

Lisa McDonald

Professor Allison Carr

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Romance Novels and the Propagation of Rape Culture

Rape culture is "a complex set of beliefs that encourage male sexual aggression and supports violence against women" ("What is Rape"). Coined by feminists in the 1970s, the term "rape culture" identifies the assumption promoted in society that violence is sexy and sexual violence is inevitable. This can be seen explicitly in visual mediums such as shirts stating "It's not rape, it's a snuggle with a struggle" and audio mediums such as the infamous song "Blurred Lines." Yet the power of rape culture lies in the implicit written medium, where its influence is taken for granted and shapes the way in which "healthy" relationships are described and portrayed. This can be seen most clearly in romance literature. This essay will analyze to what extent romance literature propagates rape culture in society, and discuss why eradicating its influence is so much more difficult than banishing rape culture from other mediums. Specifically, this essay will compare romance literature by female and male authors respectively to identify where rape culture is most prevalent. The essay will then discuss why it is detrimental to readers to not know if these rape culture messages on relationships are coming from the female or male authors. Before analysis of the romance pieces begin, however, a history of romance novels and the connection between objectification and rape culture will be examined to provide a foundation against which the novels can be discussed.

The literature identified by today's society as contemporary romance novels does not have a definitive start date, but McDaniel College's Professor of English Pamela Regis has traced the changes in society which allowed for the development of the genre. In her book *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, Regis notes the shift that occurred in social relations, from having relations based on the family and society to having relations based on the individual. This "affective individualism" focused on an individual's fulfillment being the central goal in one's life (Regis 55). Having this new focus changed the individual ideas of courtship, prompting women to search for a companionate marriage over an economic union (Regis 58). Regis believes courtship based on this framework lent itself more easily to dramatization than the earlier, economic-based courtship, and writers used this to their advantage. Though determining the first true contemporary romance novel is a question still debated by scholars, Regis lists it as the 1740 novel *Pamela*, written by male author Samuel Richardson, due to it being the first romance novel to reach best seller status (Regis 61).

For a novel to be deemed as romance and not simply as a novel containing a love plot, eight essential elements must be included within the storyline. Of the eight, sex scenes are not one of the required elements to classify a piece of literature as romance. Sex scenes are a fairly new addition to the genre since extramarital sex has only recently come to be accepted by society at large (Regis 54). The same does not apply to rape, however. Male authors have used rape as a plot device since the very beginning of the romance novel genre. In the best selling romance novel mentioned above, *Pamela*, rape is used as a threat throughout the novel in order to persuade the female protagonist, Pamela, to bow to her master's wishes and turn her into an object for her master's desires. In

contrast, the first well-known contemporary female-written romance novel, *Pride & Prejudice* in 1813, creates tension and drama without the use of rape. This divide that male authors use the plot device of rape more frequently than female authors has held to the current day. It is necessary, though, to clarify the relationship between objectification and rape culture before analysis of the romance pieces can take place.

To understand rape culture, one must first understand the concept of objectification. It can be elucidated most elegantly by a quote from Jane Austen's 1817 novel, *Northanger Abbey*: "[M]an has the advantage of choice, woman only the power of refusal ..." (Austen Ch. 10). This statement implies that while women might have the power to say no, men have the choice to ignore that request and forge ahead regardless. Through choice, man takes on the role of subject, but women are left holding the status of object. Object status renders the person as one whose actions are determined by outside influences, easily manipulated to fit the role those holding subject status wish for them to fulfill. This objectification takes place in all spheres, but the sphere most readily identified in discussion is sexual interactions ("The Objectification"). This is due in part to the ease with which the topic can be sensationalized, grabbing the mass's attention and resulting in profitable ventures for media companies relying on this appeal. This objectification is seen clearly in lingerie ads such as those from Victoria's Secret, yet the lesson of objectification is taught even to the young of society through traditional story tropes of a knight rescuing a "helpless" maiden. This plot framework carries forward into adult romance novels, yet that does not necessarily mean rape culture does too. That is because objectification can be split into positive and negative categories, with the negative category being the one that aids rape culture.

