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Social Differences in Taste: Investigating Romance Reading

My name is Maleah Fekete and I am the lead student investigator of the project entitled “Social Differences in Taste: Investigating Romance Reading,” supervised by Ann Swidler. My project originally intended to build off Janice Radway’s 1984 study entitled, *Reading the Romance*, in which the author conducts – what she dubs – an “ethnography” of the romance reader. However, after finding Radway’s claims no longer applicable, my research questions have since morphed into: What *really* motivates romance reading? And, Was Radway wrong or are her findings simply obsolete? My project is therefore divided into two parts: repudiating Radway’s hypothesis, and presenting my own argument. This presentation will focus on the first section, refuting Radway’s argument by comparing Radway’s hypothesis with my own findings.

I begin by providing a brief overview of Radway’s project. Between 1979 and 1983 Radway sampled a group of 42 women living in a small, conservative Midwestern city named Smithton. She recruited all of her participants based on the connections of a woman named Dot, a bookstore employee and a romance novel critic (the 1980s equivalent of a blogger). Based on data collected from her primarily stay-home mother participants and a review of 40 romance novels, Radway concluded that women read romance in order to fill an unmet need for nurturance – a need created by their social positions as caregivers but never care-receivers. Although Radway concedes that her sample is very small, she fails to sufficiently emphasize its homogeneity. All of her women lived in very similar social circumstances and read primarily the same books.

I, on the other hand, hoped to create a methodological contrast by sampling a wide variety of romance reading women. By collecting participants at a Bay Area romance reading convention that catered to nearly all romance subgenres and attracted attendees from all over the

country, my sample is far more representative of a romance reading population as a whole. Like Radway, however, my sample size is limited, having interviewed only 12 and surveyed 65 women.

In order to refute Radway's claims, I first present them. Number one: Radway believes women read because they are nurture needy. She bases this on her surveys of stay-home moms who constantly provided emotional support for children and husbands, but never received any. Number two: Women feel cared for while reading a romance. Women are able to identify and live through the experiences of heroines who are nurtured by their heroes. Number three: Sex is not important. She agrees with her interviewees when they insist that romance is about love, not sex.

Addressing her first argument, I do not believe women read because they are nurture needy. I base this on having found modern women to be emotionally supported and better nurtured, but still reading the same plots that Radway identified as providing nurturance. In contrast to Radway's participants, today's women are far less nurture needy seeing as they are more independent, more likely to work full time outside of the house, and more likely to have better support networks. In fact, one of the biggest differences in romance reading since the time of Radway's study is the growth of the incredibly supportive online romance reading community. Even if readers do not have supportive networks in their immediate environment, they always have access to their fellow readers *virtually*. One of my interviewees, attesting to the support the online community offers, volunteered a story in which she described, after going through an extremely traumatic incident, how she was able to turn, not only to her romance books, but also to the online community who helped her through her very difficult time.

Still, even though my readers did not appear nurture needy, they continue to read plots Radway described as providing nurturance: they still want the gradual build-up of love between two characters, and they still want an alpha male to be turned from his manly ways by an exceptional female. My readers even talk about their tastes in the same way as Radway's readers: they want manly heroes who are also "lover boys", they want what characters who "grow to love" each other "for the way they are", etc. If my readers and Radway's readers are reading the same stories, describing them in the same way, one may suspect the motives for reading are also the same and thereby contrary to Radway's claims.

In Radway's second claim, she argues readers feel nurtured while reading ideal romances. I argue they do not. To clarify, the kind of nurturance Radway refers to is a motherly-love, affectionate nurturance; not a self-actualization or, crudely put, an ego-stroking nurturance. I have three key reasons for disagreeing with Radway. Firstly, one of my readers happened to live in a social context that very closely mirrored that of the Smithton women. Like them, she is a stay-home mom with a poor supportive system, often bored and lonely. Yet even she does not read for nurturance. One of the books she specifically offered as one of her favorites depicted a story in which the heroine was kidnapped, repeatedly raped, and ultimately incarcerated, all at the hands of the hero – not a particularly nurturing story. Secondly, not all stories include caring heroes. This is perhaps best demonstrated by *50 Shades of Grey*, one of the most important romances of all time. In this book the hero never ends up caring for the heroine in the motherly way Radway describes as being so important. However, the ideal plot line, of the alpha male being turned from his ways by an incredible female is still maintained. Thirdly, it is very unlikely that women repeatedly read formulaic books to be satisfied by only the last pages when the hero recognizes his true love for the heroine and starts treating her accordingly. As one reader

described, if she reads 20 percent of a novel and there is not a sex scene, she is going to be “annoyed” and going to have to seriously consider whether the book is worth finishing, often times putting it down.

This leads to my next point: Sex *is* important. I have two key reasons to believe this. One: Sex apparently drives readership. There have been four industry shake-ups since the inception of modern romance approximately 50 years ago. All of these shake-ups were caused by a small or independent house, or a larger house accidentally or inadvertently, publishing an exceptionally explicit romance that women then flock to the stories for. (The most recent shake-up occurred with the publication of *50 Shades of Grey*.) It then seems that readers are, at least to some extent, driven to read by sexual explicitness. Secondly, sexual energy drives the plot. That is, unlike nurturance, which may or may not be present and possibly only at the end of a novel, sex (or minimally sexual charge) is present throughout every romance book in every romance genre.

To conclude, I have found that Radway was wrong; women do not read romance for nurturance. Additionally, though not addressed in this presentation, I argue that the real reason women read is to feel sexually self-actualized – that is, reach their highest potential as sexually active women.

For further research – again, despite not being highlighted in this presentation – I believe my work has pointed out the importance of understanding cultural fantasy and the necessity of its continued study. This research will be especially important for its ability to aid our understanding of the activities and pursuits individuals take up to fill their free time and create meaning in their otherwise “settled” lives; an understanding that I believe will become ever more relevant in a world in which obvious purpose (and therefore meaning) is ever harder to come by.