to Western post-enlightenment thought could, then, be a prerequisite for romantic narrative which hinges on the idea of two such unique individuals being made for each other.

This learning of romance narrative, which Alexis shares with many of her Western contemporaries, is not a process where girls are passive recipients of inculcation into romanticism, rather it is a resource they draw upon in making sense of their emotional and social world. As Christian-Smith (1991) found, for young teenage girls romance fiction may be quite explicitly read in an attempt to learn the scripts and conventions of heterosexual relationships. She also suggests, importantly, that romance reading may be for girls a form of literary consumption about which they can demonstrate knowledge and competence. Romantic fiction, soap operas and other feminine genres are not something girls merely consume: they are narrative forms which they can learn to manipulate, second guessing the plots of what they read or see (Christian-Smith 1991), using similar narrative structures and devices in what they themselves write (Moss 1989) or employing them to construct their own private fantasies (Thompson 1989). The decline in romantic fiction in teenage magazines noted by McRobbie (1991) is unlikely to herald the decline of the culture of romance.
The features in many of these magazines, especially those concerning the stars of popular music, may well be providing the material for personal romantic fantasies which girls find preferable to the stilted photo-stories they are offered (Thompson 1989).

What is being created in these narratives and shared in the feminine culture of girls and women is a certain form of emotional literacy which men rarely acquire. Women often find men emotionally illiterate precisely because men have not learnt to construct and manipulate romance narratives or wider discourses of emotion. Men are generally aware of the more superficial conventions of romance, but not its more complex aspects. Women may find this annoying and often hurtful, but they also make allowances for it. Part of the culture of romance consists in women’s shared knowledge that men are creatures with emotional disabilities which we can help them overcome, that they have a more emotional side buried under their masculine posturing (Radway 1987). This shared feminine knowledge is not merely a product of romance narrative, though it is central to it, it is also bound up with the material realities of gender, the fact that men rely on women, rather than each other, for nurturance.

It is in these terms that Radway accounts for the specific pleasures of reading romance – it satisfies a need for nurturance which women do not receive in everyday life. The heroes of the romances which Radway’s sample of readers most enjoyed were ‘spectacularly masculine’ (Radway 1989:128), but with a hint of something softer beneath the hard exterior. The hero behaves in characteristically masculine ways, hurting and humiliating the heroine. In the end, however, his cruelty is explained as resulting from misunderstanding: eventually, with the help of the heroine, his softer side is revealed as he declares his love for her. Radway sees this form of narrative structure as a means by which women can deal with their anxieties about masculinity, explaining its negative consequences for them, without fundamentally challenging it. They gain pleasure from identification with a heroine who is finally nurtured by the hero and whose identity is confirmed by his love for her.

But where is the passion, excitement and eroticism in this account of romance? The ideal romances which Radway describes do not simply represent the heroine as the recipient of affection, but as the object of uncontrollable passion. The hero often rapes the heroine in these novels. This is constructed not as an act of violence but as the result of overwhelming desire. Again Radway suggests that women are thus enabled to deal with real fears about male violence without questioning the patriarchal society and culture which produces it. This may be the case, but it does not explain why women find pleasure and excitement in this eroticisation of male power: and this is implied in her account of romance readers. It is also a feature of Helen Taylor’s (1989) study of Gone With The Wind fans, many of whom found the scene in which Rhett rapes Scarlett highly erotic. They do not, however, generally describe this scene as a rape: rather Rhett is seen as ‘driven mad’ by his love for Scarlett.
and his actions are read as resulting from her power over him. The meaning of the quintessential male enactment of power over woman is thus reversed. This may be suggestive of the excitement which romance offers women: the excitement of a form of power over men (cf. Modleski 1984). The attraction of romance for women may well lie in their material powerlessness.

Radway’s (1987) account conflates the two forms of love which those who inhabit our Western culture habitually distinguish between. One is a felt need for nurturance which could be satisfied but which, for heterosexual women frequently is not, the other is romantic desire experienced as overwhelming, insatiable. This is precisely what romantic narrative and the ideology of romantic love does: it assumes that the former is the outcome of the latter. The ‘happily ever after’ conclusion of fairy tales and romances papers over the contradictions between these two forms of love.

The narrative closure effected at the moment of passion’s consummation indicates that the excitement lies in the chase not in the ‘happily ever after’. Many of the ‘great’ romances of Western cultural tradition end in death, thus refusing routinisation (Wilson 1983). The attraction of romance narrative in part lies in the ability to relive the chase over and over again. Have we learnt too well that the story ends when mutual love is established, that once past that point the narrative has no direction? Or is there something else which predisposes us to pursue a form of love which evaporates almost as soon as we think we have captured it?

**Conclusion**

All this raises far more questions than can be answered. Ideas I think worth pursuing are clear: the idea that narratives of self are something we actively construct through accessing certain discourses and narrative structures existing within our culture, the notion that subjectivity, indeed the very idea that we are individual subjects, is discursively constructed. I would not wish to rule out the possibility that certain felt emotional needs and desires are constituted through our early experiences of nurture and through our entry into a particular culture, but any account of this must recognise the historical and cultural specificity of these experiences and should not assume that our emotional needs are irreversibly fixed at some point in childhood. Since gender differences are so crucial a factor in understanding the culture of romance it is also important to remember the material power differences between women and men: women’s historic economic dependence on men, the emotional and physical labour they perform for men within households and families underpin published and broadcast romance narratives and the narratives we construct around our own experience of romantic and domestic attachments.
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Notes

1. As Rosaldo (1980) reminds us, we cannot assume when making cross-cultural comparisons (and the same applies to historical ones) that we are comparing like with like. When we think we recognise a social phenomenon as familiar it may only be because we have imposed meanings derived from our own society on the cultural patterns of another.

2. In drawing out common themes in the work of representative feminist thinkers, I am necessarily glossing over their differences. For example, where de Beauvoir emphasises women’s tendency to worship an idealised male, Firestone sees men as more prone to romantic idealisation. Both of these theorists stress women’s powerlessness in love relative to men, Comer focuses on love as a means of binding both men and women into monogamous marriage. I have also, for reasons of space, confined myself to considering only these three writers and have thus excluded some well-known analyses such as that of Germaine Greer (1970). It should also be noted that none of these writers mount a sustained critique of heterosexuality itself.

3. That this accords with many women’s experience of heterosexual love is suggested by more recent work such as that of Rubin (1983), Radway (1987), Hite (1988), Mansfield and Collard (1988) and Cancian (1990).

4. Even feminist accounts, otherwise firmly grounded in material reality, sometimes slide towards such mysticism. Haug et al., for example, assert that through love we retrieve the ‘buried and forgotten stirrings of our soul’, that love reorganises ‘the forces of the soul’ (1987:278–279).

5. I am aware of the dangers of essentialising the categories ‘women’ and ‘men’. It should be clear that my comments on gender differences in love refer to culturally constituted femininity and masculinity, not to some essential difference and are offered in the spirit of sociological generalisation rather than implying some absolute dichotomy.

6. There is a parallel here with the distinction made in psychoanalysis between a need, which is capable of satisfaction, and desire, which is not (see, for example, Rose 1982:32). For a full discussion of psychoanalytic perspectives on love and desire see Beddoe, Jackson and Young (forthcoming).

References


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