

Romance and Metagenre: A Response to Burkhard Niederhoff

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Abstract

This short essay constitutes a reflection on meta-generic strategies and practises employed by authors of romance fiction. Conceived as a response to Burkhard Niederhoff’s article published in *Connotations*, it aims at making literary criticism and romance fiction dialogue with one another by discussing several of the same texts analysed by Niederhoff from the perspective of Romance Studies.

More specifically, this contribution to the debate on metagenre aims at making available some of the concepts developed by scholars of the romance novel to literary scholars. Adopting Pamela Regis’s definition of the happy ending as “betrothal,” the essay sketches a short progression of this trope as heading towards increasingly visible self-reflexive “metageneric” solutions. The outline begins with a discussion of E. M. Forster’s *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905) as a “failed romance” which aims at complementing Niederhoff’s reflections on the novel’s ending in connection to its protagonist’s inner development and maturation. It continues with an examination of E. M. Forster’s *A Room with a View* (1908) which focuses on “the bitter notes” hidden within its apparently uncontentious happy ending, and it ends by analysing some of the explicit metageneric devices employed in John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969).

In recent years, several edited volumes have been released on literary fiction and genre, and on the centrality of generic narrative forms to past and present developments in the field of Anglophone literary studies (see, e.g., Frow; Dowd and Rulyova; Cooke). Although this move towards genre has

been amply recognized and elaborated upon by literary critics (Dorson; Lanzendörfer; Rothman), the romance genre has been almost entirely neglected by the recent increase in scholarship on generic forms of literature.

I would like to take this opportunity to make literary criticism and romance fiction enter into dialogue with one another by discussing several of the same texts analysed in Niederhoff's article from the perspective of Romance Studies. More precisely, I will adopt Pamela Regis's definition of the happy ending as "betrothal" (37-38) to sketch a short progression of this trope heading towards increasingly visible self-reflexive "metageneric" solutions. The outline will begin with a discussion of *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905) as a "failed romance" and will continue with *A Room with a View* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. This response aims at making available to literary scholars some of the concepts developed by Romance Studies researchers. Although I largely share Niederhoff's reading of these texts, a perspective from Romance Studies might add to his point of view.

Before going forward, I should elucidate the notion of happy ending as betrothal. In *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (2003), Regis individuates eight essential narrative elements to be used as analytical categories of the romance novel, several "events" in the storyline which must occur for a romance novel to be defined as such:

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.¹ (30)

This schema allows for a virtually endless number of variations: the meeting between heroine and hero can be recounted in flashbacks, for instance, or the barrier(s) can be thoroughly internal, that is to say constituted by the "attitudes, temperament, values, and beliefs held by heroine and hero that prevent the union" (Regis 32). Accordingly, the "betrothal" has been adapted to the needs of contemporary taste in storytelling. Sequences depicting the romantic protagonists (no longer necessarily a man and a

woman) sharing an ice-cream or dancing together at the end of the narrative qualify as scenes of betrothal. In other words, a “betrothal,” in order to be such, must contain the indication of a continuing romantic union or of “an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending to a central love story” (Carter 12).

One Moment Short of Connecting: *Where Angels Fear to Tread*

Niederhoff observes that “Philip cultivates his sense of humour to achieve a feeling of superiority that is unfounded” (20), adding to this remark that precisely his lack of self-knowledge, or “Pusillanimity” (20), will get in the way of seizing the opportunity to change the course of events. I see Philip’s essentially failed attempt at acting upon his acerbic improvement in time to change the course of his life as constituting a shift from comedy to tragedy—the very shift Niederhoff calls attention to throughout his article.

Although Philip, by the end of his trip to Monteriano, understands more of himself, his awareness of this (newly acquired) ability to connect is far too timid to allow him to make a convincing attempt at securing Caroline’s affection at the end of the narrative. Philip ponders too long and, at that point, Caroline’s unexpected confession of her love for Gino silences Philip’s declaration to her, making Philip fall back into his old patterns of passive observer.

