Breaking the stereotype – romance novel today

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Breaking the stereotype – romance novel today

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INTRODUCTION

> "It's the happy endings," Gus said suddenly as he pulled onto the main drag.
>
> "What?" My stomach clenched. They all live happily ever after. Again.
>
> Gus cleared his throat. "It's not that I don't take romance seriously as a genre. And I like reading about women. But I have a hard time with happy endings."

(Henry 61)

The quote above has been chosen as the opening statement of this paper as it concretely shows one of the main problems with romance novels. When Gus says, "It's not that I don't take romance seriously as a genre," he voices the general consensus about these literary works in our society. This occurrence of disparagement of romance novels is, however, not specific to our time or society. In her book, Regis defines "the modern romance novel written in English and traces its development from 1740" (preface), which means that the form has existed for over 280 years and the "widespread disdain for and condemnation of this literary genre" (Regis, preface) has been following it from the beginning. The parts of them that were disliked have changed and evolved with the genre, but the one constant is the negative perceptions of these novels. They have been stereotyped as lacking literary merit, not being serious, formulaic, presenting life, characters and relationships as unrealistic and idealized and so on. These stereotypes have also spread to the characters themselves, especially in a negative way about the novels' heroines – they *must* be weak, passive, dependent and without a goal, besides getting married, of course.

Besides being present for such a long time, the romance genre has continuously been the most popular genre in the United States. According to the data for the year 2022, "romance novels generated over $1.44 billion in revenue, making it the highest-earning genre of fiction" and made up "over 33% of books sold in mass-market paperback format" (Curcic). Previous

year, romance accounted for approximately 20% of all fiction book sales in the United States (RWA website).

Regis presumes that the "lack of respect results, in part, from a lack of understanding, both of the heroine herself and of the genre in which she appears" (preface) and mentions that romance is the most female of popular genres, and since a man reading it and identifying with the heroine would require reading across gender lines it is done less and is more misunderstood.

However, with the rise of contemporary romance novels, there seems to be a shift in the genre's narrative landscape, which is why this thesis will aim to explore if the contemporary romance novels are breaking free from these stereotypes, both in terms of the genre itself and its heroines.

This is precisely the main research question of this study – do modern romance novels challenge or perpetuate the stereotypes associated with the genre and its heroines and does their representation of women help break or maintain the gender stereotypes in society? In order to find an answer to this question, a close reading methodology will be applied to a selection of contemporary romance novels published in the last five years, i.e., from 2018 until 2022. Close reading "explores and exposes far more sensitively the complex cultural embeddedness of the text" and it is chosen as the vehicle of conducting this study for it allows "revealing much about a text and a community that is neither explicit in the text nor even known to its community" (Bardzell*).* By employing this technique of reading of the selected novels, this study aims to reveal the confirmation and negation of traditional stereotypes of the genre.

It is also important to mention that this study is based on the presumption of connection of literature (fiction) and reality, i.e., the assumption that social life can be reflected in literature, as well as influenced by it. If one presumes fiction can affect reality, the portrayal of the heroines in romance novels can affect readers' (women's) understanding of themselves,

femininity, relationships, and personal agency, which is why it would be useful if the results of the study showed that contemporary romance novels are indeed breaking the (negative) stereotypes.

The scope of this study is limited, as it uses five novels in total, analyzed by the close reading technique. The books were chosen on several criteria, such as: the country of the author (United States of America), year of publishing (2018-2022), popularity (in the top 20 books of the year, as voted by the members of the site Goodreads), subgenre of the romance genre, since specific subgenres focus on some specific traits that define and distinguish them from others.

The original sample consisted of almost 300 romance novels written from 2003 and 2022, that I have read in the last two years. The corpus contained over 70 different authors of different nationalities, and the novels were of various subgenres of the romance genre. Most of the novels were contemporary romance, but several are classified as historical romance, erotic romance, romantic suspense and young adult romance. The subgenre of contemporary romance is the one that I have liked the best and from which I have read the most novels. However, these novels can be further divided based on the tropes they contain and the traits of characters, e.g., sports romance, billionaire romance, celebrity, small-town, single-parent, enemies-to-lovers, friends-to-lovers, second-chance romance, and so on. It is important to mention this because each of the categories contains certain traits of characters and certain aspects of life are shown in each that differs them from others. These categories are not mutually exclusive, so most of these, including the chosen five novels, combine several of those topics.

This thesis is organized in the following way: Chapter One covers the definition and evolution of the romance novel. Chapter Two explains the relationship of society and literature, presents gender stereotypes as present in contemporary American society, as well as the stereotypes about the romance novel genre and its characters. Chapter Three presents the methodology used for this study – the method of close reading, process of selection of

novels and the way they were analyzed. Chapters Four and Five present the chosen novels, analyze them and provide the results of the analysis. The last part of the paper contains the conclusion, list of works cited and the abstract.

Chapter One

Defining the romance novel

The task of defining the romance novel seems easier than it is. There is a general consensus about what constitutes the romance novel, but each of the authorities on the topic offer their own explanation and definition, depending on the topic of their research and varying in the level of detail needed. The most basic definition is given on the Romance Writers of America website, which states that "two basic elements comprise every romance novel: a central love story and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending" (RWA). According to RWA, a central love story means that "the main plot centers around individuals falling in love and struggling to make the relationship work. A writer can include as many subplots as they want as long as the love story is the main focus of the novel" and to achieve an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending "the lovers who risk and struggle for each other and their relationship are rewarded with emotional justice and unconditional love" (RWA). They further explain that "settings and distinctions of plot create specific subgenres within romance fiction" (RWA). Romance subgenres include contemporary romance, erotic, historical, paranormal, romance with spiritual elements, romantic suspense, and young adult romance (RWA).

As it was mentioned, besides these two basic elements that a novel must contain to be considered a romance novel, different authors offer additional conditions for a novel to achieve this. Janice A. Radway and Pamela Regis are just two of the authors who dealt with the topic of romance novels. They are chosen as the base of this study because of their importance and the way of writing about the topic. Janice Radway and her study on Smithton women is considered to be one of the most important studies conducted in this field. Her study was conducted in 1980 on a group of women who loved reading romance and it concerned the practice of romance reading. She defines the "most important ingredients" (Radway, 66) through her interviewees' answers. The three most important part of the romance novels

according to them are a happy ending, a slowly but consistently developing love between hero and the heroine and some detail about heroine and hero after they've gotten together (66). Some other responses, ranked from the most often, include "lots of love scenes with some explicit sexual description, a setting in a particular historical period, a very particular kind of hero and heroine, punishment of the villain, a long conflict between hero and heroine, lots of love scenes without explicit sexual description, lots of details about faraway places and times" (67). Another important note from Radway's study is that the readers "project themselves into the story" and they "become the heroine" (67).

Just as important as what a romance novel should contain is what it should never include. According to the Smithton women, the three most popular answers to this question are bed-hopping, sad ending and rape (74). These answers are ranked from the most objectionable. Following the top three, other answers included "physical torture, a weak hero, a cruel hero, explicit sex, a heroine stronger than the hero, an ordinary heroine, and premarital sex" (74).

Some 20 years after this important study, Pamela Regis published her book *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* in 2003. Her book is based on previously published research and literature, as well as on the analysis of several representative romance novels. The beginning of the book is concerned with the definition of the genre itself and the evolution it has been through since its beginnings. She gives her own version and defines the romance novel as: "a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines" (Regis, 31). She defends the definition by saying it "focuses on the narrative essentials of the romance novel—those events, including the happy ending, without which there is an incomplete rendering of the genre. In naming the narrative elements of "courtship" and "betrothal" and in emphasizing the heroine, this definition departs from earlier efforts to define the romance novel" (31). She further expands the definition by giving a list of "the eight essential elements

of the romance novel" (38), as well as some accidental elements and she explains their possible appearances in the novel. Regis claims that

> eight narrative events take a heroine in a romance novel from encumbered to free. In one or more scenes, romance novels always depict the following: the initial state of society in which heroine and hero must court, the meeting between heroine and hero, the barrier to the union of heroine and hero, the attraction between the heroine and hero, the declaration of love between heroine and hero, the point of ritual death, the recognition by heroine and hero of the means to overcome the barrier, and the betrothal. These elements are essential (38).

The list of accidental, or optional, elements contain only some which "occur often enough to be characteristic of the romance novel" and it contains examples such as "scenes depicting a scapegoat exiled, bad characters converted to goodness, and the wedding, dance, or fete that traditionally ends the comedy" (38). The appearance of either of these elements is not determined, they can "appear in any order", "be doubled and even tripled in the same scene or action" just as "a single element can also occur more than once" or "be diminished" (38). Furthermore, "any element can be expanded to any length and dramatized in detail with action and dialogue, thus becoming a governing element of the novel" (39).

It is important to further explain what these elements include in order to understand them and recognize them in the actual novels. Firstly, the society. It is usually defined "near the beginning of the novel" and it "is in some way flawed; it may be incomplete, superannuated, or corrupt. It always oppresses the heroine and the hero" (39). The level of definition of the society may vary from being "barely sketched—the heroine and hero may be the only representatives of it that we see" to "carefully drawn and its unfamiliar principles explained" (39). The meeting also occurs "near the beginning of the novel, but also sometimes presented in flashback" and "some hint of the conflict to come is often introduced" (40). The barrier does not have to be a single event but is presented as "a series of scenes scattered throughout the novel establishes

for the reader the reasons this heroine and hero cannot marry" (40). The barrier can be external, "a circumstance that exists outside of a heroine or a hero's mind, or internal, a circumstance that comes from within either or both" (40). Another important element of the barrier is its removal, and as Regis presents it, it "usually involves the heroine's freedom from societal, civic, or even religious strictures that prevented the union between her and the hero. This release is an important source of the happiness in the romance novel's happy ending. The barrier's fall is a liberation for the heroine. It is a moment of rejoicing for the reader, whose response to the heroine's freedom is joy" (41-42). Next essential element of the romance novel is the attraction, which is defined as the opposite of the barrier – "a scene or series of scenes scattered throughout the novel establishes for the reader the reason that this couple must marry" (42). It keeps them together long enough to surmount the barrier, continues Regis, and can be "based on a combination of sexual chemistry, friendship, shared goals or feelings, society's expectations, and economic issues" (42). The declaration's position in the novel is one of the things that determines the plot and creates different tropes. It is "the scene or the scenes in which the hero declares his love for the heroine, and the heroine her love for the hero" (42). The sixth element according to Regis is the point of ritual death, which "marks the moment in the narrative when the union between heroine and hero, the hoped-for resolution, seems absolutely impossible, when it seems that the barrier will remain, more substantial than ever" (43), whose target is often the heroine "and beneath her very real trials in the narrative is the myth of death and rebirth, which echoes, however remotely, the myth of Persephone" (43). The recognition may look like anything, but its point is giving "new information that will overcome the barrier", and at the center of this scene is the heroine (45). The final essential element in romance novel's narrative is the betrothal. It does not need to mean marriage if it is clear the couple will end up together, says Regis, and as will be shown by the novels used for this paper. Nevertheless, the

initial definition of this element is "a scene or scenes the hero asks the heroine to marry him and she accepts; or the heroine asks the hero, and he accepts" (46).