The distinction between positive and negative objectification is described in the 2010 essay *Feminist Perspectives on Objectification*, which contrasts several prominent feminist thinkers' takes on the subject of objectification. While many of the feminist thinkers claim objectification as inherently negative, American philosopher Martha Nussbaum stresses that the context of the objectification is what classifies it as either negative or positive/benign. Objectification is negative when the context lacks equality, respect, and consent but is positive/benign in contexts containing these features (Papadaki Ch. 5). Nussbaum emphasizes this distinction, especially in sexual relations where the woman may choose to embody an object role: "[a person's] chosen resignation of autonomous self-direction, or her willed passivity may be compatible with, and even a valued part of, a relationship in which the woman is treated as an end for her own sake... as a full fledged human being" (Papadaki Ch. 5). As defined in the introduction, the core of rape culture is violence against women. Since this violence rests on the degradation of females as a gender, objectivity that relies on the inclusion of equality, respect, and consent does not feed into this mindset. As such, defining the objectivity as either negative or positive/benign in each of the case studies to be analyzed will assess the level at which rape culture is being promoted in the story.

Understanding the history of romance novels and the distinction between positive and negative objectification allows for analysis to take place on how the romance pieces selected for this study promote rape culture. The pieces selected for this study were chosen based on two criteria, those being either the prominence of the author or the prominence of the book itself. For the female authors, Nora Roberts, Judith McNaught, and Krista Lakes were chosen. Nora Roberts and Judith McNaught have been writing in

this genre for decades, and they, along with author Krista Lakes, have made the New York Times Best Seller List multiple times. Roberts' novel *The Liar* was chosen based on it being the most recent novel published by the author while McNaught's novel *Remember When* was published in the middle of her career. Lakes is known for her Kisses series, and the book selected from her repertoire, *Saltwater Kisses*, is the first of the series. Combined, these novels from these three separate female authors span two decades of romance novel history to allow for discussion of how, if any, the romance novel has increased or lessened its promotion of rape culture during this time. For the male authors, Thomas Elmer Huff and Harold Lowry were chosen. Huff and Lowry are two of the most well-known male romance novelists writing under female pseudonyms, Jennifer Wilde and Leigh Greenwood respectively. Huff was specifically chosen due to the fact his novel *Love's Tender Fury* is infamous for the rape scenes involved. The two novels were published in 1976 and 2003 respectively, thus allowing, like with the female authors, the ability to discuss how, if any, the romance novel increased or lessened its promotion of rape culture during this time.

The majority of romance novels are written by females, so the analysis will begin with the discussion of the female authors since they are more representative of the romance genre as a whole. The analysis will begin with a brief synopsis of each of the selected pieces to provide a frame of reference for the discussion that will follow.

The first novel, *Remember When* by Judith McNaught, came out in 1996. The protagonist is Diana Foster, a thirty-year-old engaged businesswoman. At the age of twenty-two, Foster single-handedly negotiated thousand-dollar loans in order to prevent her family from falling into poverty following her father's death. She then proceeded to

create a multi-million dollar magazine business using her wits alone. The plot follows Foster's decision to marry long-lost love interest, Cole Harrison, after her fiancé deserts her. Throughout the novel, Foster retains her position as head of her self-developed company even when, at the novel's end, she and Harrison have their first child together.

The second novel, *Saltwater Kisses* by Krista Lakes, came out in 2010. Small-town Iowa girl Emma LaRue wins an all-expenses paid trip to a tropical island, where she meets Jack Saunders. After a fake marriage on the beach, it is revealed Saunders is actually in line to take over his father's billion-dollar oil company. When photos of the fake wedding are leaked to the paparazzi, LaRue is taken to New York to live with Saunders until it can be decided if the marriage should be legitimized or not. Though LaRue ultimately decides to forgo a career as a veterinarian in order to marry Saunders, this is seen as a personal choice and not an gender-induced one since several barriers are constructed to deter her from this path.