Caroline, over the course of an important exchange with Philip, tells him: “your brain and your insight are splendid. But when you see what’s right you’re too idle to do it” (124). Shortly after, she adds: “There’s never any knowing—how am I to put it?—which of our actions, which of our idlenesses won’t have things hanging on it for ever” (127). This is an exact prediction of what will happen in the last scene. Philip’s hesitation will forever seal his destiny of passive spectator.

Hence the story concludes with Philip’s aborted attempt at rebelling against his conscious condition of “puppet” (71) governed by society’s restrictions, perfectly embodied by his mother, whom he sees as a “well-ordered, active, useless machine” (71). Indeed, *Where Angels Fear to Tread* is not a romance novel, but resembles, rather—as Harriet herself observes in

a clearly ironic meta-generic remark: “one of those horrible modern plays where no one is in the right” (57). Nonetheless, analysing this novel as a failed romance reveals that precisely what makes it fail as a romance—the misalignment of the elements of “recognition” and “declaration”—impresses onto its ending a final tragic note.

The missing “nugget” Philip needs in order to complete the mosaic of a more complete and freer existence is described by Forster as follows: “[Philip] concluded that nothing could happen, not knowing that human love and love of truth sometimes conquer where love of beauty fails” (57). Understanding this lesson too late—the immediacy and physicality of love beyond its aesthetic dimension—Philip loses Caroline, and with her the possibility to access a less contrived mode of existence.

Caroline understands the concrete nature and carnality of love from her own attraction to Gino, and from observing him with his baby. However, she does not dare letting this knowledge change the course of her life, as she knows—from Lilia’s parable—that a concrete trespassing would ruin her. In this sense, Philip, as Forster himself phrases it and Niederhoff reports in his article, “exceeds” (16) Caroline at the end of the narrative: he would dare to change; Caroline would not. Philip, the reader suspects, needs a “nudge,” an encouragement that Caroline is not able to provide.

Niederhoff calls attention to the narrative gradually shifting from comedy to tragedy. The same (reversed) movement is detectable, on a smaller scale, in the opera sequence, where Forster, through an intertextual reference to *Lucia di Lammermoor* (the story of a fragile woman caught between two families), stages a rapid shift from tragedy (the story of Lucia as intended) to a comic performance—divesting the original story of all its gravity by representing the joyous participation of an anarchic audience.²

Over the course of the sequence, in which the capacity of each character to live fully and emotionally is tested, Harriet and Gino remain, untouched, at the opposite poles—Harriet will remain incapable of feeling; Gino *only* feels—Caroline and Philip let themselves be affected by the performance, and, by extension, by the Italian experience, but they will elaborate upon it differently. This inconsistency will ultimately lead to their alienation from one another.

Claude J. Summers writes that “[t]he underlying sadness of *Where Angels Fear to Tread* stems from its apprehension of the atomized self, of the near impossibility of connecting the intellect, the soul, and the body, either in a balanced individual or in complementary relationships” (40-41). “Just as the three great attractions of Monteriano’s piazza symbolize the intellect, the soul, and the body,” Summers argues, “so do Philip, Caroline, and Gino also represent these parts of an entire person” (40).³ “Throughout the book,” he adds, “Gino is associated with unconscious sexuality and physicality” (41). The latter are the very elements that British culture, according to its own perception, has lost on its way to modernity and progress, and tragedy occurs every time a British character unthinkingly approaches that existential sphere.

From this perspective, Caroline might be seen as a reconciling figure placed between two extreme positions unlikely to bring about good results: whereas Philip is too cerebral for his own good (as the last scene will make painfully evident), Gino is unaware of his elemental nature. Caroline occupies a space of conciliatory mediation between the two domains, a role she plays throughout the novel.