Evolution of the genre

To present the evolution of this genre through history, this paper will be guided by the example of Pamela Regis. Her 2003 work titled *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* invests a lot of effort to follow the romance novel from its very beginnings until the end of the 20th century. She traces the source of the confusion and misunderstanding of this literary work to its very name – romance novel, since both of those terms can and have meant various things throughout history. This section of the thesis will make a brief overview of her conclusions, starting precisely from this problem of the name and continuing by summarizing her findings based on several representative novels from the year 1740 until the end of the 20th century. Her analysis enables us to follow the development of the genre, the main themes, problems it focuses on and in what way, all followed through two elements – barrier and point of ritual death.

Firstly, the focus falls on the term romance. "In its broadest sense," says Regis, "begins at least as early as the Greeks" (28). Other authors find the beginnings of romance in this sense a couple of centuries B.C.; "Margaret Anne Doody describes texts as old as the fourth century B.C. that tell a story of passionate love, separation, and triumph (6). Jean Radford notes that this larger sense of romance "includes 'Greek "romances," medieval romance, Gothic bourgeois romances of the 1840s, late nineteenth century women's romances and mass-produced romance fiction now' (8)" (Regis, 28-29). According to Regis, Frye says that "the essence of romance is the 'idealized world' it embodies in its texts (Anatomy 367)" and in this sense "all popular genres – mysteries, thrillers, horror, science fiction, and, of course, the romance novel itself" are romances (Regis, 29). Another defining possibility of romance in this broadest sense is by putting "focus on what is depicted - an idealized world - and how - non-

mimetically - and on that depiction's status in the minds of authors and readers—fantasy" and "this ancient, ideal, non-mimetic fantasy world can be represented in verse, either dramatic or narrative, or in prose" (29).

Next confusion about the romance novel concerns the term novel, a relatively new form that "came into use in the late seventeenth century" (29). Regis sets the problem by asking "is a novel a romance or are the two forms distinct?" and saying that "this question has preoccupied critics since the English novel began its advance toward literary preeminence" (29). One of the older definitions by Reeve from 1785 defines the novel "as 'a picture of real life and manners, and of the times in which it was written,' whereas the romance 'in lofty and elevated language, describes what has never happened nor is likely to' (111)" (30). It is interesting to mention Deborah Ross's claim "that this novel/romance distinction has been manipulated to argue that women always write the wrong sort of books," exemplified by "'novelists' such as Henry Fielding could scorn 'romancers' such as Eliza Haywood. Then, years later, when the aesthetic wheel had turned, 'romancer' Sir Walter Scott scorned 'novelist' Jane Austen (2–5)," conveys Regis (30).

Finally, we get to the combination of these two terms and this is where the critics "narrow their scrutiny to prose fiction love stories, they begin to focus on the elements most associated with the popular romance novel: love and the happy ending" (Regis, 30).

Traditionally, history of the novel is written as "a history of male forms (with Jane Austen made an honorary male by virtue of her irony)" and it "marginalizes the romance novel" (Regis, 61). For the period between 1740 and 1908, Regis chose several novels representative of their eras – "Richardson's *Pamela*, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, Anthony Trollope's *Framley Parsonage*, and E. M. Forster's *Room with a View*", i.e., representatives of "Augustan (Richardson and Austen), romantic (Brontë), Victorian (Trollope), and Edwardian (Forster) eras" (63). She chose these novels, in addition, because of

their heroines. As the romance novel is focused on the heroine, Regis chose the ones who stand out – "vivid, assertive characters" and novels "portraying intense, vigorous women provide the purest account of the genre" (63). She claims that these novels portray "a time of changing values and practice concerning courtship and marriage" and that three trends can be seen evolving in this period: "the rise of affective individualism, the importance of companionate marriage, and English law as it applied to married women" (63). These terms, briefly, note the change in which the individual is placed on top of the list of priorities, rise in the emotion, values that we might call freedom in contemporary society (affective individualism). The reasons to marry have evolved from pure financial stability, rise in social status or merging of the families to those of wanting "mutual comfort and support, including love, between spouses," or companionate marriage (65). And finally English law applied to married women, meaning their lack of property rights after marriage which is why "for centuries, choosing a husband was the crucial decision for most women" (66) and "courtship became a battleground for the working out of these sometimes conflicting values," (67) values such as financial security, love and freedom. "The literary form that took courtship as its subject - the romance novel - provided an obvious vehicle for the depiction of the clash of these values" (67).

In the final part of this chapter, an overview of the 20th century romance novels will be offered. "In the year 2000, 2,289 romances were released. In that same year, 55.9 percent of popular paperback fiction sold in North America was popular romance" (Regis, 116). The author claims "it is now a commonplace to say that as the twentieth century progressed the romance novel in its popular form eventually dominated the fiction market" but unlike the previously mentioned works which "were mass culture when they were published but became literary and canonical . . . the romance novel in the twentieth century has remained a mass cultural phenomenon" (117). Regis uses five authors to demonstrate the development of the romance novel in this century – "Georgette Heyer, Mary Stewart, Janet Dailey before her self-

admitted plagiarism, Jayne Ann Krentz, and Nora Roberts" (115). She chose them because of the high quality of their books, because their works "have changed the romance novel landscape in important ways" (115) and have developed several subgenres of the romance novels (115). The most important novel analyzed is *The Sheik* by R. M. Hull, as it "shows the way" in its "presenting the courtship between the heroine and her hero with emotions foregrounded" and presenting her characters in a way that sets the trend – "her heroine is independent; the hero is dangerous" (116). The clearest way to express the trends of the 20th century romance novel is to quote it directly from Regis. Unlike for the heroines of the past, "courtship is no longer the path to the fulfillment of affective individualism, property rights, or even the right to make a companionate marriage" and "generally, all of these are in place at the novel's outset" (118). The distinguishing features of 20th century romance novels can be summarized in these three points according to Regis:

> Courtship, in the twentieth-century popular romance novel, changes in response to this changed heroine. This is the first distinguishing characteristic of the twentieth-century popular romance novel: the heroine is still at the center of the book, and courtship is still the book's reason for being (and its reason for being a romance novel), but the books present portraits of women in command of their lives. . . This is the second distinguishing characteristic of the twentieth-century popular romance novel: the hero is much more in evidence, much more a part of the action. A final distinguishing characteristic lies in the nature of the courtships themselves: they focus much more on the emotional elements of the heroine and hero's relationship (119).

Another characteristic of romance novel is important to mention, and it is related to the hero himself. Regis presents the two kinds of heroes – the alpha and the sentimental hero. The difference lies in the role of the heroine, i.e., "if the alpha hero must be tamed, the sentimental hero is hurt or damaged in some way, often emotionally, and the heroine must heal him" (Regis, 122). The healing or taming can also be done vice versa.

Chapter Two

Literature and society intertwined

The basis of this thesis develops on the assumption that literature and society are related and intertwined in a way that they affect each other. The reason for that is so a comparison of the stereotypes can be made, and some conclusions drawn about the changes that have occurred, both in the romance novel and the society, and the mutual connection of the two. How the two are connected; however, is a common topic of scholarly discussions. One of the authors who talks about this is Winfried Fluck who starts the discussion by saying that "critics and scholars never seem to be able to agree on the meaning and significance of a literary text" (Fluck, 280). This thesis deals with the possible meaning and the consequences of literary text, particularly a genre that is very popular and widespread, although often considered useless. Therefore, Fluck's view of the process of reading will come very useful in the attempt to connect the reality (society) and literature.

Fluck offers the overview of literary methods that have been used in trying to resolve the "never-ending interpretative conflicts" (280). The first is a pluralistic view which acknowledges potential in multiple methods that can complement each other and gives an example of "formalist approaches [which] focus on form, ideological analyses on the text's ideology, gender studies on the role of gender in identity construction, and so on" (281). Another approach he mentions is historical contextualization. This approach is based on the assumption that "meaning undergoes changes in history, and thus it seems reasonable to argue that the best way of getting at the 'true' meaning of a text is to reconstruct the historical context in which it was produced and by which it was shaped" (281) but it cannot be the only approach used because historical context "cannot explain the fact that literary texts and aesthetic objects can continue to provide an aesthetic experience although the historical situation has changed" (281).

Why does this topic provide such a rich ground for discussion? Fluck says that it is because "critics hold different views about their political, social, and aesthetic functions and uses" (281) which is a very logical answer. One can analyze a text in whatever way they want, and different people can analyze the same text in different ways. Even the same person can see the same text in different ways, depending on their mindset at the time of reading it. What is an important step when talking about analyzing literary texts in whatever way, is the assumption that the text has a function, that it is designed to do something, whatever that may be (282). Fluck continues on this by saying that this text's function is what makes it "readable" (282) and that "we cannot interpret a fictional text without already implying a function" (282).

Fluck presents a new theory about reading fiction, "a theory of aesthetic experience" which is based on the work of Wolfgang Iser. This theory is his answer to why we read fiction if we are "well aware of the fact that these texts are invented and in most cases practically useless" (284). Fluck says we "search out fictional texts not primarily for information or documentation but for a special experience with the text or aesthetic object. We read not "for meaning" but in order to have the kind of experience we call *an aesthetic experience*" (284). He defines this aesthetic function of a text as "the basis for the realization of other functions, because political or social functions of fictional texts can be realized only through an aesthetic experience" (284). Fluck explains this further:

> When a text or an object is considered as fiction, we cannot regard the object as simply referential, because when we read a fictional text, even a realistic novel, reality is created anew. Since we have never met a character named Hamlet and in fact know that he never existed, we have to come up with our own mental image of him. Inevitably this mental construct will draw on our own feelings and associations, or, to use a broader, more comprehensive term, on our imaginary. These imaginary elements can gain a Gestalt, however, only if they are connected with discourses of the real (284).

Some other critics, like Albrecht, propose three theories about the connection of literature and society, which are relatively concrete and with strict divisions. He divides this relationship on three hypotheses: the first is that literature reflects society, and in turn influences or shapes society, and the third names literature as a device of social control and maintenance of the status quo (Albrecht, 425). Unlike him, Iser (and Fluck) do not see literature as a reflection or mimesis "but a performative act" (284). By looking at literature in that way, we can set the stage for the aesthetic experience as we are both "articulating imaginary elements and looking at them from the outside" (284). It is clear from this that the reader is the one who has a key role when considering a fictional text, it has to be brought to life by means of an imaginary transfer on the side of the reader," (285) i.e., "no matter how well crafted a literary text is, it cannot solely determine its meaning. It always needs a reader in order to become actualized (and thus 'meaningful'); the reader, however, can actualize a literary text whose reference is 'fictionalized' only by drawing on his or her own associations, mental images, and feelings as an analogue" (285). Another important process that the reader goes through is identification, by "bring all characters to life by means of a transfer" (286) the reader creates a more expressive version of himself, while simultaneously "enter other worlds that are different from their own but remain, strangely enough, their own worlds at the same time" (287).

