

# UC Santa Barbara

## UC Santa Barbara Previously Published Works

### Title

The Mythology of Modern Love: Representations of Romance in the 1980s

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/37x5f93d>

### Journal

The Journal of Popular Culture, 24(4)

### ISSN

0022-3840

### Authors

Harrington, C Lee  
Bielby, Denise D

### Publication Date

1991-03-01

### DOI

10.1111/j.0022-3840.1991.2404\_129.x

Peer reviewed

# **The Mythology of Modern Love: Representations of Romance in the 1980s**

**C. Lee Harrington  
and  
Denise D. Bielby**

The apparent decline in the 1980s in commitment to long-term love relationships has received a great deal of attention recently.<sup>1</sup> Those who monitor trends in marriage, divorce, and intimacy note that the ideal of love in America appears to be undergoing a gradual but significant change, and the reasons for it are hard to grasp. According to Swidler<sup>2</sup> and others, love in our culture is both an experience which is essential to adulthood and an ideal, marking the beginning and certainty of adulthood. Swidler argues further that the traditional American myth of love as lifelong commitment and self-sacrifice is eroding, giving way instead to an emergent notion of love based primarily on individual growth.

Fictional representations of love relationships are known to depict cultural norms, mores, and ideals.<sup>3</sup> The television mediums of daytime soap opera and the romance genre in prime time specialize in fantasies, particularly for female audiences, and are revealing sources for examination of cultural ideals, including any modifications, transformations, and inconsistencies within them. Furthermore, the popularity of daytime and prime time soap operas since the late 1970s, particularly among young adult women achieving identity in an era of feminism, where traditional forms of interdependence with men have been rethought, invites a contemporary analysis of the content of these mediums. In this article we address the form in which commitment persists within these popular cultural representations of love.

To examine contemporary depictions of commitment, we discuss the work of Swidler and others regarding the evolution of "ideal" love to its present day form. We also rely on Cancian's<sup>4</sup> interdependence blueprint which encompasses the utopian dream of contemporary romantic love, wherein commitment in its traditional form is compatible with individual growth. We argue that contemporary daytime soap opera

and prime time romance genre relationships illustrate Swidler's notion of what love entails in the modern era, while at the same time refusing to relinquish the ideals of the traditional love mythology. We describe this through a textual analysis of romance narratives, concentrating on how relationships between lead characters are portrayed.

Ours is a sociologically informed interpretative analysis. Through examination of two daytime and one prime time series we address the tension between fictionalized portrayals and actual contemporary relationships. We chose these series for three reasons. First, critics, ratings, and fan magazines suggest these particular stories resonate especially well with female viewing audiences. Second, while true to the romance genre, each introduces new elements to the form. Third, we have viewed each narrative closely and have followed them since their inception. Moreover, we have also followed discussions in trade journals and fan magazines concerning the writing and production of these storylines. Thus, we are informed about the circumstances surrounding the production of these narratives as well as the content of the narratives themselves.

Our analysis raises a question to which we will return later regarding what television is "ready" to portray about romance. Cantor and Pingree<sup>5</sup> and others contend that the content of a soap opera reflects its intended audience. In general, what a soap opera depicts reflects norms and mores about women's place in the social order. However, soap operas do not simply "mirror" and thus reinforce prevailing social structure. Modleski's<sup>6</sup> analysis of women's media revealed that soap operas also reflect deviations from the norm as well as the sought-after ideal—what "ought" to be. Richard Dyer<sup>7</sup> explains that entertainment can offer us "...something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide." Thus, we are guided by Modleski's thesis that mass entertainment, especially soap operas and the romance genre, address unfulfilled ideals. Indeed, we would argue that these mediums exist with such popularity precisely because they address a perceived void. However, we also consider the possibility that these mediums reaffirm ideals that *do* exist in reality, and are thus not necessarily insidious in their legitimation of existing social structure.

Real life commitments to long-term love relationships may be declining, but fictional ones have achieved a complex form far beyond the tradition described by Swidler. What we find in our analysis of fictional romantic couples is a novel ideal of love, one that manifests notions proposed by Cancian<sup>8</sup> as androgynous love, a heterosexual love that incorporates elements of both traditional masculine and traditional feminine love while simultaneously incorporating the elements of intimacy, trust, and commitment—long held as essential to love in our culture. Its features defy Swidler's contention that commitment and love

have unraveled in fictional ideals, raising issues for reevaluation within reality.