For Forster, happiness in interpersonal relationships and self-knowledge are closely related—“recognition” and “declaration” being another set of terms for the same dyadic mechanism—the capacity to read oneself and only then reach out to others. Three years after *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, Forster publishes a novel in which all these elements finally align. Lucy Honeychurch will be able, after much “muddle,” clumsiness, and a final decisive nudging from Mr. Emerson, to recognise and admit her feelings for George.

The Seed of Decay: *A Room with a View*

A Room with a View is a romantic story of great formal complexity and extraordinary existential depth, with an H. E. A.—romance scholars’ jargon for “happily-ever-after”—of astonishing realism and gentle sadness. In addition, the novel makes apparent the changing episteme of personal and

romantic relationships pertaining to courtship and the choosing of a partner.⁴

In this novel as well—as it is well-known—Italy plays a crucial symbolic role in the heroine's transformation and in her discovery and acceptance of honest and unaffected values. The novel seems to perfectly epitomise the dichotomy between Italy as a spiritual/sensual world and England as a rational one. Over the course of the narrative, Lucy overcomes society's restrictions, and her self-imposed renunciation (the "muddle"), to achieve a better knowledge of herself that does not deny her love for and sexual attraction to George Emerson.

Regis's eight elements are all present, but "hidden" within a narrative that works them to the point of making them unrecognizable: "Where Austen employed them quietly, submerging them in the narrative, Forster manipulates them brazenly" (Regis 100). For instance, Forster creates two points of ritual death: the well-known "Piazza della Signoria" scene, as well as Lucy's denial to Cecil (her fiancé), Mr. Emerson (George's father), and herself, of her feelings for George. Chapter IV introduces the long segment of the novel in which barriers must be removed: engagement to the wrong man, geographical distance from George, Charlotte's (apparent) disapproval of the union between Lucy and George. The most cumbersome barriers, however, are Lucy's internal ones: her fear to recognize and act upon her feelings for George.

Over the course of a long conversation between Lucy and Mr. Emerson, Forster makes three of the eight elements happen simultaneously: the second point of ritual death, Lucy's recognition of her true feelings, and the declaration of love between heroine and hero which, quite uniquely, takes place in George's absence, as Mr. Emerson makes it on George's behalf. This is indeed an interesting turn, especially if we read it in light of Lisa Fletcher's understanding of romance as a genre defined by the speech act "I love you," the performative utterance which constitutes, in Fletcher's view, the very essence of the genre.⁵

Lucy achieves happiness and freedom with George at the price of a break with her family. She atones for her emancipation with a (temporary?) alienation from her mother and brother which taints the blissful mood of the

novel's happy ending: "[George's] content was absolute, but hers held bitterness: the Honeychurches had not forgiven them; they were disgusted at her past hypocrisy; she had alienated Windy Corner, perhaps for ever" (218).

Detecting its ambiguous note, critics have diversely commented on the novel's happy ending. Barbara Rosecrance, for instance, affirms that, "despite the happy ending, Forster implies a modern condition" (90). Such condition, I wish to argue, is precisely given by the ending's deliberate characteristic of defectiveness. On the one hand, Forster writes his happy ending, and, on the other, he has clearly learnt (from Austen perhaps?) the lesson that freedom, self-knowledge, and personal emancipation come at the price of coming to terms with one's flaws, sometimes the most aggravating to acknowledge.

The conclusion of the novel—and the final sequence of its best-known cinematic transposition, in which Lucy and George kiss on the windowsill of their Florentine hotel room, enveloped by the warm rays of the sun⁶—sees Lucy and George looking out of the window together. The window, of course, frames the "view" the protagonist has fought for all along, and marriage is the beginning of another—unknown—story which unfolds before Lucy and George just like the course of the river Arno. I believe there is, in Forster's reticence to wholly embrace a happy ending, an elusive but telling clue of his liminal position vis-à-vis the novelistic form he is dealing with. In a way, Forster is at a window too—a threshold perhaps—contemplating the future of romantic stories.