The next important term Fluck tackles is "the articulation effect" of fiction. It continues onto the previously mentioned transfer that "brings the text to life". It "allows us to give expression to associations, feelings, moods, impulses, desires, or corporeal sensations that otherwise have not yet found any satisfactory expression—either because of censorship, or social or cultural taboos, or simply because society has not been interested so far" (287). It is possible because of "fiction's status as a made-up world that can transcend reality claims, fictional texts and aesthetic objects can employ 'official' discourses of the real as a host for the expression of as yet unformulated and possibly 'unsayable' things" (287). The articulation

effect of fiction is important, especially for this thesis, because it shows how fiction actually makes the connection with reality, it links "the subjective and the social by means of analogue" (289). "For modern society," claims Fluck, "this articulation effect serves an important purpose, because it contributes new elements to the ongoing conversation of a culture and thus functions as a source of constant redescription and reconfiguration. For the individual, the articulation effect is welcome, because it can provide a cultural recognition of her own interiority" (289). Because each reader creates their own reality when reading a text, the result can end up being the opposite of the intended, since the reality created is based on the opinions and experiences of each individual reader. The author gives an example of even the "ideologically most conformist text [...] a domestic novel of the American antebellum period" (290) having the potential to produce the opposite of its ideological intended goal, i.e., it contains characters who oppose the patriarchy which activate the transfer for the reader. I mention this example specifically because of one of the stereotypes about romance novels which will be explained later in this chapter, but this genre is commonly criticized for being anti-feminist or trying to promote marriage as the only goal for women. This thesis explores if the romance novels today break this stereotype, but according to Fluck's interpretation of the process of reading, it seems as though even the novels that confirm some of the anti-feministic stereotypes can be interpreted by their readers in the opposite way than they were intended. As far as the connection and mutual influence of literature and society, Fluck says that "by representing reality in a fictional mode, the literary text restructures reality. This doubling is repeated by the reader in the act of reading. In this reception, the reader produces a second narrative that constitutes, in fact, a second text" (292).

This trait is the reason fictional texts are "ideal means for the articulation of an interiority that seeks representation" (Fluck, 295). He explains that:

what makes them so wonderfully effective for this purpose, however—their ability to link imaginary elements with a semblance of the real—is at the same time also the reason for the insufficiency of representation and, consequently, for ever newer attempts to fill the gap. Since articulation can be achieved only by analogy, it remains indirect, provisional, and temporary, and since it can never fully express an interior state, it must stimulate an ongoing search for analogies that promise a fuller expression. Thus one analogy will be quickly replaced by another (295).

The popularity of fiction in general, and romance novels as the focus of this thesis, can be explained by what Fluck names "hunger for fiction (Lesehunger)" (296). It is a name that explains how fictional texts affect their readers, that "reading can be an adventure because it always holds the promise of unexpected encounters and discoveries" (296) and why we "expose ourselves again and again to fictional texts although we are aware that the fictional world is 'unreal'" (296). He defines the reason for this as "our constant desire for articulation lies in the inability of representation to articulate our imaginary and express our interior states fully" (286) and the fictional texts and aesthetic objects as providing the illusion of fulfilling our wishes for articulation, but they can do so only by stimulating our desire for articulation ever anew" (296).

Final point that Fluck makes in his essay concerns misrecognition. He provides an example on ethnic and African American literature and explains it as "if one looks at it from the perspective of reading as transfer, a major point is that this literature takes its departure from experiences of misrecognition or the denial of recognition (as in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*) and that the ensuing narrative is that of a transformation of inferiority into (moral) superiority, of discrimination into empowerment" (299). This point is particularly attractive for this thesis, as a parallel can be drawn between the mentioned groups and women as a group with less power and more discriminated upon when compared to men. As literature written mostly by women for women, some of the reality of misrecognition can "be taken out of their context and can

function as an analogy for readers who consider lack of attention and recognition the major injustice they are experiencing under democratic conditions" (300) and can serve as "the host for articulating the reader's own imaginary longings for increased recognition in a politically correct manner" (300).

Gender stereotypes

In order to continue with this thesis, the terms stereotype and gender stereotype must be clearly defined, as well as their implications and influences. Michael Pickering defines stereotyping as "a way of representing and judging other people in fixed, unyielding terms [which] revolve around an alleged characteristic of the category to which they are assigned" (4781) while the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (OHCHR) defines a gender stereotype as "a generalised view or preconception about attributes, or characteristics that are or ought to be possessed by women and men or the roles that are or should be performed by men and women," which "can be both positive and negative" (1). According to Pickering, anyone assigned a stereotype is viewed through that characteristic (4781) and it is because of that, that it is important to

> distinguish stereotyping from the way we operate all the time with preconceptions and mental schemas as a means of cognitively mapping the world and negotiating different situations and circumstances, including those with which we are not necessarily familiar. These help us in our encounters and interactions in everyday life; they can be modified, updated, and flexibly used as our lives develop and move on. Stereotyping is by contrast a rigid form of cultural representation that creates barriers between people (4781).

Since OHCHR includes the division of stereotypes on positive and negative, I find it important to add Pickering's comment about this division. He says that some stereotypes "may then appear more positive as images, but they are still one sided projections and may have negative consequences for the other, as for example in confining them to a set role or ability"

(4782). Hentschel et al. say that there is "typically a great deal of consensus" about these generalizations.

They traced the explanation for existance of gender stereotypes to social role theory, according to which "gender stereotypes derive from the discrepant distribution of men and women into social roles both in the home and at work" (Eagly; Koenis and Eagly in Hentschel et al., 2). They are "often internalized by men and women" (2). The division of labor based on gender has existed for a long time, putting women in the domestic sphere, (2) while "in the workplace, women have tended to be employed in people-oriented, service occupations rather than things-oriented, competitive occupations, which have traditionally been occupied by men" (Lippa et al. in Hentschel et al., 2). Stereotypes, according to Devine and Sharp, and Fiske and Taylor, "can serve an adaptive function allowing people to categorize and simplify what they observe and to make predictions about others" (2), but they can "also induce faulty assessments of people" (2).

Those faulty assessments can also be dangerous, especially to women, as the more discriminated-against gender. OHCHR gives several examples of the dangers women face because of gender stereotypes, i.e., because of the "stereotypical expectations, attitudes and behaviors towards women" (1). To summarize, some of them include poverty and lower levels of education because of the "stereotype about women's role within the family," women are more in danger of violence because of the "traditional attitudes by which women are regarded as subordinate to men," their right to health can be endangered because of "how societal norms are often based on stereotypical beliefs about the need to regulate women's freedom, particularly with regard to sexual identity and life, resulting into restrictions to sexual and reproductive rights" (1-2).

Before fully focusing on gender stereotypes, I believe it is important to mention some of the practices of stereotyping and its purpose. According to Pickering, "those who generate

and perpetuate stereotypes of others are usually in positions of greater power and status than those who are stereotyped. Stereotypes not only define and place others as inferior, but also implicitly affirm and legitimate those who stereotype in their own position and identity," (4781) it can act "as a means of validating elements of an existing social order or cultural hierarchy [and] create symbolic boundaries between peoples and cultures" (4782) which can explain the consistent existance of stereotypes in society. Those symbolic boundaries, continues Pickering, "exclude those who are targeted by them" (4782) and gives an example of African (or African descendant) people and women as examples for this.

Hentschel et al. conducted their research based on the "two defining features of gender stereotypes, agency and communality" (1). Men are usually "characterized as more *agentic* than women, taking charge and being in control, and women are characterized as more *communal* than men, being attuned to others and building relationships" (Broverman et al; Eagly and Steffen in Hentschel et al., 2). The perpetuation of stereotypes in contemporary society is influenced by several factors. Hilton and von Hippel and Heilman claim they are "tenacious" and "tend to have a self-perpetuating quality that is sustained by cognitive distortion," (3) while Eagly and Steffen, and Koenig and Eagly claim they are maintained not only because of the "inflexibility of people's beliefs but also a consequence of the societal roles women and men enact" (3).

There have, obviously, been some positive changes in this respect. As of 2017, in the United State "women increasingly pursue traditionally male careers, and there are more women in roles of power and authority," (3) although "women still are concentrated in occupations that are perceived to require communal, but not agentic attributes" (3) like "elementary and middle school teacher, registered nurse, and secretary and administrative assistant" (U.S. Department of Labor, 2015 in Hentschel et al., 3) and even though "men's home and family responsibilities

have increased, women continue to perform a disproportionate amount of domestic work" (Bureau of Labor Statistics in Hentschel et al., 3).

In their 2019 survey, Hentschel et al. studied a representative sample of 629 people, ranging in age from 19 to 83 years old, with 61% of participants being women (5). Their study focused of the two most important parts of gender stereotypes – agency and communality. Traits that concerned agency have been divided into four ratable groups: instrumental competence, leadership competence, assertiveness and independence, and those concerning communality into three categories – concern for others, sociability and emotional sensitivity (6). The results of this study show a representative picture about the situation in the American society with the focus on gender stereotypes, how men and women see men and women in general and themselves. This survey provides a great general context within which this study can work and connect the stereotypes in society with literary works it studies.

The results have shown that men have been rated as less communal than women, by both male and female raters. In terms of agency, they have been rated as more agentic (than women) by male raters, and equally as agentic as women by the female raters (8). The exception is the individual category of assertiveness, where female raters rated men higher than women (8-9). Women have, therefore, been rated as less agentic in terms of agency by male raters and equally as agentic by female raters, with the exception of assertiveness where female raters find women less assertive than men (8-9). In terms of communality, women have been rated as more communal than men by both female and male raters (9) and the ratings were higher by female than male raters (10). Female raters also "rated women in general higher in concern for others and emotional sensitivity than male raters did" (10). When asked to rate themselves in comparison to their gender group in general, men saw themselves as more agentic (11) and more communal than they see men in general, (12) while women seemingly saw themselves as they saw women in general (11). However, when analyzed though the four categories, some

differences appear – female raters saw themselves as higher in instrumental competence, but "significantly lower" in terms of leadership competence and assertiveness then they saw women in general (11). In the communality aspect, they have rated themselves equal to women in general, with the exception of concern for others, where they rated themselves higher (12). The general conclusion of this survey is that "gender stereotypes persist" (12). They are present in both the female and male raters, but are "more prevalent for male than for female raters" (12-13). The results also show that although some aspects like assertiveness are a point of difference, there have been some changes made in the direction of equality, as there was no difference in independence or competent in leadership because of gender (13).

Pickering says that "the content of stereotypes diminishes and recedes" (4782) and the "the targets of stereotyping change historically, across different times and conjunctures" (4782). We can see that exemplified in some of the results of this study, as some stereotypes in terms of agency (like independence) do not seem to apply to contemporary women, "women do not entirely embrace the stereotypic view of women as less agentic than men" (14). However, the stereotype about women being more communal still persists. Furthermore, it seems like even though they do not accept the traditional gender stereotypes, women still see themselves as "lacking" and "less than", especially in terms of assertiveness and leadership – "dimensions of agency associated with social power" (14).

Stereotyping the romance novel

It is a wide-spread opinion that romance novels are "trashy", unworthy of being taken seriously, "silly" and "empty-headed genre" (Regis, 11) and this opinion is usually followed with the assumption that people (women) who read them are just like that. What is not so well known is why these stereotypes exist and how they came to be. In this part of the thesis, I will cover some of the most common stereotypes about romance novels and their characters. In order

to provide both perspectives, three works have been chosen for this part, varying from criticism to defense of the romance novel.