### *Love Mythology*

The traditional notion of love in America is that of a “mythic” union between two devoted individuals. In our mythology, love conquers all. One only attains “completeness” —a full identity—through choosing a love partner and remaining true to that choice against all odds. The search for self-identity is thus fused with the search for a mate, for only through marital union can the self be “whole”.<sup>9</sup>

The emerging ideals of the individualized self, however, seriously jeopardize this traditional ideal of love as permanent commitment. Emphasis in a relationship is placed on growth and development of the individual rather than that of the couple, and as these rebellious, impulsive sides of the self are given greater priority, the ideal of permanence in a relationship is undermined. The modern love myth denies the dependence that was part of the traditional love myth, and argues instead that love must be capable of stimulating and absorbing perpetual change. The moral emphasis in the modern love myth is not on life-long commitment to another (and its accompanying self-sacrifice), but on a lifetime of choices—on *self-development*.

But if this is, as Swider and others claim, an accurate representation of the emerging structure of love relationships in America, it is not, we contend, the new “ideal” of what a romantic relationship can and should be. Our society is still fascinated by the notion of “true love,” a belief that love as life-long commitment, trust, and sacrifice between two people is still very much alive in our culture. While there has indeed been a recognition of the needs of the individual independent of the love relationship, there is also, we believe, a reluctance to relinquish the basic tenet of the traditional love myth—that of love as permanent commitment.<sup>10</sup>

By the mid-1970s, new images of love were emerging in two distinct forms—*independence* and *interdependence*. The *independence* blueprint clearly resembles Swidler’s notions of modern love, with emphasis on development of the self rather than development of the relationship. This blueprint implies that growth of the self can occur in the absence of a committed relationship—that a reciprocal relationship threatens self-development.<sup>11</sup>

The *interdependence* blueprint is similar to the cultural ideal of utopian love, with the self and the relationship in equal standing. In this blueprint, mutual support and affection between partners is expected, and love is a precondition to full self-development. Relationships in this blueprint are androgynous in two senses: love is the responsibility

of both the man and the woman, and it includes traditionally “masculine” and “feminine” qualities.<sup>12</sup>

The relationships examined in this article exemplify the struggle between the two blueprints that couples today are faced with. The point of demarcation between an independent relationship and an interdependent one is the different expectations of commitment. Drawing upon work from across the social sciences,<sup>13</sup> we explore commitment within a relationship in terms of the level of intimacy between partners—an intimacy which is not only physical, but emotional and cognitive as well. A fully committed couple would have, then, an ever-increasing bond of closeness in the relationship, as indicated by such factors as degree of trust, a sense of emotional “connectedness,” empathy, and outward physical affection. Below we discuss three intimate relationships, analyzing their form and content for what they reveal about the 1980s love ideal.

### *Analysis*

*The Jones' of General Hospital* Frisco Jones and Felicia Cummings Jones have been integral to the “world” created each day on “General Hospital.” Both in their mid-20s, their paths crossed several years ago in Port Charles, New York (the fictional setting of “General Hospital”) in a story line concerning Felicia’s family inheritance. While initially their relationship was conflict-ridden, the mutual search for her inheritance increasingly entangled their lives, and out of this entanglement grew love for one another, and eventually marriage. Until June, 1987, they were a central couple on the show, providing a “core” from which much of the other action radiated.

Initially, Frisco was a famous local rock singer, with his own band and his own teenage-focused TV talk show. As his character developed, however, and his relationship with Felicia took on more serious implications, he traded in his singing success for a career in law enforcement. As many of “General Hospital’s” major story lines involve crime and/or intrigue, this career switch put Frisco on the scene of much of the action in Port Charles.

His character transformation was not, however, bound solely to his profession, but was ethical and moral as well, signaling a new maturity in the character of Frisco and the prerequisite for a more serious love relationship with Felicia. Here, the traditional “through love comes character” mythical element is reversed, with the discovery of identity providing an element to the foundation for their long-term love. Hence, personal growth is portrayed not as a threat to commitment and love but as an essential element of its formation.

Their relationship has not been a steady one—they have suffered a number of misunderstandings, as well as one traumatic “breaking-up.” Through this, however, their commitment to one another and to their future together as husband and wife has grown ever stronger, and as such has reached the level of intimacy dictated by America’s love myth, while at the same time adhering to the new rules predicated by Swidler. In this sense, their relationship is utopian.