The third novel, *The Liar* by Nora Roberts, came out in 2015. After her husband's supposed drowning, Shelby Pomeroy and her three-year-old daughter move back to Pomeroy's small hometown in Tennessee. After taking work at her grandmother's spa, Pomeroy begins a relationship with contractor Griff Lott. The plot follows the development of their relationship as tensions rise following secrets from Pomeroy's late husband's past. During the course of the novel, Pomeroy successfully pays off the several million dollar debt her husband left behind without once relying on either her family or boyfriend to help her achieve this goal.

In all three novels, the female authors promote the attainment of a man as the way to achieve happiness, but they do so with the requirement the woman holds equal status

within the relationship. In constructing this equality, the female protagonists are written as possessing grit and determination that do not conform to the traditional gender roles. LaRue is an exception since she desires marriage over a career in that novel, which is traditionally considered the goal of females, yet the fact other characters in the novel actively encourage her to pursue a career instead of marriage creates a situation in which choosing marriage is actually the non-conforming role. In each case, the women pursued their personal goals while vehemently refusing the help of the significant men in their lives. While all three expressed longing and pain whenever situations threatened to tear them from their loves, the climax of each novel rested on the woman's shoulders to solve the crisis instead of their man. Foster flew to Dallas to support her husband and personally discovered the one man able to provide evidence clearing her husband's name of the fraudulent business practices he had been accused of. LaRue refused the payout offered by her love-interest's parents to get her to leave and instead chose to stay and provide the emotional support he needed to prevent stress from overwhelming him. Pomeroy, arguably the most progressive, shot her actually-not-dead husband when he kidnapped her and is already safe by the time her boyfriend arrived to "rescue" her. While the women are objectified through repeated references to their attractive physical characteristics and family praises of finding a man, these objectifications do not strip the women of their equality and respect among the other characters of the novel. As such, this objectification is of the positive/benign form, and thus does not institute rape culture within these novels.

Having established objectivity as positive/benign in the majority of romance novels since most romance novels are written by females, the male romance authors will

be compared to this standard of rape culture not being promoted in the romance genre. The analysis of male romance authors will begin with a brief synopsis of each of the selected pieces to provide a frame of reference for the discussion that will follow.

The first novel, *Love's Tender Fury* by Thomas Elmer Huff, came out in 1976. The book is the first of a three-part historical series set during the time of the American Revolution. Marietta Danver is shipped to America as an indentured servant after being framed for stealing her employer's jewels. She is bought by Derek Hawke, a plantation owner, but is resold to Jeff Rawlins, a dealer of prostitutes, after helping Hawke's slaves to escape. She ends up helping Rawlins establish a gambling house in New Orleans, but leaves for Natchez following Rawlins' untimely death. There she marries a man revealed to be mad but is saved from death by the return of Hawke to the scene.

The second novel, *Family Merger* by Harold Lowry, came out in 2003. Kathryn Roper runs a house for pregnant teens who cannot face life at home. When Ron Egan, a father of one of the girls, appears at her door, Roper is entreated to help salvage the relationship between father and daughter. Through this process, Roper and Egan develop a relationship of their own, and ultimately end up married by the time of the novel's conclusion.

While on the surface these women appear progressive, both of them are operating in jobs deemed "safe," i.e., traditionally feminine. Roper runs the house by herself, but the house--watching over pregnant girls--places her in a mothering role instead of a true power position such as Foster, who was a corporate CEO. Danver too might be skilled as a seamstress, designer, and hostess, but all of these skills are categorized under feminine qualities. And unlike the climax of the female-written novels, Roper and Danver both

require their love interests to save them at the end. Roper was allowing her sister to take advantage of her monetary gains, and it wasn't until Roper's love interest researched and presented the sister's treachery to her did Roper confront her sister then come begging forgiveness in her lover's arms. Danver unwisely chose to stay in her mad husband's house after helping her sister-in-law to escape, and would have been burned alive in the house fire if her original lover hadn't returned to knock the husband unconscious and carry Danver from the flames. While these examples play heavily on the established gender roles of females as homebodies and dependent, it cannot be stated affirmatively based only on this that there is a presence of rape culture in these novels. Discussion of the rape scenes, mentality about relationships, and type of objectification must be analyzed to positively state if male authors promote rape culture in their novels. This discussion will begin with the examination of the rape scenes since it is the most explicit example of rape culture at work.