Regis claims the "critical rejection of the romance novel emanated from the wave of feminism that arose in the 1960s. Germaine Greer, one of the leaders of that movement, inaugurated the modern criticism of the romance novel in 1970, striking a theme that becomes a commonplace in subsequent criticism—that of the romance novel as an enslaver of women" (Regis, 13). One of the stereotypes about the genre is that it "is easy to write" and therefore unworthy of respect (10). It has been criticized for its happy ending; marriage being considered the governing element of this form (23). Two main points are criticized about the romance novel, says Regis, that it "extinguishes its own heroine . . . and denies her independent goal-oriented action outside of love and marriage" and "it binds readers in their marriages or encourages them to get married: it equates marriage with success and glorifies sexual difference" (19). She adds to this that although some romance novels are indeed like that, it "has never been usual sort of romance heroine, and by the early 1980s, almost all romance novels, no matter how modest depicted women who had active careers, and who kept them after they married" (21). However, because the opinion still exists today, it is important to mention it here. It is also thought formulaic, a fallacy that occurs when you equate the "genre as a whole with a formula (a subset of the larger genre)," claims Regis (16). One of the most popular publishers of romance novels in America is Harlequin, founded as a reprinting publishing house in 1980 (164) and those novels have been a target of critique very often and considered to "reflect the heterosexual family ideology of our culture" (Ganguly in Regis, 14). Radway says that the romance novel provides "unrealistic expectations about society and relationships" (214) and perpetuates the public versus private stereotypes of society, like leaving "unchallenged the male right to the public spheres of work, politics, and power" and depicts "their (women's) satisfaction by traditional heterosexual relations" (217). Another generalization that occurs in

romance novels is equating them with "incidental elements, such as the sex scenes" which Regis claims are "widespread but not essential" (16-17). A name for romance novels in line with this assumption was "bodice rippers" – concerning the appearance of sex, but also its representation in the form of rape, which is a topic for itself, and will be discussed later. The topic of sex in romance novels, and the level of its representation, depends on the period – Smithton women do not like to see it in their novels, while a study from 2016 shows that contemporary readers do (Fekete, 3). Radway, among others, articulates further conclusions about romance novels, these in term of the language used. She says its language is "redundant and simple" (Radway, 196) with "repetitive use of the same, limited vocabulary" (195).

Further stereotypes concern the characterization of the heroines and the heroes. The stereotypical expectations for a romance novel heroine include, but are not limited to "foolish, dependent . . . pathetic" (Radway, 78), and "unusually compassionate, kind, and understanding" (127) and "innocence and inexperience," "completely unaware that they are capable of passionate sexual urges" and "alluring appearance . . . unaware of their beauty and its effects" (126). The romance heroine is also "preoccupied by fashion" (193). Clark et al. name a few of the stereotypes concerning about romance novels' "perpetuation of the male myths of female character" (369) through the traits of the heroine, which they identify as "narcissism, passivity and masochism" in the form of a "virginal, beautiful, helpless female," (369) as well as the who does "everything for the invisible eye of the man" (371). The heroine wants to be cared for by the hero after she softens him (Radway, 67) and she is no ordinary woman, she has to be "intelligent and able" with "special qualities" to do so (67).

Although the focus of this study is comparing gender stereotypes about women in today's society and the ones which appear in romance novels, the hero of the romance novel must be analyzed as well, as a part of the aspect of the stereotypes about romance novels themselves. The hero, according to stereotypes, must be what Clark et al. call "alpha male,"

i.e., "macho, hoarse, hard, firm, annoying" (374). Radway describes the perfect hero as promiscuous, desires sexual pleasure, is unself-conscious, handsome, indifferent, honest, courageous and emotionally reserved (132). He does not desire love, unlike the heroine, is not tender or emotionally expressive (Radway, 132). A bad hero is "insufficiently aggressive, protective and strong" and therefore, "insufficiently masculine" (133). When looking at the financial situation, the money "always comes from heroes" (Clark et al., 379). Final stereotype that will be mentioned is articulated by Clark et al. in saying that the heroine and the hero in a romance novel "always hate each other."

Chapter Three

Close reading

Close reading as a practice "gained prominence in the scholarly literature in the 1930s through the 1960s" (Davis and Womack in Hinchman and Moore, 443). According to Rabinowitz, "the term has come to refer to a family of literacy practices devoted to methodical interpretation of texts" (Hinchman and Moore, 443). The process itself refers to "reading to uncover layers of meaning that lead to deep comprehension" (Scherer, 90) and it does that by "engaging with a text of sufficient complexity directly and examining meaning thoroughly and methodically" (PARCC in Scherer, 90). It was chosen as a method because it enables the reader access and understand "both the surface and the deeper levels of complex text" (Dollins, 49). The process itself encompasses "multiple interactions with the text to examine what it says, how the author has said it, and what it means" (Lehman and Roberts in Dollins, 49). As this study focuses on observing the stereotypes in the novels, concerning both directly the vocabulary, language, repetitiveness, and the stereotypes of its characters, both the explicitly mentioned trait, as well as the implicit meaning inferred from the narrative, this method of analysis seemed the most appropriate for accomplishing this goal. The method of close reading, as Bardzell says, "is capable of revealing much about a text and a community that is neither explicit in the text nor even known to its community" (Interaction Culture) and as the second part of this study is connecting the existing gender stereotypes in society with the novels', this method only became more clearly the appropriate choice.

Selection of novels

Selection of the novels for analysis was a process that took careful consideration. The genre of romance novels is a very broad one, with thousands of books published every year, from multiple publishers, in various subgenres, within which there are further divisions. Therefore, it is impossible to choose several books to represent the whole genre, which is one

of the limitations of this study. For that, some limitations had to be defined. With this in mind, the first limitation was that all books, both analyzed in detail through close reading and those mentioned, are a part of the subgenre of contemporary romance. Contemporary includes romance novels "set from 1950 to the present that focus primarily on the romantic relationship" (RWA) and these specifically are set in the twenty-first century. The second set of limitations concerns the scientific disciplines within which this thesis is being done. As it is based on American literature and culture, the novels chosen for analysis must be written by American (meaning from and living in the United States) authors. The second basis is sociology, so the societal aspect of it has to be time-limited and relevant. Our society has been developing rapidly and has been through numerous transformative changes in several aspects. Therefore, the time limit for this study to stay relevant has been set to five years, i.e., the novels considered were published from 2018 until 2022. In this time period the American society has been affected by, among other things, the presidency of Donald Trump (2016-2020), the #metoo movement (2017), global health crisis caused by the COVID-19 virus (2020), attack on the Capitol (2021), increase of racism and police violence against African Americans, and BLM movement (2020) and so on. All of these, and other events have changed the society in some way, they were talked about constantly and affected the lives of individuals. If one guides themselves by the theories of reflection and influence of literature, these changes could have influenced the authors and shaped the novels they wrote.

Further conditions that have been set include the popularity, or relevance of the novel. The way this was done is based on the website Goodreads – the novel had to be on the top 20 list of romance novels published that year. Goodreads is "the world's largest site for readers and book recommendation" (Goodreads) which had around 125 million users in December 2022 (Smith). One of the features of the site is the vote for the best book of the year. The users have a certain amount of time at the end of the year to vote for the books they liked the most,

and the top 20 list is published on the site for over fifteen categories. The number of votes cast for this competition rangers from 5,027,741 in 2018 (249,931 for the category of romance) to 5,779,854 votes in 2022, 616,858 of those for romance novels (Goodreads). As the website does not allow to sort the votes according to country, there is no way to determine which of the novels have been the most popular in the US, but on a global scale. However, many of these novels have been promoted in the media by American content creators (Instagram, Tik-Tok, et cetera).

The next condition that was set was one author – one novel representation. This was done for the sake of diversity, as many of the authors appeared on the list multiple years in the row, and a single author has a certain style of writing, certain character traits or "tropes" they write. For this reason (of diversity) the publishers of the novels had to be different, but American. The opposite condition did not apply, the novel could be written by several co-authors. The novels' selection was further determined by the style of writing, themes, areas of life, professions that they cover. And the final condition was made based on the gender of the characters, i.e., the novel had to have a single heroine and a single hero. This is done because the literature used and for analysis of the gender stereotypes.

The initial sample from which authors and novels have been chosen consisted of 73 different authors and 295 novels, ranging from the year 2003 to 2022 which I have read from March 2021 until April 2023. The sample contained authors who were not from the US (17) or whose nationality is unknown (4). Some of the novels were not contemporary romances, a lot of them were written as a part of a series and therefore in a context not attainable by reading a single novel. The novels were published by different publishers and some were self-published. All of the novels eliminated from close reading analysis did not satisfy some of the conditions. The final selection was made by selecting a single novel from each year based on appearance

of the author on multiple lists and the diversity of the main area of life it covers. Therefore, the books selected for close reading analyses are the following:

From Lukov with Love by Mariana Zapata, published 2018,

The Friend Zone by Abby Jimenez, published 2019,

The Soulmate Equation by Christina Lauren, published 2020,

Beach Read by Emily Henry, published 2021, and

Reminders of Him by Collen Hoover, published 2022.

Process of analysis

The way the novels were analyzed was modeled on previous studies, primarily Radway (and Fekete, who mimicked her) and Regis. All three of these authors have taken some romance novels and analyzed them according to and in a way they found relevant and useful. Radway's study is one of the authorities in this field of research, which is why it was consulted and referenced often. Her work voices the many opinions of romance novels still present today, 40 years later. I wanted to put today's novels to the test based on this. It is important to note that her research was done in 1980 on a group of mostly married housewives, whose society, norms and attitudes differed from today's. Fekete's work is important as it replicates Radway's, only 36 years later. The hypothesis is that my results will largely resemble hers. One of the most emphasized results of her study is the optionality of sex in romance novels, i.e., unlike in Radway's time, it is now depicted more often, more explicitly, the readers want the novels to contain them, and the function and meaning have changed (Fekete, 11). A second change that is noted, and one that I expect to notice, is the appearance of stronger heroines and heroes who are not threatened by them (Ramsdell in Fekete, 10). Fekete is used as a guide also in conducting the close reading – she read and coded the novels through several categories, just as Regis's elements of the romance novels.

For this study, I have used the books that I have already read at least once in the previously mentioned period. This enabled me to connect the theory with examples, made me aware of the scope of the genre, and the subgenre. I realized there are several different settings as a frame to the novel, which enabled me to create some of the conditions and limitations for analysis. The process itself consisted of the following steps: reading the novels again and making notes such as names, ages and professions of characters, narrator (first or third person, one or dual point of view) and locating all the Regis's eight essential elements. Besides these, I have made notes about the personalities of the characters, how they were presented – explicitly or through actions or other people, etc., notes about their families, if mentioned, appearance of sex scenes, and how the heroine and the hero begun their story and how long it takes them to develop a relationship ("slow-burn", love at first sight, etc.). These notes and theoretical background enabled me to form several categories through which I can test if these novels perpetuate or break the stereotypes about the genre, their characters and through the representation of the heroine and the perception of her in society, I could compare the situation in real society and the one represented in the novels, i.e., test if the novels perpetuate or break the gender stereotypes present in reality. The heroine's traits were based on how she sees (inner-monologue) and presents (conversations with others) herself, how other's see her (things said to or about her) and her actions. The categories for the hero were the same, although not as detailed, as the focus is more on the female gender and its representation. The final step was comparing the obtained results with the theoretical background described in detail in Chapter Two.