*Commitment Portrayed*

One of the interesting aspects of the relationship between Frisco and Felicia is the way in which we, the audience, have seen their commitment to one another deepen and strengthen as their love affair matured. The question of commitment—or the meaning of commitment—has been an underlying theme since the beginning of their relationship, and we have struggled along with them to reach an understanding of what commitment actually entails. What is intriguing, analytically, is that the telling within this soap opera story of commitment was taken as given from the beginning. As in a traditional romance, these two characters were destined to be together. However, this story was boldly portrayed in the 1980s, when arguably, such a tale should not have been told, much less succeeded.

Incidents involving betrayal and abandonment stemming from ambition and self-development seriously threatened the emergence of commitment in their early relationship, causing them each to question the strength and meaning of their growing love for one another. A major rift in their relationship in which Frisco rejected Felicia was eventually resolved in a highly dramatic scene after several months of tentative negotiation. It marked a clear recognition of their love and a precondition for their commitment to each other. A confident Felicia rented an apartment for the two of them and on her own purchased their first piece of furniture which was symbolic of their increasing personal intimacy—a sofa-bed. Their moving-in together signified commitment both privately and publicly to a future together, which seemed unquestionable. This stage in their relationship was initiated by Felicia, but enthusiastically supported by Frisco who welcomed her lead:

Fr: What’s all this about?  
Fe: Us.  
Fr: This couch is about us?  
Fe: This couch is ours, this bed is ours, this apartment is ours. So what do you have to say?  
Fr: I don’t think I understand. . .  
Fe: Well isn’t it obvious? I’m making a commitment to you.  
Fe: You mean, you want to live together?  
Fe: Don’t you want to?

## 134 Journal of Popular Culture

Fr: Well, yeah, yeah, but I didn't think that, that...I mean, I didn't...I never thought you knew that...I mean we haven't talked about it.

Fe: I knew.

Fr: How?

Fr: Oh, just by the way you acted when I was around Robin. You just, I don't know, talked and acted like a person who was serious about us.

Fr: Oh, I am baby. I'm so serious I want to be committed to you forever. Forever. And as long as I can make you happy, I hope that's forever.

Several months later, Felicia asked Frisco to marry her, and was the one who insisted that he purchase an engagement ring to symbolize their commitment to one another. In a very touching scene filled with her sobbing over being initially rejected, he explained his hesitation and gratefully accepted her invitation:

Fe: No. I think you said it all at the jewelry store.

Fr: Well, I didn't say quite all of it. I've never been proposed to before.

Fe: Really?

Fr: Yeah. It was just all so sudden. It was so quick. I mean it was a shock. I didn't know how to react.

Fe: I see.

Fr: You know how it is when you've always been the best man, never the groom.

Fe: Yes, like always being a bride's maid and never being a bride.

Fr: Right. Well I just, I just couldn't believe my good luck.

Fe: Shall I propose to you again and then you could believe it?

Fr: You'd be stuck with me, for a long time. I'm warning you.

Fe: Thank you for the warning.

To this point, we have a couple struggling with mutual trust. The 1980s telling of this brings an open link between sexuality and commitment, one which certifies their arrival at intimacy, at least of the physical type. Felicia is portrayed as a mixture of traditional and progressive woman of the 1980s. It is at her behest that major shifts in physical intimacy and symbolic commitment occur. To this point we have a well told tale of achieving "true" love, and its merging with discovery of self. However, from this point on their story achieves an altogether new level in the fictional telling of commitment.

### *Contemporary Love*

The current stage in their relationship most clearly illustrates the conflict between independence and interdependence. Within six months of Frisco and Felicia's engagement, they marry. Devotion within their marriage brought a new level of investment on the part of Frisco to their relationship. In one scene he reveals his dependence upon her and his desire to prioritize his world with their children:

Fe: Do you realize that in a couple of weeks we're going to be an aunt and an uncle?

Fr: Well, that's good practice.

Fe: For what?

Fr: For becoming a mother and father.

Fe: I've been thinking about that a lot lately.

Fr: Well facing death on a daily basis does have a tendency to kind of adjust your priorities.

Fe: Yes, its does make you appreciate life a lot more. There's at least a hundred-thousand things I'm going to do differently.

Fr: Not me honey. I want the same things I've always wanted, only more. At the top of the list is having a family with you.

Fe: I want that too, more than anything.

Fr: Ah, I do love you Mrs. Jones. No matter what happens you can always count on that.