As stated during the history of romance novels, male authors have used rape as a plot device since the very beginning of the genre. While rape was only threatened during the 1740 novel *Pamela*, rape actually occurs throughout the 1976 novel *Love's Tender Fury*. The first time female protagonist Danver experiences rape is at the hands of a man employing her as a governess for his children. At the time of the event, Danver was nineteen and a virgin. After the rape, though, Danver's response borders on proud.

The nervous, vulnerable nineteen-year-old girl had vanished completely, and the woman who looked back at me was much more interesting. There was a patina of sensuality that had been latent before ... Marietta Danver had become a woman,

and with the new knowledge had come a sense of power that was immediately evident (Wilde Prologue Ch. 3).

There are many responses people go through after being raped. A three-stage process has been identified by which survivors work through their experience. In the acute stage, the stage following directly after the assault, victims' responses range anywhere from extreme emotional displays of anger or sadness to total calm brought on by shock ("The Effects"). Responses do not include immediate acceptance of and strategic use of the event. Having Danver respond to the event in such a way is the same as stating women are meant as sexual vessels, a fact they need to realize for themselves as Danver did. Being raped opened Danver to her "true" potential, a fact she uses on the voyage to America when she hooks up with a sailor in exchange for protection from the rest of the crew.

One might propose a counterargument that since this is a historical novel, governesses of that era would expect rape as a possible outcome of any employment they took and would thus be more successful in mentally coping after the assault has taken place. This assumption is analogous to soldiers expecting to see their friends blown to pieces once they reach the front lines and would thus not be affected by the violence. It does not matter if the soldiers in theory know this as a possible outcome. Once they are physically in the position where bullets are flying and heads are exploding not even five feet away from them, the PTSD they develop cannot be prevented by the foreknowledge that such an event might occur. This is exactly the same for rape victims. Awareness of the possibility does not protect one from the mental trauma that occurs when the event actually takes place. In light of this, for Danver to react the way she did does not make

sense even taking historical accuracy into account and labels this as a prime example of rape culture at work.

The inclusion of rape scenes in these earlier novels are understandable due to the society of the times, but the way in which the female protagonists handle the rapes is inaccurate and the reason these novels classify as promoters of rape culture. Historically, rape was viewed not as a violation of the woman but as the violation of another man's property. However, this defilement of the "property" only mattered when the woman was of the privileged classes, so women who did not hold the proper socio-economic status and were raped did not receive legal justice (Poskin 1). Thus, rape as a plot device made sense since commonly the female protagonists of these early and historical male-authored romance novels are of the lower socio-economic class in order they can be saved by marrying upward. However, the fact rape was portrayed erroneously as an empowerment of the female victim, as demonstrated by Danver, is where the fault of rape as a plot device lies. While including rape scenes as a way to remark on the moral ills of society would be understandable, the use of rape to demonstrate empowerment of women promotes the sexual violation rape culture centers around. It wasn't until the 1970s when rape became a topic of public discussion and its inclusion as a plot device, even for historical contexts, came under intense scrutiny, that the use of rape as a plot device became a less common occurrence in mainstream romance novels (Poskin 4).

The inclusion of explicit rape scenes is not as prevalent in mainstream romance novels as they were previously, yet male-authored romance novels still promote rape culture through less forthright means. Instead of explicit rape scenes, the inclusion of rape culture mentality within the novels provide a more subtle promotion of rape culture.

To substantiate this claim, sections from the 2003 novel *Family Merger* will be outlined and analyzed.

In Chapter 11 of *Family Merger*, Roper expresses a sentiment key to the rape culture mentality. In the previous chapter, Roper and her fling were involved in a heavy make-out session. The man took off her top and proceeded to slide his hand up her skirt. Roper yelled at him to stop, and Chapter 11 began with their plane having landed and them driving through Geneva. Roper sits uncomfortably in the car as she analyzes how she took the situation. "She knew enough of men to know what she'd done was taboo. No woman would encourage a man in such a fashion then, without warning, scream at him to stop ... she could have made sure [he] didn't believe she was promising more than she was willing to give. It was only fair" (Greenwood Ch. 11). It then continues to explain that even a "man trained to keep his feelings from showing could only control so much" and "[h]e had every right to accuse her of being a tease, of leading him on" (Greenwood Ch. 11).