Chapter Four

From Lukov with Love by Mariana Zapata

This novel was published in February of 2018 which makes it the oldest novel this study analyzes. It is rated with 4.29 out of five stars, an average of 200,453 ratings (Goodreads, May 21, 2023) and was nominated for best romance on Goodreads, occupying the seventh place out of the twenty nominated novels (Goodreads, 2018). It is also the longest of all the novels, with 493 pages.

Mariana Zapata is an author who specializes in writing slow-burn romances which focus on complex characters, and this novel is no different. Slow-burn romance indicates that the heroine and the hero do not get to the attraction, declaration and betrothal elements until very late in the novel.

This novel is written from the heroine's point of view. The first-person narrator is also the heroine - Jasmine Santos, a 26-year-old professional figure skater who is trying to reassemble her life after her career has been interrupted. The hero, four years her senior - Ivan Lukov, is somebody who she has known and disliked for a long time. In turn of events, the two pair together for a series of figure-skating competitions in 2016. The novel is character-driven, meaning the characters', in this case the heroine's, inner lives, motivations, and personal journeys is the force that drives the progression of the novel. Her emotions, thoughts and interactions, and the complex background are what drives the plot. The novel is rich in details which add to the characterization of characters and advancement of the plot. In this novel, the focus is put on Jasmine's issues and how she deals with them, what she learns and how she grows as a person, on the development of her as an individual and the development of the relationship with the hero – and through that, the relationships with other people in her life.

***The Friend Zone* by Abby Jimenez**

This debut novel by Abby Jimenez was first published in 2019 and has since been rated with 3.90 out of five stars on Goodreads, an average of 12,859 ratings (Goodreads, May 21, 2023) and has taken twelfth place on the top 20 nominated novels that year (Goodreads, 2019).

This novel is just like Zapata's, character-driven. The focus is; however, put on both the heroine and the hero, as it is written in a dual point of view. The narrators are Kristen Petersen (heroine) and Josh Copeland (hero) who narrate the story in first person. She is a 24-year-old business owner, and he is a 29-year-old firefighter who just moved to Los Angeles, where this novel takes place. The attraction between them is immediate, but ignored for the first quarter of the book - when it is acted upon, while the declaration and betrothal elements are achieved at the 75% mark. Because of that their relationship cannot truly be classified as a slow-burn one, or love at first sight, but something in between. This way of writing enables the reader to get to know the motivations and emotions of both characters in a deeper way. Besides their direct relationship, the novel develops the characters through their relationships with other people like family and friends, and emotionally-charged, life-changing situations – the heroine's medical problems and death of a close friend. Both characters notice and mention a lot of details – be it physical reactions, tone of voice, emotions or food and clothes - which add to their personalities and plot development, as well as the realism of the novel. Even though the novel is told from both perspectives, Kristen is the main character – it is her hardships and personal development the story focuses on. Her character is broadly developed – family, friends, job, etc., while Josh's character development is mostly about the relationship with her.

***Beach Read* by Emily Henry**

With an average rating of 4.03/5 stars out of 791,037 ratings, Beach Read by Emily Henry is the third book chosen for this study (Goodreads, May 21, 2023). The novel was first published in 2020 and had earned second place on that year's top 20 list (Goodreads, 2020).

Emily Henry has been appearing on most of the Goodreads' top 20 lists in the last couple of years and *Beach Read* is her first adult romance novel. Set during summer months in Michigan, two authors – heroine January Andrews and hero Augustus Everett – restart their relationship. As they have met before, but their relationship did not evolve, this romance can be classified as second-chance. She is a 29-year-old romance author, and he is a 32-year-old author of literary fiction. The story is told from the heroine's point of view, by a first-person narrator. Both faced with writer's block, they make a bet trying to write each other's genres. Their relationship develops from the beginning of the book, starting from forming a friendship to dating. Through the development of their relationship, both are faced with their fears and their past, and by trying to make this relationship work, they heal each other. Topics such as death and cancer, violence and aggressive parents, divorce and cheating are confronted in this novel. It is also important to note that this novel explicitly and realistically states the problem of the disrespect of romance genre, as seen in this excerpt:

> I know how to tell a story, Gus, and I know how to string a sentence together. If you swapped out all my Jessicas for Johns, do you know what you'd get? *Fiction.* Just fiction. Ready and willing to be read by anyone, but somehow by *being* a woman who *writes* about women, I've eliminated half the Earth's population from my potential readers, and you know what? I don't feel *ashamed* of that. I feel *pissed*. That people like you will assume my books couldn't possibly be worth your time, while meanwhile you could shart on live TV and the *New York Times* would praise your bold display of humanity. (Henry 55)

Like the previous novels, this one's plot is filled with the details the heroine notices about other people, herself and her environment. Unlike any other novel out of these five, Beach Read's chapters have names, not numbers, which represent the most important moment of the chapter. It is also a novel highly filled with references to popular culture, ranging from books, movies and music, to mobile and web applications used in daily life. The repetitiveness and

over-explaining Radway mentions as a trait of romance novels is highly present in this novel. In terms of character development, this novel develops both the heroine and the hero as in broader terms than their relationship with each other - their pasts, emotions and motivations are examined through many of their conversations.

The Soulmate Equation by Christina Lauren

Christina Lauren is a pen name for "long-time writing partners and best friends Christina Hobbs and Lauren Billings" (Christina Lauren bio). Christina Lauren's novels have made the Goodreads top 20 list of nominees for best romance several times. This novel has earned tenth place on the top 20 list for the year 2021, when it was published (Goodreads, 2021). By May 21, 2023, it has earned a rating of 4.02/5 stars as an average of 179,903 ratings.

This is the only novel out of the five whose narrator is not in first-person, but third. The narrator tells the story from the heroine's point of view, and has insight in her thoughts, emotions and motivations. Jess Davis, the heroine of this novel, has just turned 30 years, is a freelance statistician and a single mother whose whole life is structured around her daughter, grandparents and best friend. The hero, a 35-year-old geneticist, Dr. River Peña, is just a regular customer in the same café as her, who is launching a matchmaking company based on DNA. As it turns out, the two have a compatibility score of 98% and are used to promote the company until the launch. Because of this business-like beginning, their relationship has some aspects of a fake-dating romance. Out of the two characters, more emphasis is put on the heroine character development – her issues and learning how to deal with them in order to form a genuine relationship with the hero. The details are as present in this novel as in others, although they do not always advance the storyline but serve to the reader as an insight into the heroine and her daily life in an attempt to make the character realistic. This novel contains references to contemporary everyday life, like dating apps and societal statistics, as well as the stigma of

romance novels and single parents. It also uses images inside of the text, e.g., the texts between the characters are shown in text-bubbles resembling the iPhone interface.

Reminders of Him by Colleen Hoover

Colleen Hoover's novels are usually emotionally intense, have main characters who are far from perfect and deal with serious topics like mental health, addiction, domestic violence, trauma, etc.

Reminders of Him is one such novel. It claimed second place on 2022 Goodreads Best Romance list, (Goodreads, 2022) and has since its publication in January 2022 gained the rating of 4.44/5 stars on the website, the average of 881,077 ratings (Goodreads, May 21, 2023) which makes it the best rated novel of the five. It is the only novel whose narrators tells the story in present tense. The narrators speak in first person and are both the heroine - Kenna Rowan, 26 years old – and the hero – Ledger Ward, 28 years old. The dynamics of their relationship make this novel stand out from the others, because although they meet at the beginning of the novel, they knew of each other – his opinion being unfavorable. Kenna is released from prison before the beginning of the novel and comes back to the town where her life fell apart in order to try to meet her daughter and rebuild her life. The novel deals with complex emotions of love, hate, mourning and forgiveness - shown both explicitly through conversation, and inexplicitly by the actions the characters make. Although the focus of the novel is Kenna - her journey of healing and rebuilding her life, meeting her daughter, Ledger is the hero whose character develops and grows immensely, and this makes almost as much of the novel, making him the most detailsey developed hero out of the five.

Chapter Five

Analysis – meeting, barriers and betrothal

Each of the chosen novels contains all of the Regis's eight essential elements – definition of society, the meeting, the barrier (sometimes more than one), the attraction, the declaration (one or multiple times), the point of ritual death, the recognition, and the betrothal. They differ in time of appearance, the form, number of times they appear, and which character is the main focus.

The first element I chose to focus on more closely is the meeting of the heroine and the hero as it sets the tone for their relationship, some part of their personality is revealed through this element and usually the barrier is hinted at.

The couples' meetings differ – Jasmine and Ivan (*From Lukov with Love*) have met as teenagers and have formed a relationship full of banter, annoying and insulting each other, resulting in Jasmine's hate towards him. When they meet in the novel, it is to discuss mutually beneficial business arrangement – to pair together for pairs skating competitions. She has already shown her short temperament, insecurity and fear of failure, but also confidence in her professional abilities and the readiness to give a hundred percent of dedication to something she cares about in the first couple of dozen pages. He confirms her opinion of him with his actions, even though it turns out his view of the situation is completely different than hers. It is clear from the beginning of the novel that one of the barriers would be this animosity between the characters.

Kristen and Josh's (*The Friend Zone*) meeting is presented from Josh's perspective. The two meet at the beginning of the novel, during rush hour in Los Angeles when he accidentally hits her truck. He shows his cool and readiness to help, and she reacts emotionally and rudely, during which he notices her physical beauty and fiery personality. Their meeting is not limited to this one scene, as they meet again a couple of minutes later in the place their meeting was

planned, as they are both part of the wedding of their best friends. The attraction between the two is instant and based on physical appearance and banter, which is a problem for her as she has a boyfriend (first barrier hinted at). In this meeting he shows his interest and respect for the relationship when he backs off, and she shows her independence and loyalty by refusing his help, their communication consists of banter and humor. The business deal they strike up is the beginning of the development of their relationship.

Beach Read in a way combines the meetings of the two previous books. January and Augustus firstly exchange a couple of words over their shared fence, without really seeing each other. They continue this trend by fighting over the volume of his party, still without seeing each other. During these two initial chapters, the reader meets the heroine January and the circumstances under which she had moved to this beach house in Michigan. Finally, the two run into each other at the beginning of chapter four where they are introduced to each other. It turns out; however, that they have met in college, where he hurt her feelings and she has since considered him her professional rival. The attraction has been there since their first meeting in college, but was acted on only once. This repeated meeting, in different circumstances, gives them a second-chance kind of romance. From their meeting Gus seems just as January has thought of him – mysterious, aloof, judging the romance genre, "playboy" mindset, as he does not initially recognize the heroine. January until, and in this scene, shows her panic about confronting her problems, insecurity in her abilities, lack of satisfaction with her life, anger and depression about the traumas and changes she had met in the last year. At this point of the novel, it seems as though her opinion of him will be the barrier, as with Jasmine and Ivan.