Hence the reflection, on the author's part, on the romantic genre which the narrative exemplifies through a note of unmistakable bitterness. The novel's ending seems to encapsulate a meditation upon the genre based on Forster's "modern" view on marriage, which he expresses, in the essay "Pessimism in Literature" (1907) as follows: "We of today know that whatever marriage is, it is not an end. We know that it is rather a beginning, and that the lovers enter upon life's real problems when those wedding bells are silent" (135). Just a little later in the same essay, Forster asks: "Is there any happy situation on earth that does not contain the seeds of decay, or at all events of transformation?" (137).

A Room with a View is one of the last canonized Anglophone romances of the pre-wars period. After a long intermission, literary fiction slowly reprises the canonization of its romances. This occurs towards the second half/end of the century, with texts—such as John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969) and A. S. Byatt’s *Possession: A Romance* (1990)—that thoroughly display a view of the romantic as a fundamentally conflicted and, by then, controversial genre.

If, as we will shortly see, Fowles himself appears as a character in his own narrative, voicing concerns regarding the tenability of the happy ending in current times, Byatt’s novel chiefly displays the strategies of intertextual references and “*genre within genre*” (Niederhoff 9)—fairy tales and poems embedded in the main narrative and functioning as commentary to it. *Possession* follows two storylines, the Victorian and the modern-day, interrogating, from today’s disenchanted perspective, the possibility of romance. Disillusionment weighs on Maud and Roland, the contemporary protagonists, setting them apart from their Victorian counterparts. Maud reflects on how love and desire would have been experienced by men and women in the past:

I was thinking last night—about what you said about our generation and sex. We see it everywhere. As you say. We are very knowing. We know all sorts of other things, too—about how there isn’t a unitary ego—how we’re made up of conflicting, interacting systems of things—and I suppose we *believe* that? We know we are driven by desire, but we can’t see it as they did, can we? We never say the word Love, do we—we know it’s a suspect ideological construct—especially Romantic love—so we have to make a real effort of the imagination to know what it felt like to be them, here, believing in these things—Love—themselves—that what they did mattered— (318)

Both *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* and *Possession* create multiple possibilities for the story to conform and/or question the conventions of romantic fiction, particularly in relation to their respective endings. They may undermine the construct by doubling it and examining it, but by dissecting it, they also celebrate it and give it its due importance. As Niederhoff points out: “a text may repudiate a genre while simultaneously practicing it” (15).

An Explicit Questioning: *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

I will return for a moment to the essay "Pessimism in Literature". Forster opposes his notion of "modern marriage" to the older Victorian one:

The early Victorian woman was regarded as a bundle of goods. She passed from the possession of her father to that of her husband. Marriage was a final event for her: beyond it, she was expected to find no new development, no new emotion. And so the early Victorian novelist might reasonably end his book with a marriage. (135)

The first of *The French Lieutenant's Woman's* "final" endings⁷—a novel Niederhoff rightly regards as exemplary of a new way of reflecting on fictionality—has been read as a competent and gentle parody of early Victorian endings, with Charles and Sarah (the protagonists) reuniting with each other, and Sarah (plausibly) abandoning her personal development and pursuits to be with Charles and mother their child. Charles Scruggs, for instance, reads this ending as caricaturing "the false sense of closure so typical of Victorian novels in general" and maintains that the second ending is "the least clichéd, the more open-ended (hence the more modern)" (96).

True: the second ending seems to be created by Fowles in exact opposition to the early Victorian one, as it significantly focuses on Sarah not wishing to renounce her situation of freedom and independence. According to this alternative conclusion, Sarah continues to live as a single working woman. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a novel built on the gradual but constant emancipation of its heroine, and Scruggs is right, I believe, in stressing the link between her continuous development, deliverance from social constraints, and the frequent references to Marxist and Darwinian theories present in the novel.