There are several messages hidden in this exchange that establish the prominence of rape culture. It starts with the belief that a man has only so much control. As sex and sexuality blogger Nikki Brown notes, rape culture teaches men control is unnecessary when it stands in the way of sexual fulfillment.

Rape culture says that we should *expect* men to be violent, misogynistic, and to not even notice, let alone *care*, what a woman wants, as long as she did something to make him think she wants to have sex. No, scratch that. As long as she did something to make him think *about* sex (Brown).

This has been expounded on again and again for situations where the woman did not even vocalize a supposed implication but simply wore revealing clothing. Atheist blogger Libby Anne notes how this is especially true in the modesty doctrine stressed in many religions, including the Christian right in which she was raised.

Now of course, the argument being made here is not that women through their scanty dress force men to *rape* them but rather that they force men to *lust after* them. But really, how much separates the two in the terms of the mentality behind them? (Anne).

Sex is not an expectation, sex is a choice, and when any of the party decides to forgo the intercourse, the intercourse is stopped for all involved. Sex can even be stopped once it has already begun. The belief that once a path of flirting has been established that it leads to an inevitable ending of sex is wrong. Sex can be stopped at anytime and there should be no "taboo" against this (Stevens).

To have Roper worry that her actions were taboo and she deserved to have been forced to continue with the physical interaction is only half of the problem. After Roper rebuffed her lover, he apologized for pushing her and instead cuddled her for the duration of the movie they were watching. "But if he could behave with such class, then the least she could do was try to behave just as well ... [h]er nightmares were probably just reward for her behavior" (Greenwood Ch. 11). To word the reaction of her lover in such a way reinforces the belief men have the right to pursue physical intimacy even when told to stop. This, coupled with the previously discussed statements, work together to present a very strong case for the acceptability of rape culture in relationships.

This mentality in *Family Merger*, along with the discussion of rape in *Love's Tender Fury*, provides a strong argument for the presence of rape culture throughout the male-authored romance novels. However, the classification of the objectification must also be established to determine the full extent of rape culture throughout these novels. This classification will begin by examining the passages directly preceding the rape scenes throughout *Love's Tender Fury*.

The rape Danver experienced at the hands of her original employer was only the first of many throughout the novel. On her way to jail after being framed for the thievery of her employer's jewels, the two men escorting Danver raped her in the police carriage. "During the night that [my employer] had used me repeatedly, I had thought I knew what it was to be degraded. I hadn't. Until now I hadn't even known the meaning of the word" (Wilde Prologue Ch. 3). Once Danver reached America and was purchased by Hawke to work as his indentured servant, he treated her callously until one day decided to take pleasure with his vassal. "Then he kissed me, a hard unyielding kiss, as he would kiss a whore ... I was an object, a receptacle for his lust" (Wilde Part One Ch. 7). The one man throughout the novel to treat Danver with respect, the dealer of prostitutes Jeff Rawlins, Danver refuses to let herself love and instead pines away for the attentions of Hawke.

As can be seen in the above passages, the objectification Danver experiences at the hands of various males leave her without equality and respect. The one man, Rawlins, who does objectify her positively by waiting to have sex until her grief over being sold by Hawke diminishes, and even then "used [her] body as a great musician might use a cherished instrument, tenderly" is rejected by Danver as too boyish next to the brutal masculinity of Hawke (Wilde Part Two Ch. 12). This not only presents objectivity as a

predominantly negative force throughout the novel, it also explicitly states women as preferring this kind of objectivity over anything else.