Jess and River (*The Soulmate Equation*) are both regulars in a coffee shop and have been noticing each other for some time. Jess is attracted to him, even though she does not admit it for a while, but dislikes and judges him because he is serious and dressed business-like and not quirky like the rest of the people and neighborhood (Lauren, 4). She has an image of him

set in her mind as a rude and arrogant person, which she confirms to herself on several occasions. Their meeting takes place in the mentioned coffee shop when Jess asks him about his matchmaking company where he explains it and invites her for a presentation. Jess is presented as a mistrusting person who is having trouble with dating, dedicated to her routine and her daughter with preconceptions about people she is not willing to let go easily, while River's character is not given much place to show his personality at the beginning. The hint of a barrier is not subtle, Jess's dislike and preconceived notions of River are a big part of their future relationship.

Finally, Kenna and Ledger *(Reminders of Him)* have the simplest meeting, with the most complicated background context. They meet in his bar – he is immediately intrigued by her and finds her attractive. Kenna notices him, finds him attractive but has no interest in starting something with him. When she is leaving, he invites her to come back later when they start talking and kiss. The complex background of their relationship reveals itself at this moment when she realizes he is the best friend of her dead boyfriend, for whose death she spent five years in prison – also a hint of the barrier. Kenna is shown at this initial period of the novel shown as caring, secretive and protective of herself, taking action she wants to take, dedicated to her goal of meeting her daughter, independent and resourceful, aware of her limitations, lost in the world and trying to reassemble her life. Ledger's point of view describes her as beautiful and intriguing, solitary and emotional. He is presented as a man who is not bothered by that, a caring and comforting person who does his best to cheer Kenna up, he notices a lot of details and is very aware of his thoughts and emotions in the moment they appear.

The second focus of analysis is the element of the barrier. In these novels, the couples face different barriers, both internal and external, stemming from the heroine and the hero. The dissolution of the barrier is something that motivates the progression of the novel and is, therefore, the most important element. The forming of the barrier also depends on the

personality traits of the characters, their past, their fears and hope, baggage and goals for the future. The development of the characters, their personal and mutual growth, can be traced through the duration of the barrier and the way it is finally removed.

In *From Lukov with Love*, the barrier is internal. It presents itself in the mind of the heroine. She has seen Ivan as her enemy, someone she does not like, and for whom she believes does not like her. One of Jasmines traits that enables the barrier are trust issues. Ivan is well aware of that, and from the beginning of their partnership he works in subtle ways to get her to trust him, first in the business sense and then in private life. His liking her can be seen in subtle actions that he does. With time his attempts to befriend her become more obvious – literally asking her to be friends, befriending her family, supporting and reassuring her, explaining how he saw their relationship and saying he cares about her. The main barrier is Jasmine herself, who is not aware why, and not willing to admit, she cares about his opinion and him so much, not even to herself. Little by little she starts to appreciate his support and enjoy his company. She is oblivious to his hints of wanting to be important to her, i.e., his attempts to see him as a romantic option. The other parts of the barrier are her thinking she is not good and successful enough to be loved, and her inability to rely on other people – she is always the strong one, the protector. Through the development of her relationship with Ivan, she works through those problems, confronts the people who are the reason for some of those issues (her father) and because of his continuous support through her personal development, finds the worth in herself. Her recognition happens at the 86% mark, when she realizes she loves him and finally believes he cares about her, not her as his skating partner. After this, the barrier starts to melt in her mind, and finally falls after several weeks - when she realizes she does trust him, both in skating and in her private life. In Regis's terms, in this novel the heroine is the one who has to heal, but she does it herself – with the support of the hero.

*The Friend Zon*e is one of the novels which doubles the barrier element. First barrier that Kristen and Josh face is external - Kristen being in a relationship with someone else. During that time, the two bond, become aware of their compatibility but neither acts on the attraction they feel. The second barrier is internal, the heroine's. Kristen has medical issues because of which she will undergo elective hysterectomy to improve her quality of life. Since she will not be able to have biological children, and Josh wants that, she thinks they have no chance of being together. The second barrier is imposed, then, because she believes she is lacking the ability to provide him what he wants, and she does not want him to settle for her, i.e., believes that just her will not be enough for him. When her boyfriend breaks up with her, the first barrier falls at the end of the first quarter of the novel, and the two act on their attraction but the relationship is defined as friends-with-benefits - because of the second barrier. Kristen does not want to risk him getting hurt or settling, even though she is hurting, and because of that does not allow the relationship to become something real. When Josh finally finds out about her reasons for not wanting a relationship with him, he tries to still chose her because he loves her, but she does not allow it, for previously mentioned reasons, so he approaches the problem from a practical angle. By proving to her that he is aware of what the problems and possibilities are, and that he is prepared to deal with the situation with her, and not acting on emotion, she is prepared to let go of the barrier. The hero heals the heroine in this novel and so the barrier falls in the last quarter of the novel, around the 75% mark.

In *Beach Read* the barrier is internal, on the part of the hero, Gus. Although the heroine has her problems that she surmounts as the novel progresses, the hero is the one whose problems with himself have to be resolved. After the initial dislike January has towards Gus, the two start to spend time together and are slowly becoming friends. Gus is, however, very closed off, does not share personal details as fast as January does, has a problem with happy endings in romance novels because his experience in life has shown him it is not possible. He had wanted the

heroine from college, but had never known how to show it to her. While she had always been happy and optimistic, he was skeptic towards those ideas. He believes he is broken and not worthy of her, wants her to be happy but does not believe it can happen with her. He had never made an effort to be vulnerable, and thought of himself as the distraction, and not the one girls ended up with. He eventually married, and loved his wife – big part of their relationship being her strength and independence as an individual that he felt she does not need him, and if she does not depend on him, he cannot let her down. When she cheats on him and leaves him, he confirms his opinion of himself and happily-ever-afters. Through the development of his relationship with January, he shows to her and to himself that he is capable of all those things that he fears he is not, and she makes him realize that the effort and being himself are just enough. He realizes that not everything is his responsibility, that he is capable of being loved and happy. The barrier falls in the last fifth of the novel. In Regis's terms, the healing of the heroine and the hero is mutual in this novel, with the focus on the hero's healing.

The Soulmate Equation is the example of multiple barriers, stemming from both the heroine and the hero. Firstly, the one they share is the disbelief in the results of the biological test that says they are a 'soulmate' match of 98%. Her problem with that is that she dislikes him and does not like that idea (her internal barrier). His problem with that barrier is short-lived, after confirming the results he becomes open to the possibility and wants to explore the potential connection. The second barrier is the doubt of genuine behavior, which also both share – him because she is getting monthly payments for getting to know him, and her because he stands to get millions if the company, and its promotion through their relationship, becomes successful. Her final barrier is fear of the relationship failing, and both her and her daughter getting hurt mixed with the feeling of not deserving happiness as it feels like selfishness and neglect of other people. In the process of them getting to know each other, Jess is more willing to let go of her previous unbased opinions of him and act like she likes him, and also accept his actions and

words as real, not strategic. The final barrier falls when she resolves this with herself, and decides to take action and show him that she also likes and wants him, which happens around the two-third mark in the novel. The division of healing or taming is not so easily determined in this novel – the hero both heals and tames the heroine with his actions, and partly the heroine heals herself by confronting people who caused her issues. The third part is the heroine's best friend who also gives her the motivation and strength to confront her issues in order to heal and give herself a chance for happiness with the hero. The combination of all three enables the fall of the barriers.

Reminders of Him has both external and internal barriers, and also intertwines them. To explain them, some context is needed. Kenna and Scotty had an accident five year ago, in which he died, and she went to prison for involuntary manslaughter. After ending up in prison, Kenna found out she was pregnant with her daughter Diem, who is being raised by Scotty's parents, as Kenna lost parental rights because of the duration of her prison sentence. As Scotty's best friend, Ledger is very involved in their and Diem's lives. The external barrier is represented by Scotty's parents, who cannot forgive Kenna for his death. Her internal barrier is also connected to them, as further dislike lowers her chances of earning forgiveness and a chance to meet her daughter. Ledger's internal barrier is twofold – blaming Kenna for what happened to Scotty, hating her for the last five years and reconciling that with the opinion of the girl he had before finding out who she is, and the negative consequences if Diem's grandparents ever found out about their relationship, both for him and for Kenna. His other barrier is connected directly to them, i.e. he worries if she would like him even if he had no connections to Diem, just for him. The two of them start a relationship after Ledger's barrier about what kind of person she is falls at the 58% mark in the novel. The two continue the relationship in secret, getting to know each other and breaking the barriers of motivation behind their connection and ignoring the external barrier of Diem's grandparents, which finally falls in the last 20% of the novel. The healing

process in this novel is not limited only to the heroine and the hero, but the grandparents. Kenna's honesty about that night, among other things she does, heals Ledger. His behavior gives her hope about her situation, and his direct actions towards the grandparents allow her to reach the stage of forgiving and healing herself.

The end of the romance novel must be happy. One of the critiques aimed at that is the wrong message it sends to readers by ending in marriage, and marriage being the end goal. Through the previous element of the barrier, I believe it can be seen that the marriage is not the point of these novels. The relationship is the center of it, but it is influenced and in turn, influences other aspects of the characters' lives. According to Regis's definition, romance novel tells the story of the courtship and betrothal. Betrothal is represented differently in all of these five novels.

Ivan and Jasmine's betrothal is implicit in their declaration of love and assurance that they will stay skating partners. The novel ends with them starting a performance. In the epilogue, the reader gets a glance at their life several years after this event – several professional accomplishments, as well as personal – children, marriage, pets. They are shown happy and content with their life, still in love, and still working together, now as coaches.

Kristen and Josh, on the other hand, in the last quarter of the novel, combine several elements – the fall of the barrier, followed by a second declaration, a betrothal in three parts – official relationship, proposal and marriage, all in the span of a single day, i.e., a couple of pages. Their marriage is genuine, the reason is their love for each other, but it contains a practical element of health insurance, power of making life decisions for each other because of her medical issues.

January and Gus have a special kind of betrothal and happy end. Their second declaration and betrothal happen at the end of the novel, at 94 percent. It is not a traditional

betrothal, but one where Gus says he believes in marriage and love with her and that they will start from here and be happy for now. In the last chapter, titled Nine months later, the two are dating, splitting time between their apartment and the beach house, enjoying each other and celebrating Gus's birthday. The healing they went through can be seen in the small details mentioned in this chapter. The novel does not end in marriage.

Jess and River's situation is similar. The second declaration of love and betrothal happen at the 95% mark, where it is clear the two will continue to be together. In the epilogue, they are shown a couple of months later, functioning as a family and planning to move in together. Again, no marriage at the end of the novel or in the epilogue.

Kenna and Ledger's betrothal is also not explicitly stated, although implied in their declaration of love after she met Diem, at the very end of the novel – 96 percent. The following chapter describes their life a couple of months later, Kenna has forgiven herself and has healed, her and Ledger are parenting Diem together. The epilogue is in the form of a letter Kenna writes to her dead boyfriend Scotty, from which we find out that two years later Kenna and Ledger had a baby. The reader knows the couple ends up together, although no marriage is mentioned.