More recently, Frisco developed a need for professional growth, and applied to join the World Security Bureau—an agency much like the CIA. While joining the WSB has been a dream of his for some time and a clear extension of his maturation, Frisco has been hesitant in going ahead with the application, primarily due to the threat to their marriage which acceptance would entail. Felicia was initially dismayed and upset by Frisco's obvious wish to join. Throughout this decision process, discussions of commitment were frequent—both worried how such a career move would affect their marriage.

Fr: Felicia, a person has to do what he has to do. You know that.

Fe: I know. That's why I'm trying to persuade you not to join the WSB. Because I love you and I don't want to lose you.

Fr: Don't you think I care about our marriage? Don't you think I care about your needs and your feelings? I do. I just don't know how to fix this problem. . .

Fe: I love you now more than ever.

Fr: Honey, listen, my work is one thing. But you're my life.

In the end, Frisco decided to go ahead and join the agency, and at this writing, after spending several months in a training facility away from Felicia, is missing in action and presumed dead. The discussions leading up to this departure were very emotionally charged for both characters. Much of the drama of their marriage took place in their bedroom, and fused love, personal growth, physical intimacy, and commitment.

In their final scene together, which took place at the airport as Frisco departed, both Frisco and Felicia break down into tears, and Felicia is finally left sobbing at the airport. According to Swidler, this separation signals *the* end of their relationship and an accurate playing out of the tenets of the modern love myth. The ideal of permanence in their



relationship appears undermined, as commitment is made not to each other, but to the growth of the self—in this case, to the growth of Frisco.

However, commitment as portrayed by the Jones' clearly goes beyond the limitations dictated by Swidler. Their mutual determination to make their marriage work, at the expense of anything and everything else, is indicative of the level of commitment (and intimacy) they have attained—a level more exemplary of the *traditional* love myth than of the modern love myth.<sup>14</sup>

*The Hydes of Ryan's Hope* The Jones' ideal romance stands in stark contrast to the evidence of Rick and Ryan Hyde's eventual failure at marriage as portrayed on this critically acclaimed show. Rick and Ryan, a young couple, have been married for a few years in a seemingly nontraditional relationship. Rick is a detective who is several years older than his wife. Ryan, nineteen, is a college student and aspiring journalist whose career is vital to her sense of personal identity. Their relationship is a search for the interdependence blueprint, i.e., a relationship combining mutual dependency and commitment, with freedom to develop one's self as well. In stark contrast to the Jones', Rick and Ryan's search is problematic, however, and a series of events leads to Rick's desertion, and eventual divorce of Ryan. Their commitment is deep, but perceived at times by Rick as overwhelming. Ryan, on the other hand, is naive about their love, seeing their commitment as a sharing of her accomplishments.

Rick and Ryan's expectations of commitment soon took different paths, and its meaning and boundaries fell into dispute. Ryan is more interested in a modern relationship than is Rick, for her career is essential to her self-growth and self-actualization. Ryan's character is built around the notion of "doing it all." The conflicts caused by this, at first amusing and then more serious, formed the core of their storyline.

The character of Rick represents the conflict caused by a desire for a traditional relationship in a presumably "modern" society. Rick is proud of his wife's career interests and ambition and is supportive of her work until he realizes that the commotion and unpredictability of his life is due in large part to his wife's inability and disinterest in maintaining a traditional home (and his traditional inability to contribute equally to a division of household labor). He becomes envious of his partner's marriage in which the wife is a full-time homemaker, wife, and mother. Rick's commitment becomes ambivalent, trapped between Ryan's need for a modern marriage and his own increasing desire for a traditional one.

Throughout their marriage, the Hydes have had numerous discussions about the meaning of their commitment to one another.

Rick: I know how important this story is to you. I just want you to remember how important you are to me.

Ryan: Nothing is going to happen to me, I promise.

Rick: Well, if you need anything, just give me the word.

Ryan: O.K. You just keep supporting me, believing in me, and loving me.

Rick: So much of my world's wrapped up in you. When you were hit by that car, I don't know how I could live my life without you. I love you so much it scares me.

Ryan: I'm really sorry I have to worry you like this. It's just that I have a responsibility to this thing.

Rick: I'm very proud of you Mrs. Hyde.

Ryan: You know you seem to think I'm so full of ambition and this drive. But what you don't realize is that I borrow so much from you. I borrow your fearlessness and your persistence. So much of what I do is for you.

Rick: Well, that's the nicest thing you've ever said to me.