Forster sees marriage as the beginning of a new story; the ending in which Charles and Sarah separate and follow different paths is regarded by Scruggs as "more modern." That discordant note at the end of *A Room with a View* suggests a modern condition. If it does not signify the continuation of the story at a narrative level, it conjures up the notion of continuous work and inner restlessness (will Lucy reconcile with her family?). As we

progress in time, therefore, it is not the “happiness” of the happy ending that becomes increasingly problematic, but its conclusiveness and finality.

It is not a coincidence that the author-narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*—who appears in the novel as a character—is tempted to leave Charles on a train “for eternity on his way to London” (405), in a frozen image of movement, but then observes that “the conventions of Victorian fiction allow, allowed no place for the open, the inconclusive ending” (405).

Indeed, today's literary romances tend to resemble modulations more than conclusive narrative parables. In a recent analysis of Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018), I discussed the trajectory of the novel as destabilizing the notion of a positive (or negative) accomplishment of existence as purposeful, teleological tale. The novel, by making its protagonists' relationship continue beyond the last page of the novel, subscribes to an understanding of love as ongoing pursuit.⁸

Philip and Caroline will not connect with one another. Lucy finds love at a cost. Charles and Sarah question love, bringing attention to the increasing precariousness of romantic relationships. Most contemporary romantic fiction fully recognizes the fragility of today's relations, making of it a necessary narrative element to be dealt with. As a genre, the romance is haunted by past accusations of naïve lack of depth, mawkish sentimentality, and optimism. Such allegations are often counteracted by the genre's enhanced inquisitiveness of its own forms, which makes of the romance a literary context of particular interest if one wishes to observe the current literary construction of love and the meta-generic strategies and practices employed by authors in the field.

This response was conceived from this perspective, as an encouragement to extend the debate on metagenre to scholars of romance literature, and a reflection weaved upon the numerous stimuli provided by Niederhoff's article.⁹

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NOTES

¹The “freedom” Regis mentions is not absolute, it is the freedom to marry/engage in a relationship with the person chosen by the protagonist (no longer necessarily a “heroine”). Pamela Regis’s *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* has played a fundamental role in re-routing scholarly approaches to romance from ideological and psychologising to straight-forwardly academic. As Eric Selinger explains: “by doubling back to pre-feminist, non-Freudian approaches to the romance novel, Regis essentially hit the reset button on the whole enterprise of popular romance studies” (3). In this work, Regis puts together a modern canon of the romance novel, sketching its history and pre-modern literary affiliations. Regis borrows and elaborates upon Northrop Frye’s notion of “ritual death” formulated in his *Anatomy of Criticism*.

²For an extensive analysis of the theatre scene, see my article “Multitudes of Otherness.”

³The three attractions are the Palazzo Pubblico, the Collegiate Church, and the Caffè Garibaldi.

⁴*A Room with a View* is one of the first modern romantic narratives to display the emergence of what Eva Illouz calls “the regime of emotional authenticity” (31), an important turn in romantic relationships, as well as in literature about them, towards conceiving of courtship, and the choice of one’s partner, as a fundamentally individual and private matter, rather than a process a young woman would go through from a position of encasement within familial protective relations.

⁵“I love you,” Fletcher points out, “is a confession and a cliché” (41). By “mutely confessing” to Mr. Emerson her love for his son, Lucy achieves the performative effect of a confession avoiding the reiteration of its banality.

⁶*A Room with a View*. Directed by James Ivory, performances by Helena Bonham Carter, Maggie Smith, and Julian Sands, Merchant Ivory Productions, 1985.

⁷John Fowles writes three endings to the novel, one of which he indicates as false. The remaining two endings conclude the narrative.

⁸For an extensive analysis of the novel, see my article “Sharing the Same Soil.”

⁹After reading the following passage, in which the 2021 *Connotations* conference is described: “At the *Connotations* conference on metagenre, papers were given on tragedy, the epic, stand-up comedy, pastoral poetry, the verse essay, six-word stories, the short story, the novel, the memoir-novel and dramatic burlesques” (Niederhoff 7), I wished to add a Romance Studies perspective.

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