While the objectivity is predominantly negative in the older romance novel, the more recent male-authored romance uses positive objectivity in its plot. This is evidenced in the 2003 novel *Family Merger*. While the mentality in the book is a strong perpetrator of rape culture, the objectivity evident in the book does not add to this mentality. This can be seen in the fact that even though Roper berates herself over "leading" her love-interest on, he still stopped when she told him no. He respected her wishes even if Roper herself felt they were misplaced, which is an example of her being objectified in a positive, not negative, way. This positive objectivity is also evident in relation to Cynthia, the pregnant daughter of Roper's love-interest. Throughout the novel it was assumed Cynthia was coerced into the sexual interaction that resulted in her pregnancy, but in the last chapter it is revealed she was the one to initiate sex. "I wanted something of my own to love, something that would love me back. A baby has to love its mother, doesn't it?" (Greenwood Ch. 12). In a twist of fate, the story instead paints the boy as being the unwitting victim of Cynthia's advances, himself objectified as a way for Cynthia to gain the pregnancy she desired. And when her father attempts to challenge the boy, Cynthia refuses to budge. "In case you've forgotten, I'm the one who's pregnant. It's between me and [the boy]" (Greenwood Ch. 12). In Roper and Cynthia's cases, any objectification they experience is done within the context of equality and respect, thus refuting the objectification in this novel as being an aid to rape culture. However, even if the more recent male-authored romance novels have turned to using positive instead of negative objectification within the plot, the fact still remains that the mentality expressed through

examples such as Roper's self-shaming creates an environment that supports rape culture nonetheless. With this analysis, it stands that male-authored romance novels propagate rape culture much more frequently than female-authored romances.

While it is evident male-authored romance novels propagate rape culture more so than female-authored romances, what makes this especially detrimental to society is the fact casual observers do not know which novels were written by males. This is due to the fact stated earlier that the males chosen for analysis write under female pseudonyms. This is the norm for males wishing to break into the romance genre, since males are assumed to not understand the mentality of a female and thus would be unable to adequately write in a female-centered genre. To be successful, males are encouraged to adopt female pseudonyms in order their female audience will trust their opinions more. Unless the authors are researched online, it is difficult to distinguish the male from female authors merely by looking at their books. Due to this, the male-authored romance novels' rape culture messages could erroneously be assumed to be coming from females themselves. As such, a woman reading these novels would presume another female is telling her she should wish for negative objectivity within a relationship. Since she does not realize these words are being written by a gender not her own, it could lead her to surmise that other women truly feel this way and she should too.

However, with the recent turn of male-authored romance novels to positive objectivity, it makes it much more difficult to pinpoint the rape culture within their novels and results in it being much more difficult to eradicate. Unlike the clearly stated rape and negative objectification within *Love's Tender Fury*, recent male-authored romance novels thread elements of rape culture mentality throughout the novels in more

subtle ways. This threaded rape culture mentality was clearly discussed in relation to Roper's guilt in *Family Merger*. Not only does it make the rape culture mentality a more embedded plot device than the negative objectification was, female readers will be less likely to question the mentality since they believe the message to be coming from females such as themselves. By taking female pseudonyms, the male authors are able to create for themselves a false comradery with the female readers based on gender similarity. When they then deliver these messages supporting rape culture, the female guise prevents the messages from being as critically deconstructed as they might otherwise be if the true gender of the author was to be known.

Rape culture is a predominant force in today's society, yet the extent to which it is propagated within the context of romance novels is not as much as a cursory observer might believe. While rape culture is clearly more prevalent in male-authored romance novels, the blatant tactics of rape and negative objectification used in earlier novels are not seen as much in the novels of today. However, the more implicit delivery of rape culture mentality is insidious since it cannot be as easily identified and eradicated as the earlier representations. This is especially true in relation to female pseudonyms since they can deter female readers from critically analyzing the novels as they might otherwise do if they were to know the authors were actually male. Yet on the whole, while romance novels do rely on objectivity of the female, it is a positive objectivity, and thus does not aid in the propagation of rape culture within society. As such, the wholesale condemnation of the romance genre is not the way to eradicate rape culture from society, since the genre as a whole does not promote rape culture to begin with. What the romance genre needs--especially the male-authored novels--is to be critically analyzed on

a piece-by-piece basis in order to actively call out the singular perpetrators of rape culture. Their work not only propagates rape culture in society but misrepresents the romance genre. Through critical analysis, not only will a step be taken toward eradicating rape culture from society but a step toward eradicating the negative stereotype of the romance genre as a perpetrator of rape culture will be taken as well.

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