Ryan: You know, I think what's happening here is that we're growing together.

Rick: Just remember that I have never had it as an intention to change you in any way whatsoever.

Ryan: Well, as long as you're behind me, I can do anything. It's like we're partners.

These talks gradually reveal two individuals at cross-purposes, with Ryan remaining adamant about pursuing her journalism career and Rick increasingly adamant about his desire for a more stable and traditional life style. This conflict came to a head after several months when Ryan discovered, with mixed feelings, that she was pregnant. While Rick was delighted at the prospect of becoming a parent, Ryan was hesitant and concerned about how they would find the personal and financial resources to accommodate a child in their lives. Her suspicion that he intentionally caused the pregnancy as a means to fulfill his own ideals rapidly led to the undoing of their relationship.

Ryan: I told you why I wanted to wait.

Rick: Yeah, I know, I've heard it before.

Ryan: Why are you mad?

Rick: Aren't you mad?

Ryan: Well yes! Maybe I don't have a right to be, but if I don't tell you this now, I'm going to be too scared to say it later, because if it's true, I'm going to be so furious.

Rick: About a baby?!

Ryan: If you planned it.

Rick: What?!!

Ryan: If you wanted me to get pregnant. . .

Rick: How could I plan to get you pregnant?! I don't know how it could have happened. Think of what you're doing. Think of what you're accusing me of.

Ryan: Just tell me, ok? Tell me it wasn't in the back of your mind that night or any other night, and I'll believe you.

Rick: I don't know why you trust my word more than you want to trust me.

Ryan, pursuing a lead in a story, fell victim to an accident at an industrial plant and suffered a miscarriage. The loss of the child became symbolic of the loss of their relationship, as the child represented their future with one another as husband and wife (just as Frisco and Felicia's plans for children signified their intention for a life together). Upon hearing that Ryan lost the baby, Rick hurled accusations that she deliberately caused the death of their child by placing her career ahead of the safety of their baby.

Rick: Why didn't you just have an abortion.

Ryan: Please don't give up on me now.

Rick: You don't need anyone but yourself.

Ryan: Baby, that's not true. I need you.

Rick: Well you sure haven't been acting like it.

Ryan: I know you wanted this baby. So did I. And I know you're hurt and you're angry and you're sad. But you have to understand the way I feel.

Rick: I'm tired of trying to understand the way you feel.

Rick explicitly blamed Ryan's career as having caused the miscarriage. In his eyes, if she had accepted a more traditional marriage, the baby would not have been lost to the dangers of her job. With his needs in the relationship left unfulfilled, he decided to leave the marriage, in order to preserve her autonomy as well as to spare himself further disappointment. In spite of his traditionalism, he leaves her so as not to block her individuality.

Ryan: I don't understand. Are you saying you want to end the marriage?

Rick: It's not going to work.

Ryan: Just because I lost the baby? Rick, I'm not damaged for life. We can have other children.

Rick: I'm not going to go through that again. I can't.

Rick: . . . It's us and how we relate to each other. I can't spend the rest of my life being afraid of saying something to you because I might step on your freedom or your individuality or your career.

Ryan: You won't. We'll work it out.

Rick: I don't see it happening. We're still having the same battles that we had a year ago. Ryan, it's who we are. I understand your need and your responsibility to yourself first. But some time you have to be responsible for the other person.

Rick: . . . I'm not judging you. There's just so much you can put into a person's life. And we tried to put too much into yours. You already have enough. There's no room for a baby. There's just no room for me.

What is portrayed in this storyline is an attempt at a modern relationship, but one that fails in the end. The struggle to combine self-development and mutual commitment is seen as impossible. The barrier between a traditional and modern relationship is insurmountable. In representing the search for an interdependent relationship as conflict-

Rick: I know how important this story is to you. I just want you to remember how important you are to me.

Ryan: Nothing is going to happen to me, I promise.

Rick: Well, if you need anything, just give me the word.

Ryan: O.K. You just keep supporting me, believing in me, and loving me.

Rick: So much of my world's wrapped up in you. When you were hit by that car, I don't know how I could live my life without you. I love you so much it scares me.

Ryan: I'm really sorry I have to worry you like this. It's just that I have a responsibility to this thing.

Rick: I'm very proud of you Mrs. Hyde.

Ryan: You know you seem to think I'm so full of ambition and this drive. But what you don't realize is that I borrow so much from you. I borrow your fearlessness and your persistence. So much of what I do is for you.