Gender stereotypes

The other part of this analysis focused on connecting gender stereotypes in society and shown in the novels. Through previously mentioned categories of tracing the personality traits of heroines and heroes, I compared them to traits Hentschel et al. used as the basis of their gender stereotyping study. The complete list of traits, divided in agentic and communal attributes is enclosed in the table below:

TABLE A | List of agentic attributes measured.

Agentic Attributes	
Able to Separate Feelings from Ideas	Independent
Achievement-Oriented	Intelligent
Active	Leadership Ability
Ambitious	Logical
Analytical	Objective
Assertive	Organized
Authoritative	Persistent
Bold	Productive
Competent	Relaxed
Competitive	Reliable
Conscientious	Risk-Taking
Consistent	Self-Confident
Decisive	Self-Controlled
Desires Responsibility	Self-Reliant
Direct	Skilled In Business Matters
Dominant	Sophisticated
Effective	Speedy Recovery From Emotional Disturbance
Emotionally Stable	Stands Up Under Pressure
Feelings Not Easily Hurt	Steady
Firm	Strong
Forceful	Task-Oriented
High Need For Power	Vigorous
High Self-Regard	Well-Informed

TABLE B | List of communal attributes measured.

Communal Attributes	
Affectionate	Likeable
Aware of Others Feelings	Modest
Cheerful	Neat
Collaborative	People-Oriented
Communicative	Relationship-Oriented
Compassionate	Sensitive
Emotional	Sentimental
Generous	Sincere
Gentle	Sociable
Good Natured	Sympathetic
Helpful	Talkative
Humanitarian Values	Tender
Intuitive	Understanding
Kind	Warm

Image 1: Table of agentic and communal attributes (Hentschel et al., 19).

Hentschel et al. have divided these traits into four dimensions of agency and three dimensions of communality, as seen in the images below:

Instrumental Competence (α = 0.88)
Competent
Effective
Productive
Task-Oriented
Leadership Competence (α = 0.80)
Leadership Ability
Achievement-Oriented
Skilled In Business Matters
Assertiveness (α = 0.80)
Dominant
Bold
Assertive
Competitive
Independence (α = 0.82)
Independent
Desires Responsibility
Emotionally Stable
Self-Reliant

Concern for Others (α = 0.91)
Understanding
Kind
Compassionate
Sympathetic
Sociability (α = 0.77)
Communicative
Collaborative
Relationship-oriented
Likeable
Emotional Sensitivity (α = 0.75)
Emotional
Intuitive
Sentimental

Image 2 and 3: Agency (left) and communality (right) dimensions (6).

The analysis of heroines and heroes of these novels according to these attributes was done in two ways, in order to check the representation of female heroines in general, and in comparison with their corresponding heroes. The aim of this part of the study is to see if the gender stereotypes present in our society are represented in romance novels, i.e., do the novels perpetuate or negate the societal stereotypes. This division of traits that is used as the basis of my research of the heroines was done for a particular purpose and some of its elements might not be as emphasized or relevant for this study (like the division of leadership attribute of business competence). However, the analysis has included those as well because leadership ability is a relevant trait on which the discrimination of women occurs in our society (women not being thought of as capable as men in this area of life). For this reason, I have considered this when analyzing my chosen heroines because I wanted to see how this aspect, relatively unimportant for the story, is represented in the novels.

The five chosen heroines exhibit most of the agentic dimensions. All five show components of instrumental confidence. In terms of leadership competence only Jess and

Kristen show skills in business matters, while all five are achievement-oriented, i.e., they all focus on realizing their goal, whatever that might be. In terms of assertiveness, all five are bold and assertive, Jasmine embodies competitiveness in her profession the most, followed closely by January, and Jess has feelings of competitiveness in terms of comparing herself with other women mentioned in the novel. The dominant attribute is more complicated – Jasmine is not the dominant one in her relationship with Ivan, but is with everyone else in her life, Kristen is the one who decides the progression of her relationship both with the hero and other people in her life, especially in times of crises, except with her mother, who she lets "walk all over her", January does not show signs of dominance, and Jess shows it in terms of her relationship with River, her decisions enable the progress of their relationship, while Kenna and Ledger exchange the status of the dominant one in the relationship throughout the novel, although he is a bit more dominant. In terms of independence, all five lack emotional stability, which might be because the novels usually introduce them during hardships with which they must learn to deal with. All of them do desire responsibility, are independent and self-reliant most of the time - Jess leans on her family and friends for emotional and childcare support, after he forgives her, Kenna relies on Ledger to help her win over the grandparents, January mostly leans on her best friend, while Jasmine and Kristen mostly go through their problems alone and have to learn to rely on other people as the novel progresses.

The communal aspects can be a bit more summarized, as the differences are few. All exhibit communicative and collaborative traits, and the concern for others – most highly expressed in Kenna. All heroines show it, although mostly focused on the people closest to them, and less so towards people in general. The sociability dimension is where the five differ. Neither of the heroines is initially relationship-oriented – some need a lot of time to want a relationship (Jasmine and Jess), some want it early in the novel but do not act on in because of the potential negative consequences for others involved (Kristen and Kenna) or because they

do not think it is an option (January). Likeability is an interesting attribute to analyze, because of the different possibilities of understanding this trait because of the levels possible. Heroines like January and Jess are presented as the most likable of the five, in general – but the hero initially dislikes Jess. Jasmine is presented as unlikable by people in general, but liked by her family, friends and the hero, even though she thinks the opposite. Kristen is similar, presented as the sarcastic and "badass" character who is liked by few, when in reality she is liked by everybody as soon as she meets them, while Kenna is disliked because of her past, but actually very likable when given the opportunity to be herself. All of the five heroines also show high levels of emotional sensitivity, with Kristen and Jess being the least sentimental of them.

Their corresponding heroes are presented as the more agentic of the pair, but in some cases also more communal. All but Augustus are more relationship-oriented than their heroines. They are all liked, exhibit concern for others – Ledger and Ivan being the main representatives. Sentimentality is most strongly present in Ledger and Augustus. The most assertive and competitive of the heroes is Ivan, and the least River, with Josh being the most competitive (jealous) in terms of other men in his heroine's life.

Results

After analyzing the chosen five romance novels – *From Lukov with Love* (Zapata), *The Friend Zone* (Jimenez), *Beach Read* (Henry), *The Soulmate Equation* (Lauren) and *Reminders of Him* (Hoover), some general conclusions can be drawn. These novels break most of the (negative) stereotypes about romance novels and their characters but also confirm some. In terms of gender stereotypes present in today's society being present in the novels, it could be said that the representation is true to the state of society with an obvious attempt to change them, or at least showing unsatisfaction with the situation.

Firstly, I will refer to the stereotypes about romance novels from a technical point. One of the common critiques is that they do not deserve respect because they are easy to write, to which Regis responds that an average romance novel is written in a year (RWA in Regis, 10). This timeline can be confirmed when looking at the bibliography of these five authors – on average they publish a novel a year. However, this short writing time should not be considered a flaw of the genre, as, if we remember Fluck's take on reading fiction, one of the benefits is the constant search for new analogies, desire for articulation of our imaginary and desires, which can be accomplished only by stimulating that desire. The second mentioned stereotype is that the novel's governing element is marriage and that it extinguishes its own heroine, who has no goals besides love and marriage. These five novels strongly show the opposite. While some of them end with marriage (two out of five), the goals heroines have are not focused on relationships and love, but on careers, personal growth and healing. These heroines do not require marriage to be happy and successful in their life. Another stereotype goes hand-in-hand with this one, and that is the perpetuation of private (female) versus public (male) spheres. All of the heroines have a job and interests outside of the house, which they keep after marriage or betrothal with the hero. To go even further, most of them are shown as less home oriented than their hero – Jasmine, Kristen and January cannot cook well, or a lot of dishes, and are not bothered by that and their heroes happily take over that role, Kenna's cooking skills are not mentioned explicitly, but it is mentioned that she does not have any food in her kitchen and she is shown to eat out several times. Jess is the only one who fills this home-maker role, but not as the opposite of her public sphere husband – she is a single mother who does both roles, provides and takes care of her home and family.

The stereotype about simple language, over-explaining and repetitive descriptions is mostly confirmed by these novels. All novels represent contemporary people living their everyday lives, which results in the language being relatively simple and similar to everyday

communication. The only exception can be found in *The Soulmate Equation*, where a lot of space is dedicated to detailed descriptions and explanations of statistic formulas and algorithms, and genetics which then use terms of those disciplines as in this one example – "looking at this P value, I'm guessing with this pair the interactions are everywhere, even with stricter bounds. I could create a non-Euclidean metric, something like a multidimensional data structure—like a k-d tree or cover tree" (Lauren, 57). As far as unrealistic expectations about society and relationships are concerned, connected with the stereotype of heroines and heroes hating each other, these novels do set a relatively unrealistic image of relationships. Because every one of the five novels began with the assumption of dislike between the characters and ended with love, or the dislike being fake all along, if one looks to these novels as a guide in their personal relationships, they might have unrealistic and dangerous assumptions. This way of reading literature, as a model to be copied in real life is not how literature is usually read, and I do not believe we should see it that way. However, it is important to mention this as a negative trait, because of the previously mentioned critiques of the genre and its readers. The enemies-to-lovers trope is very common in romance novels, and if one thinks that dislike, rudeness or bullying equals love, they could end up in toxic and dangerous relationships, both emotionally and physically. Usually there is a middle element in this trope, and that is friendship where the animosity disappears and differences are settled before the couple ends up together, which is a bit more realistic and healthier way of representation. Again, this is mentioned as an answer to some of the stereotypes mentioned about the genre and its readers when reading fiction, we are well-aware the text is not real but if we again recall Fluck's categorization of elements in fiction – fictional, imaginary and realistic elements, I find this distinction to be important enough to emphasize.

The last stereotype is related to appearance of sex in romance novels, i.e., negatively calling romance novels pornography because of the occasional appearance of sex. I find this

aspect extremely important, as female sexuality has been a taboo topic, something bad and has been used as a way of controlling women. For a long time, women were seen as the objects, male property and passive – men do, and women are done to, the agency is reserved for the male population. Fekete has shown in her 2016 study that women want more representation of sex in their romance novels, and they want it more explicitly, unlike the Smithton women who want the opposite. It shows progress our society has made in just over three decades where women are taking control over their sexuality and do not see it as something bad. Sex scenes are present in all of these novels - only once in Zapata's novel, while the others have multiple appearances of sex scenes - varying in duration (from a single paragraph, several pages, up to a whole chapter), details, explicitness of words used, levels of emotions or pure urge involved, including just thinking or talking about it. The actual sexual acts are limited to hero and heroine, but also differ in the timeline of their relationship – after the declaration (Jasmine and Ivan), as soon as they met (Kenna and Ledger), as a step-up from platonic friendship but not in a relationship (Kristen and Josh, January and Augustus) or a part of dating (Jess and River). It is interesting to notice that many times, especially the first time, the heroine is the one who initiates it. The most important change about the representation of sex is the change from "bodice-ripper" type of sex, i.e., raping of the heroine, to consensual sexual relations using protection. In every one of these novels, and many others from the initial list, at the beginning of any kind of sexual act the characters ask and give permission to each other to proceed and mention the need for protection (condoms). This way of representation goes as far as explicitly stating the right to change their mind during the act (Hoover, 198).

For the stereotypes related directly to the personality traits of heroines, these novels generally break them. The first stereotype is related to viewing heroines as foolish, dependent and pathetic. None of the heroines in these novels can be described with these attributes. Neither of them is dependent on other people, on the contrary, some like Kristen, Jess and Jasmine learn

through the novel that asking for help and relying on other people does not make them any less capable or strong. They cannot be called pathetic when one considers the novel as a whole, their sometimes dramatic and emotional reactions to events are a result of either past trauma, hurting or lack of control over the situation, and in the context of the whole work the reactions can be justified. The second mentioned critique aimed at them is that they are "unusually compassionate, kind, and understanding" (Radway, 127). This stereotype cannot be fully proved or disapproved because the subject of "unusually" can be very subjective. However, in comparison with works exemplified in literature Radway used, these heroines do not justify harmful behavior unlike the heroines of her study – they are not kind and understanding towards people who do not treat them in the same way, but are to those closest to them. The closest to confirming this stereotype is Jasmine's "forgiveness" of hurtful things Ivan had said to her when he explains that they " . . . fuck around with each other because we both like it. Because there's nobody else we can fuck around with that can handle it" (Zapata, 354) which is closer to the truth than Jasmine's opinion – from the first interaction it is clear that she also starts the rude comments and enjoys the back and forth of insults. The stereotype about the heroine's "alluring appearance" and them not being aware of their beauty is mostly confirmed by these novels. They think of themselves as average, they are happy with their appearance but are very surprised and do not really believe it when other people (including the heroes) tell them that.

The stereotype of preoccupation by fashion is not present in these novels – Jasmine is aware of the differences between her and other girls, does not care about it and lives within her financial abilities, Kristen does the opposite of fashionable, she uses bad outfits to wear around the house as a way of sending a message of uninterest, January likes beautiful and fashionable clothes in general, but wears cutoffs and print T-shirts most of the time as it is not that important to her, Jess is concerned with fashion on one occasion – not having the appropriate and elegant enough dress for a party where they are guests of honor, while Kenna never really talks about

clothes and wears the same shirt two days in a row. When alone, or with other friends, neither of them acts for the "invisible eye of the man" (Clark et al., 371). Although beautiful, neither of them fits the rest of the stereotype of being virginal or helpless, nor do they fit the stereotype of innocent and naïve heroines. The most naïve of them would be January, who had always believed that love could conquer all problems – until her dad's death, when her illusion shattered, her life fell apart and she began to rebuild it with more realistic expectations (where the novel starts). The need of heroines to be cared for by the heroes after they "soften them" (Radway, 67) is only confirmed by January, and the "special qualities" Radway's participants required of their heroines is both confirmed and denied by these heroines. Just as themselves, they are not really in any way special or that different from other women, but their heroes do see them in that way. Ledger thinks that about Kenna's appearance, and Josh repeatedly thinks of Kristen as "not like other girls" in a way that implies that girls who are like that are less worthy of respect, for example – she is special because she is always hungry and knows where to eat, she does not care about her appearance, swears, is direct, likes action movies, etc. which are objectively not Kristen-specific things that make her different, but common interests between them,

However, the heroes' representation confirms the stereotype about physical descriptions used by romance novels – all are attractive, "sharp edges", hard, firm, etc. Augustus is the only one who is not conventionally handsome. Ivan and Josh both confirm the alpha-male behavior, fierce and sometimes aggressive protectiveness over the heroines which they often impose on them, sometimes by physically imposing themselves in heroine's space. They confirm the more positive stereotypes about romance novels' heroes – they are honest, tender and emotionally expressive (both negative and positive emotions), affectionate, understanding and desire love – sometimes more than the heroine. The only one who is more emotionally reserved is Augustus, something he is learning to change during the course of the novel. One of final stereotypes

about the power relations between the heroine and the hero is the hero providing financially. Although the heroines all have their own money, all of their heroes have more, i.e., they cover more of the financial expenses.

This way of representing women and men in romance novels when viewed through theory of reflection can show several things. Firstly, the study done by Hentschel et al. concludes that "women do not entirely embrace the stereotypic view of women as less agentic than men," (14) which can be seen in the representation of all five heroines. All of them have most of the attributes connected with agency. If this study represents the general opinion of women about their gender, it seems that the authors of these novels (all female) all agree. By portraying their heroines as strong, independent women, with goals and ambitions and capabilities to realize them, they represent the opinion of women in general. In this case, literature reflects the society it was written in. However, Hentschel et al. say that women in their study saw themselves as less assertive and with less leadership competence than women in general, and less than men saw themselves (14). If we break down the dimension of leadership competence to three attributes – leadership ability, achievement-oriented and skilled in business matters - as Hentschel et al. have done (6), this finding is partly reflected in the novels. Out of five heroines, only one significantly shows leadership ability (Kristen), and only two (Jess and Kristen) show skill in business matters. However, all five are achievement-oriented, meaning, they all have certain goals towards which they are working, usually career-oriented (Jasmine, January and Kristen) or some personal goal (Kenna) or a combination of the two (Jess). In other cases, the hero is the leader of the relationship most of the time. Looking at this, it seems that representation of women in contemporary romance novels partly "mimics" the social situation. I use "mimics" for the lack of a better word, because the leading thought is that literature does not mimic reality. It does; however, contain some reality elements that gain life through the reader's interpretation which is based on their personal experience in real life.

When looking at this occurrence in this way, it can be explained with the fact that authors of the novels draw from their experience which is obviously similar to women's experience in general, and the readers who read it also in this way.

The negative aspect of this reflection is the representation of negative and anti-feminist views of women. In an attempt to show a realistic story of infertility, Jimenez wrote Kristen's character based on her friend's experience (296). As a part of that, she used the thoughts her friend had about herself such as being "less of a woman. Damaged goods. Barren. Sterile" (216). The topic of children as the main goal for Josh, him breaking up his previous relationship because she did not want children, and Kristen's constant thoughts of herself as less of a woman because of her infertility send the message of women being complete only if they can have children. Kristen does eventually realize she is worthy of love even if she cannot give birth, but the repetition of this opinion and the fact she does get pregnant in the end, still send this message. The other book that negates its whole point is *From Lukov with Love* – Jasmine accomplishes so much professionally and personally, faces her problems and the people behind her self-confidence issues, develops a functional relationship with her family, learns to show her appreciation to them, and so on. At the end of the novel, in the epilogue, she describes her life several years into the future, and lists all the things she (and Ivan) has done, and yet, she describes the act of marrying Ivan as the most important thing she has done and the greatest moment of her entire life (Zapata, 484). With these two sentences, the novel perpetuates the stereotype of the importance of marriage and negates all her other, more difficult to achieve, accomplishments.

If we look at the other part of this theory, the influence of literature on society, some attempts to change the social situation can be found. In terms of assertiveness, the novels make the heroines more assertive than women in society think of themselves. Their agency is more explicitly represented, they act more like protectors (sometimes more than the heroes), they are

active agents who *do*, who make conscious decisions and stand by them. As for communality, this is where the attempt to change the stereotypes is most obviously seen. All of the heroines are, of course, communal – they care for others, are sociable and emotionally sensitive. However, they do not extend these parts of themselves to everybody, but only to people who deserve it, they do not act "proper" and are unapologetically themselves – they swear, do not know how to cook, they wear what they want and do not care about attracting male attention, they have careers and goals – the relationship is just "a bonus" in their life. Their heroes show more of these communal traits than them [the heroines]. The novels also refer to the existing double standard in our society, in a way that disadvantages women. January talks about the difference of respect for male and female authors (and the romance genre). Kenna compares the consequences of prison for men and women:

> There's a double standard for women, even behind bars. When women say they've been to prison, people think trash, whore, addict, thief. But when men say they've been to prison, people add badges of honor to the negative thoughts, like trash, but badass, addict, but tough, thief, but impressive. There's still a stigma with the men, but the women never get out with stigmas and badges of honor (Hoover, 23).

In *The Soulmate Equation* Jess's friend advocates for the freedom of sex without commitment and women being unapologetic about how they live their life, even if it is contrary to the societal expectations of them: "We are in the era of women taking pleasure and not apologizing for getting theirs first, second, and one more time for the road" (Lauren, 6). With details like these, the authors show the changes they want to see more of in our society – men who are not only agentic, but as communal as women, sometimes more, who support and love imperfect heroines, women who voice their wants and needs and take up space in the same way men do, and the world does not end. If literature can influence society, by writing a

fictional world where those things are "real", the readers of romance novels could be inspired to act in a similar way, and use these books as a form of empowerment.

CONCLUSION

This thesis presented the romance novel as a genre by defining it through eight essential elements and makes a brief overview of the history of the form. From its beginning until today, the form has remained stable, yet it shows the societal changes that have occurred: from viewing marriage as means of financial and social security to marriage as an expression of love, and the eventual optionality of marriage as a form of romantic commitment. This thesis has used the method of close reading in order to delve deeper into the novels, analyze their structure, characters, plot and themes. The results of the analysis of the selected novels have been compared to the existing stereotypes, and compared with the studies of stereotypes in contemporary society. By the end, both elements of reflection and influence of societal perceptions have been recognized in these novels in the form of gender stereotypes.

The results of the analysis have shown that the chosen novels break most common stereotypes about the genre and its heroines. These novels put emphasis on their heroine's agency, goals and achievements, personal growth and complexity of character. With this the novels break the stereotypes of romance novels heroines as passive and helpless, and by portraying the heroes as family and relationship oriented, emotionally aware, understanding, and vulnerable, they break the most common stereotypes about the heroes of this genre. The agentic dimension is stereotypically male, while communality is female. By reversing the emphasis – i.e. stressing the communality aspect in heroes and the agency aspect in heroines – these novels challenge the traditional gender stereotypes of our society.

Moreover, the novels deal with issues present in contemporary society and give a commentary on them. These novels address topics such as family issues, single-parenting, infertility, life after prison, bullying, consent and protection, personal identity, gender stereotypes, the disparagement of romance novels and its readers, etc. Through this, the

novels show adaptability and ability to evolve in a way to include the topics important and present in the lives of women.

Ultimately, this thesis shows that romance novels today do break most of the stereotypes – about the genre, the heroines, and women. They explore the complex human relationships, emotions and situations, can serve as a statement of the change wanted to be seen in the society – an inspiration and incentive to empowerment and nonconformity to traditional gender expectations. As a response to the first critic of the genre mentioned, from which many others stem, I believe these novels show that "happy endings don't matter if the getting there sucks" (Henry, 62).

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is focused on finding out if the romance novels today break or perpetuate the stereotypes about the genre, its heroines and the social gender stereotypes about women. It does that by giving an overview of the definition and the evolution of the genre itself, presenting the relationship of society and literature as the basis of comparison for the stereotypes. The analysis of the stereotypes is based on a sample of five romance novels written by American authors in the period from 2018 until 2022 and were chosen as the representatives from the sample of almost 300 novels. The analysis is done by the method of close reading of the five novels. Based on the results, conclusions were drawn and the original hypothesis was answered.

Keywords: romance novel, contemporary romance novel, gender stereotypes, close reading