Rick: Well, that's the nicest thing you've ever said to me.

Ryan: You know, I think what's happening here is that we're growing together.

Rick: Just remember that I have never had it as an intention to change you in any way whatsoever.

Ryan: Well, as long as you're behind me, I can do anything. It's like we're partners.

These talks gradually reveal two individuals at cross-purposes, with Ryan remaining adamant about pursuing her journalism career and Rick increasingly adamant about his desire for a more stable and traditional life style. This conflict came to a head after several months when Ryan discovered, with mixed feelings, that she was pregnant. While Rick was delighted at the prospect of becoming a parent, Ryan was hesitant and concerned about how they would find the personal and financial resources to accommodate a child in their lives. Her suspicion that he intentionally caused the pregnancy as a means to fulfill his own ideals rapidly led to the undoing of their relationship.

Ryan: I told you why I wanted to wait.

Rick: Yeah, I know, I've heard it before.

Ryan: Why are you mad?

Rick: Aren't you mad?

Ryan: Well yes! Maybe I don't have a right to be, but if I don't tell you this now, I'm going to be too scared to say it later, because if it's true, I'm going to be so furious.

Rick: About a baby?!

Ryan: If you planned it.

Rick: What?!!

Ryan: If you wanted me to get pregnant. . .

Rick: How could I plan to get you pregnant?! I don't know how it could have happened. Think of what you're doing. Think of what you're accusing me of.

Ryan: Just tell me, ok? Tell me it wasn't in the back of your mind that night or any other night, and I'll believe you.

Rick: I don't know why you trust my word more than you want to trust me.

Catherine: It tears me apart that we can never have a life together.

Friend: Are you sure there is nothing else you can do.

Catherine: I'm sure.

Friend: Maybe it's enough.

Catherine: I want a home like this, and children and a family. It's sad knowing that that may never be.

In the dramatic final episode, she decides that the purity of the spiritual love she has with Vincent is worth the sacrifice of her career and of a physical relationship with any other man. She leaves her home and her career, and joins Vincent for a future together rooted in their spiritual bond in his world.

Vincent: . . . That secret that you carry now, our secret, sets you apart from your past, your friends, and even from the family you are yet to have, the children waiting to be born. . . . Our dream exists at the cost of all your other dreams. Know that, Catherine.

Catherine: It's worth it.

The message conveyed to the audience is, again, a traditional one. This program is unusual in that the choice is explicitly presented to the audience, which perhaps suggests that popular culture is indeed a reflection of reality. But even though the difficulty of the choice is made apparent to the viewer, the eventual decision reached by Catherine is still in favor of the traditional.

We can see how the outcome of the relationships between Rick and Ryan and Vincent and Catherine reinforce the traditional message given forth on "General Hospital." On that show, the Jones' have seemingly attained a state of interdependence, with emphasis equitably placed on both the self and the relationship. Yet, their marriage is treated as mythical, utopian, and idealistic, which undermines the possibility that an interdependent relationship can in fact exist. The union between Rick and Ryan on "Ryan's Hope" is an admirable struggle to achieve modern love, yet it falls apart when they are unable to reconcile her career interests with Rick's desire for a traditional family. In their story, the modern is offered as a viable choice but eventually rejected as too problematic. With Vincent and Catherine, on the other hand, Catherine clearly struggles between self-sacrifice and self-development—between the traditional and the modern—and eventually chooses the traditional path.

In all three relationships, then, options are presented to the audience, but the choices that are subsequently made carry decidedly traditional messages. We are left with our original question: Given that modern forms of relationship *do* exist in reality, why do those portrayed through popular culture mediums remain traditional?

Two questions arise for consideration: First, how does the depiction of commitment as illustrated here differ from what Swidler has argued should exist, and why is that important? Second, what does this depiction mean culturally in light of feminism, androgynous love, and television as a medium?

Any interpretation of our illustration must consider the extreme contrast between a new structure of romantic relationships and the preservation of old ideals. Why has the old ideal, the traditional love mythology, remained despite change in the the nature of commitment? Swidler has argued that within contemporary society, commitment in a relationship necessitates relinquishing of one's self—in effect, that there is a limited availability of resources within a dyadic relationship, and the use for growth by one depletes resources for the other. Hence, self-sacrifice *for* the relationship defines commitment *to* the relationship, and it is on this basis only that a relationship can survive. And, within society historically, women were expected to subordinate aspirations and achievements, all for the sake of preserving relationships in the face of a fundamental economic dependency upon their partners.

The 1970s brought widespread occupational and educational opportunities to women, drawing them into the labor market by creating employment possibilities for them in their own right. Whether out of economic necessity or personal preference, women perceive opportunities and rights in the public sphere, and this dramatically changes their actual and perceived obligation to make self-sacrifice their primary contribution to love relationships. Consequently, contemporary fictional portrayals of love relationships shift from self-sacrifice to personal independence. Swidler's interpretation of the pre-eminence of personal growth and its contradiction with commitment appeared to be valid.

However, the 1980s brought other developments—not the least of which is recognizing the importance of integrating commitment to work and love, without the sacrifice of oneself or the love relationship. Hence, the fictional representation of this new cultural ideal is what we see typified with the Frisco and Felicia romance—mutual self-development, mutual concern for the other as an individual, and above all, mutual commitment to their relationship such that it is not sacrificed to other elements of their lives.

We are left with consideration of the “meaning” of soap opera themes, particularly within an era of feminism, and their relationship to what television is “ready” to portray. Analyses addressing the deeper meaning of women's genres within television and film—soap opera and melodramas—are very clear in arguing that they represent female desire and female point-of-view.<sup>15</sup> Both Kuhn and Modleski<sup>16</sup> conclude that female texts are a response to a “society whose representations of itself are governed by the masculine...”<sup>17</sup> And in Radway's<sup>18</sup> analysis of

another medium, romance novels, she argues that they provide a therapeutic value made both possible and necessary by a culture that creates needs in women it cannot fulfill, thus causing repetitive consumption of romance stories.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the modifications observed in the ongoing Frisco and Felicia romance, we are left with an anomaly—one where female audiences, having achieved identity in a feminist period, are thoroughly entranced with plots about male-female relationships that at least on the surface appear to be decidedly traditional—finding “true” and permanent love. As we have observed, contrary to Swidler, the links between commitment and adult identity are unchanged. As a cultural ideal, love, particularly romantic love, is linked to the development of self, but with conjointly developing individuality. Why does a traditional telling of it persist within fictional representations, even though it exists in a modern form?

Cancian’s interdependence blueprint seems to be that represented by the fictional relationship of the characters we examined. Couples in interdependent relationships try to combine mutual dependency and commitment, with a freedom to develop themselves as well. While we have analyzed in greatest detail the Frisco/Felicia relationship as somewhat utopian, studies have shown that such enduring commitment has not only persisted as a cultural ideal, but has persisted in reality as well.<sup>20</sup> This cultural ideal of interdependence is thus being tested in reality as well as through fictional mediums.

We suggest further that although in reality the structure of women’s roles, including responsibilities and opportunities, has expanded considerably, the dynamics of negotiating intimate male-female relationships have changed very little. Previous research has suggested that traditional intimate relationships between men and women are intricately tied to power dynamics. Our notions of what an intimate relationship can and should be have traditionally placed women in a disadvantaged position by consistently reinforcing and legitimating men’s authority over women.<sup>21</sup>

Theorists also suggest that this traditional pattern is changing—that a new ideal of egalitarianism exists with regard to male-female intimacy. Yet, while the “ideal” of intimacy is becoming more egalitarian, many of the traditional patterns are upheld in actual practice. In other words, attitudes about intimate relationships have begun to change, but behavior has not yet caught up.<sup>22</sup> Confusion over this transitional state is clearly indicated by the continually traditional depiction of love relationships on daytime soap operas and prime time romance genre programs.

We suspect, then, that the perpetuation of such themes is more than seeking comfort with the familiar in the midst of social change. Rather, we speculate that in reality the negotiation of heterosexual intimacy has

remained closer to traditional form than most would care to acknowledge. That is, in the realm of power relations or decision-making, men continue to wield authority over women. In each of the series analyzed here, the future of the relationship rested on the outcome of a choice—a choice between the traditional and the modern. On “General Hospital” and “Ryan’s Hope,” the choice was made by the male, and it was at the *expense* of the female. And on “Beauty and the Beast,” the female sacrificed her professional career to the love relationship. On each show it is the *woman* who has made the sacrifice—clear reinforcement of traditional notions of heterosexual power. If traditional power relationships persist, then the limitations they place on male-female communication provide the basis for continuous retelling within the mediums observed here.

Considering the “meaning” of the soap opera genre in an era of feminism also demands that we consider what television is “ready” to portray. Television is a cautious medium that mimics proven successes and is careful not to deviate from proven formulas. Women disproportionately write for the soap opera genre because they are presumed by producers to “understand” romance and all that it entails.<sup>23</sup> The market place opens more freely for them in this genre than others, yet continues to demand formulaic production. What we have observed through our analysis has been an advance in this formula, within the context of a familiar genre. Until the dynamics guiding intimate male-female relationships change, the genre will persist, modifiable only by changes in ideals as they are desired in reality.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>For example, see Paul Ciotti, “Lite Romance: Why is Love in the '80s a Third Less Fulfilling?” *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, (June 14, 1987); Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*, Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1983.

<sup>2</sup>Ann Swidler, “Love and Adulthood in American Culture” in *Themes of Love and Work in Adulthood*, ed. Neil Smelser and Erik Erikson, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980.

<sup>3</sup>Muriel Cantor and Suzanne Pingree, *The Soap Opera*, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1983; Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance*, New York: Methuen, 1982; Jean Radford, *The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986; Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984; Ann Swidler, 1980, op. cit.

<sup>4</sup>Francesca Cancian, *Love in America*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987.

<sup>5</sup>Cantor and Pingree, op. cit., p. 28.

<sup>6</sup>Modleski, op. cit.

<sup>7</sup>Richard Dyer, “Entertainment and Utopia” in *Genre: The Musical: A Reader*, ed. Rick Altman, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981.

<sup>8</sup>Francesca Cancian, “The Feminization of Love”, *Signs*, 11 (1986), pp. 692-709; Cancian, 1987, op. cit.



<sup>9</sup>Swidler, op. cit. p. 124.

<sup>10</sup>What is meant by "commitment"—or, rather, what indicates commitment? A distinction has to be made between commitment *to* a relationship and commitment *within* a relationship. Commitment to a relationship is manifested through external factors; for example, by foregoing a risky career change in lieu of sticking with a "safe" alternative to ensure that food can be put on the table for one's family. This type of commitment can be spoken of as "sacrifice for the good of the relationship" (here, family)—a belief that the survival of the relationship/family has first priority. Commitment within a relationship—commitment between individuals—presumes priority is granted to the relationship and must be analyzed for evidence of the mutual interdependences which form the essence of a relationship.

<sup>11</sup>Cancian, 1987, op. cit., p. 105.

<sup>12</sup>Cancian, 1987, op. cit., p. 149.

<sup>13</sup>Cancian, 1987, op. cit.; Douglas Ingram, "Remarks on Intimacy and the Fear of Commitment," *American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 46 (1986), pp. 76-77; Naomi Quinn, "'Commitment' in American Marriage: A Cultural Analysis" *American Ethnologist*, 9 (1982), Number 4.

<sup>14</sup>Indeed, the actors playing these characters articulated this very understanding in a news interview in August, 1986. They referred to the relationship they portray as one filled with trust. Jack Wagner, who played Frisco, said: "I think it's a relationship that's genuine. You don't find that a lot. They're deeply in love. They will always be in love... It's going to be a very loyal, very loyal marriage."

<sup>15</sup>Annette Kuhn, "Women Genres," *Screen*, 25 (1984), pp. 18-28; Thelma McCormack, "Male Conceptions of Female Audiences: The Case of Soap Operas", in *Mass Communication Review Yearbook*, ed. Ellen Wartella and Charles Whitney, Beverly Hills: Sage, 1983.

<sup>16</sup>Modleski, op. cit.

<sup>17</sup>Kuhn, op. cit., p. 27.

<sup>18</sup>Radway, op. cit.

<sup>19</sup>Jane Biberman, "All Wrapped Up in Romance", *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, 4 (1985), pp. 30-33.

<sup>20</sup>Robert Bellah, et. al., *Habits of the Heart*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985; Phillip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz, *American Couples*, New York: Morrow, 1983.

<sup>21</sup>Cancian, 1986, op. cit.; Joseph Pleck, "The Male Sex Role," *Journal of Social Issues*, 32 (1987), Number 3.

<sup>22</sup>Mirra Komarovsky, *Women in College*, New York: Basic, 1985.

<sup>23</sup>William Bielby and Denise Bielby, *The 1987 Hollywood Writers' Report*, Los Angeles: Writers' Guild of America, West, 1987.

**C. Lee Harrington and Denise D. Bielby** Department of Sociology, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA.