Contemporary Romance and the Question of Literary Value

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Emanni N Cannon

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Certification of Approval

I certify that I have read Contemporary Romance and the Question of Literary Value by Emanni N Cannon, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in English: Literature at San Francisco State University.

__________________________________________
William J Christmas, Ph.D.
Professor,
Thesis Committee Chair

__________________________________________
Meg Schoerke, Ph.D.
Professor
Abstract

Romance fiction doesn't get much real respect within society today despite it being the top selling genre for most publication houses. If there can be certain canonized romances by Jane Austen and Charlotte Bronte taught across the country, why aren't there more contemporary ones brought into the curriculum as well? While *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre* are widely thought of as "literature" why can't more recent popular romances also be considered to have the same literary value? I explore what goes into certain romances being considered literature over others and how that impacts perceptions of contemporary romance novels toady. I feel changing perspectives around romance could break down the stigmas surrounding the genre and help society recognize that contemporary romance fiction can be considered literature, read for both education and enjoyment. I do this by analyzing *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, *Venetia* by Georgette Heyer, and *Confess* by Colleen Hoover, and exploring what they bring to the conversation around romance-as-literature through the similar themes, narrative techniques, and genre conventions they utilize.
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Introduction

Despite becoming a top-selling genre that has drawn scholarly attention in recent years, contemporary romance fiction is nonetheless still considered less than literature in most circles. Certain canonized romances, like *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Wuthering Heights*, are taught all over the country but I wonder why there isn't more recognition and respect shown towards the genre, and why there aren't more contemporary romances integrated into literature curriculums across secondary and higher education programs. With authors like Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë widely thought of as canonical, why can’t more recently written contemporary romances also be considered not only worthy of reading but also as literature to be taught? Considering there are a variety of plot lines to follow in romance novels, the ones written centuries ago and the ones written now aren't very different from one another. Contemporary romance fiction may be more sexually explicit than romance novels by Austen or the Brontës, but sex is not the focus of the novels nor is it the main reason why they are read. Yet contemporary romance has somehow remained tied to the idea that it is no more than porn on a page. Romance fiction has long been on the receiving end of scrutiny and has been kept out of certain spaces, like the classroom, despite its pedagogical potential for success in teaching literary analysis and critical thinking. Reading has been thought of as a “respectable” pastime so why did it begin to bother men what women were reading in their free time? Did the change come when women started using reading as something to make their lives better? Or was it because women started using reading as something to supplement what they weren't getting from
society? As Janice Radway suggests, “... all popular romantic fiction originates in the failure of patriarchal culture to satisfy its female members” (151).

Contemporary romance fiction gets little to no respect, especially in terms of being considered literature worthy of reading or teaching in a patriarchal society. Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* is just over 200 years old, yet it is one of the most beloved and respected romance novels of all time. Contemporary romance novels *Venetia* and *Confess*, by Georgette Heyer and Colleen Hoover respectively, are texts that could not only be taught as literature in the classroom, but also stories to immerse into and escape the realities of the world. I argue that shifting perspectives around the romance genre, particularly contemporary romance, from simple and unchallenging books to complex and challenging literature could begin to break down the stigmas surrounding the genre as a whole and open the door for contemporary romance fiction to occupy more literary, academic, and societal spaces with the respect it deserves. I want to explore what goes into certain romances being considered literature and how that impacts perceptions of romance throughout society. I want my analysis of Heyer and Hoover’s novels to be a step toward changing perceptions surrounding romance fiction and showing why the genre deserves recognition and respect as literature worth reading and teaching.

The romance genre is often comprehended as something written for women by women. Romances written in recent decades are assumed to be nothing more than porn for women as Lauren Cameron points out, “terms used to describe romance novels are often problematic and used to keep romance contained in a box. By calling a book an ‘easy-read’, it implies that the readers of the genre are not intelligent. ‘Porn’ implies that readers only read the novels for sexual reasons; to categorize every romance novel as an outlet for sexual frustration diminishes the
genre and women” (2). This societal assumption can lead women who read romances to feel guilt or shame for enjoying reading romantic stories as if they were taboo in the same way that watching porn is considered taboo. Women are made to feel ashamed for taking part in something that brings them joy. Stigmatizing the genre as “trashy,” an “easy-read,” or “porn” paints romance out to be less than real literature, thus downplaying and insulting the hard work it takes to write a good romance novel. While sex may be a part of contemporary romances written today it isn't the focus; the focus is on the little things that bring the couple together as they discover and fall in love with each other. And the reader connecting to and caring for these characters is what warrants such a loyal readership. Readers are there for the love story and the complexity that can be found within the characters that makes them relatable.

The lack of lasting respect for the romance genre appears to be rooted in the patriarchal nature of our society, and by examining what makes a good work of literature, I want to prove the literary value of the romance genre is there and break down some barriers attached to the contemporary romance genre specifically, and those who love reading it. Reading is considered a positive activity where one expands the mind and encounters new things. Women are consistently criticized when they unapologetically go after what they want and society feels it must ‘put them in their place’ in an attempt to deter women from finding something they enjoy doing, whether that be reading and writing romance novels or writing songs about the highs and lows of a romance. Making the choice to engage with the romance genre leads women to be viewed by society as unintelligent. But as Janice Radway points out,

[w]hen they subsequently argue that romances are also edifying and that reading is a kind of productive labor, they forsake that ideology of perpetual consumption for a more traditional value system that enshrines hard work, performance of duty, and
thrift. Romances are valuable according to this system because they enable the
reader to accumulate information, to add to her worth, and thus to better herself.

Romance fiction therefore has value because readers are gaining knowledge about themselves
and the world around them much like the characters in the novels.

Novels are largely considered literature and taught in classrooms when they are
understood to be complex in terms of language, syntax, allusions, symbolic meanings, etc., and
although contemporary romance may not have all these characteristics it is nevertheless complex
and valuable in terms of emotional and didactic content. As society changes and evolves, what is
thought of as literature does the same, but authors of contemporary romance fiction are still
largely left out of the conversation. The same authors and their work have been taught in
secondary and higher education for decades and have become canonized because they are seen as
indispensable and fundamental to student learning. Novels defined as “literature” are often not
transparent but challenging so they promote critical thinking in students. Contemporary romance
fiction is often not respected or included in classroom curriculums because scholars and critics
think of the genre as unchallenging. This may be because a lot of the language and syntax
included in romance novels today is simple and straightforward, along with the thematic
messages of the typical romance novel. Stephanie Moody notes, “Given the status of critical
pedagogies across literature and composition courses, anything that does not look critical risks
being dismissed as problematic…” (106). So contemporary romance fiction would not be
considered literature because it is unchallenging and students would not learn or develop critical
thinking skills because romance is considered ‘simple.’ In spite of the unchallenging nature of
the vocabulary used within romance, the genre can be “used to examine and explore tensions and
debates about social values, cultural conditions and gender relations…” (Wherry 54). I believe
the romance genre can generate critical thinking and literary analysis skills in students when examining the themes, narrative techniques, and conventions involved in the genre. I see literary value in a text that leaves the readers having learned or gained something which they did not have or were not familiar with before encountering said text, things like knowledge, adventures, or emotions. For the purpose of my argument, the definition of good literature I will be working with is a text that stimulates the reader's mind allowing opportunities for deeper thinking, and has a well-written narrative that conveys a lesson that challenges the way the reader thinks or feels. And the definition of good romance I will be working with is a text that allows the reader to escape the real world by telling a love story that has characters that are relatable, lovable, and complex while also inspiring the reader that their happily-ever-after is possible. In the following analysis, I intend to look at these formal aspects of romance novels: narrative technique, character development, significant themes, and archetypes of the genre.

Romance can be a challenging genre used to help students meet goals within education like learning how to analyze and interpret texts, and develop critical thinking skills. Using contemporary romance novels published within the last 100 years, I intend to compare them to *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, which is one of the most successful and loved romance novels. With *Venetia* by Georgette Heyer and *Confess* by Colleen Hoover, I will showcase that contemporary romance fiction holds more value than the “smut” label society tends to place on it. *Pride and Prejudice, Venetia,* and *Confess,* are romance novels I will evaluate to establish what is canonized literature, highlight the literary value within contemporary romance fiction, and demonstrate the complexity of the genre. These authors and their work have the ability to evoke affective reactions in readers, develop academic skills in students, and provide meaningful
messages that endure through social change. Looking more closely at the genre of romance fiction can bring to light the value it holds to readers in and out of academic spaces, hopefully resulting in the genre being seen in a more positive light more frequently and consistently.
Chapter 1: Austenian Foundations

While there are conventions and character archetypes that can be found across the romance genre, the way authors bring all the characteristics together to tell compelling stories readers will love is a skill not as straightforward as critics and society believe it to be. The basic structure that can be found in every romance novel is as follows: the “meet” in which the main characters meet and enter some kind of relationship; the “barrier” or conflict, in which a problem, whether internal, external, or both, comes up that keeps the main characters from being together and/or being happy; the “ritual death,” the climax, in which the problem(s) keeping the main characters from coming together manifests and one or both characters decide it's best to end whatever relationship they had; and the “betrothal,” or the resolution, in which the problem is confronted and overcome because the love the main characters have is so strong and true that nothing can or will keep them from being together resulting in the couple's happily-ever-after. What makes a romance stand out among readers and be thought of as good are things like the major plot points, shocking twists, character development/redemption, how immersive the story and details are, the feelings evoked, being made to care and root for the main characters, and the happily-ever-after (HEA): “The HEA is a sacred guarantee in a romance novel: the author will not let the readers down by failing to provide the emotional resolution” (Roach 5). The happily-ever-after (HEA) or the happy for now (HFN) defines the romance genre; if the novel does not have this component it cannot be considered a romance. The ending is always happy and comforting no matter the type of romance it is – enemies-to-lovers, friends-to-lovers, second-chance romance, tearjerkers, regency, etc. The characters must be happy and together or with the promise of being together at the end of their story. Without all these elements working together,
the romance will fall flat and readers will be disappointed and many won’t even finish reading
the novel. This can be caused by lackluster details, bad writing, being too predictable, the reader
not relating to or caring for the main characters, or the happy ending doesn't fit the story or
characters. So while scholars and critics label the genre simple and unchallenging, romance
fiction is actually the opposite, with many conventions and characteristics going into it that have
to work together seamlessly to be considered a good romance novel. Relatable, lovable
characters and a love story that will never get old, even when you know how it ends, are the most
important and difficult parts of writing a romance novel to get right and leave readers craving
more.

For the purposes of my argument here are some descriptions of the major conventions
and archetypes of romance novels that I will discuss. The hero and heroine are the protagonists
of the novel; they are usually described as extraordinary in some way whether that be looks,
personality, or intelligence and their personalities stand out as being true to themselves against
all odds. The rebel is a character archetype operating outside the norms of the society the novel
takes place in; the rebel has ideas, opinions, and feelings different from the other characters on
noteworthy topics. The villain is a figure, or character, who actively blocks the hero and heroine
from being together; this could be another character in the novel or something symbolic like
class. The rake/trickster is a character archetype who can't be trusted, who the protagonist must
stay away from at all costs because where the rake goes trouble always follows. The rake has
evolved into the bad boy of more modern contemporary romance and continues to be included in
many romance novels. The innocent is a character who is positive, optimistic, and pure when it
comes to all thoughts, experiences, and feelings they may interact with. Along with character
archetypes of the romance genre, realism, social commentary, and family are themes that make the romance genre relatable to readers and valuable when considering teaching it to students because these themes bring out elements of reality that readers can connect to. These conventions are some of what authors of the romance genre work with and against to create complex fictional characters. Starting with *Pride and Prejudice*, I will detail how the foundation of the romance genre is established and complex by exploring how the characters are written, and what they are represented as in terms of the themes and archetypes seen throughout the novel.

I

Scholars focus on elements other than the love story to establish that Jane Austen isn't just writing about love but about real issues women and men were facing in Regency England. The messages beneath the romance plot could be why Austen is a staple in the canon—and still a popular author outside of academia—because she portrays relatable lessons that comment on cultural topics that translate to real life. Through the narrator and her characters, Austen comments on societal happenings to impart lessons that she felt her audience of primarily women readers should take away from her writing. Throughout the novel female characters reduce education for women to be nothing more than “accomplishments” that would be pleasing enough to attract a husband, Miss Bingley says, “A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions” (39). A young woman's education was just skills she would use to attract a husband and entertain company. And while reading is sometimes mentioned, what
women read mattered a great deal, especially for the implied effect it had on their conduct. Darcy is one of the few who speaks openly about wanting more than these simple accomplishments in a partner, “and to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading” (39). Reading is wanted within society, as a way to expand the mind but not so much that it would lead to impropriety and scare off potential husbands. These “accomplishments” also show women the expected and accepted ways in which to conduct themselves when in the presence of company, and only affluent families with the means of acquiring access to a library could have the opportunity to learn more than the typical etiquette practices of the day. Throughout *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen is commenting on the societal restrictions young women faced when educating and conducting themselves in certain settings and how those behaviors impact the perceptions suitors had about them.

In addition to Austen being known for highlighting the societal obstacles women faced, she is also known for using and perfecting the narrative technique known as free indirect discourse by taking the reader in and out of the character's thoughts and feelings and the narrator's commentary. There were many authors who used free indirect discourse, yet Austen is praised and studied because “she was instrumental in forging this method of narration at the initiating stages of the novel's efflorescence in England” (Searle 18). Through the third-person omniscient narrator, Austen imparts the characters’ thoughts on delicate situations they are reluctant to speak about. For example, when the Bennet women are anticipating Mr. Bingley’s return to the country,

“As for Jane, her anxiety under this suspense was, of course, more painful than Elizabeth's; but whatever she felt she was desirous of concealing, and between herself and Elizabeth, therefore, the subject was never alluded to. But as no such delicacy restrained her mother, an hour seldom passed in which she did not talk of Bingley, express her
impatience for his arrival, or even require Jane to confess that if he did not come back, she should think herself very ill used. It needed all Jane’s steady mildness to bear these attacks with tolerable tranquillity” (127).

Jane is not outspoken like most of her family and in this scene, she keeps her true feelings from all but Elizabeth, unlike their mother who the narrator switches to show the liberal expression of her thoughts on the situation. The reader is getting to see multiple characters work through the same situation but in different ways. This insight into the characters' sentiments, especially of ones who don't get a lot of narrative attention throughout the novel, lets readers connect to the characters and the novel more, and explore potential meanings for themselves.

Free indirect discourse can also create openings in the narrative that invite the reader to fill in, giving each reader a chance to personalize the story for themselves. The reader is able to experience what the character is struggling with in their heads and interpret or infer where that character will end up. For example, when Elizabeth sees Darcy after she rejects him and finds that he is acting differently, “Elizabeth said nothing, but it gratified her exceedingly; the compliment must be all for herself. Her astonishment, however, was extreme; and continually she was repeating, ‘Why is he so altered? From what can it proceed? It cannot be for me, it cannot be for my sake that his manners are thus softened’” (244). Here Elizabeth could be interpreted as wondering why Darcy has started acting differently towards her as a positive thing by some readers or it could be read as a continuation of her dislike for him by others. Having more than one interpretation presents an opportunity for students to discuss different interpretations that fuel class discussions and foster critical thinking. Austen expertly pulls readers into the narrative with her free indirect discourse technique so that they feel like they have been transported into the setting of the novel and experiencing every emotion and feeling of
the individual characters. These characters become familiar to readers because they can relate to them and the situations they find themselves in.

Austen writes characters that are heavily impacted by their families, and the dynamic setup in *Pride and Prejudice* leads Elizabeth to put family first, many times above herself, highlighting her selflessness and empathy. There are a couple of scenes that show Elizabeth’s closeness and care for her sisters and their well-being, even when at times their actions may come with negative effects. For example, when Jane catches a cold after going to Netherfield, “Elizabeth, feeling really anxious, was determined to go to her, though the carriage was not to be had; and as she was no horse-woman, walking was her only alternative. She declared her resolution” (32). Elizabeth cares only about going to see her sick sister, she does not mind the three-mile walk, or that by the time she reaches her destination she will be covered in dirt. She cares even less about the opinions of the people residing at Netherfield though it is only the Bingley sisters who think negatively about her while Darcy can only admire “the brilliancy which exercise had given her complexion,” and Mr. Bingley notes how “It shews an affection for her sister that is very pleasing” (33, 36). Elizabeth's decision to walk to see her sick sister is viewed as a senseless thing to do by the Miss Bingleys, yet not only is Elizabeth independent enough to follow what she deems sensible, but she also gains some positive attributes for caring so much for her family.

While this first representation of Elizabeth's love of her family ends in a positive way, it is Elizabeth's younger sisters, particularly Lydia, who negatively impact Elizabeth and the whole family. When Lydia wants to go off to Brighton so she won't be separated from her beloved
military men, Elizabeth makes a plea to their father to step in and save the reputation of the family before Lydia’s self-centered ways and imprudent actions impacts them all,

“It is not of peculiar, but of general evils, which I am now complaining. Our importance, our respectability in the world, must be affected by the wild volatility, the assurance and disdain of all restraint which mark Lydia’s character. Excuse me – for I must speak plainly. If you, my dear father, will not take the trouble of checking her exuberant spirits, and of teaching her that her present pursuits are not to be the business of her life, she will soon be beyond the reach of amendment. Her character will be fixed and she will, at sixteen, be the most determined flirt that ever made herself and her family ridiculous…” (223)

This issue Elizabeth raises is that Lydia’s unchecked behavior might cause the reputation of the Bennet family to take a hit in social circles and if the head of the family does not step in now the damage could turn out to be irreversible. Elizabeth is concerned for young Lydia who will be stained for life if her behavior continues and she is worried about how the family will be perceived as improper because of it. In Mr. Bennet's reply to Elizabeth's plea, Austen makes clear he's not understanding that the actions and reputation of one sister affects them all,

“Whenever you and Jane are known, you must be respected and valued; and you will not appear to less advantage for having a couple of – or may I say, three very silly sisters…” (223). But Elizabeth and Jane do suffer because of the behavior of their sisters and mother causing others in their social circle/class to distance themselves from the family that appears to lack self-control. Social standing plays a big role in being content, happy or prosperous in life and Austen highlights how family is not just an important influence on who you are but also who others presume you to be.

Austen's characters can be complicated, and throughout her novels, readers experience their growth and development into better versions of themselves. The main characters are often the ones who go through a tangible change in who they are and we as readers get to experience
the change as they grow as characters and grow to love each other. Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* starts off as strong-willed and independent, wanting the best for her sisters and largely thinking of herself last. But Elizabeth begins to pursue interests that will make her heart full, and the reader begins to see how stubborn and judgmental she has been because she is so headstrong. Based on her first impression of Mr. Darcy and indulging in the story Mr. Wickham tells her, Elizabeth holds firm that Darcy is the most disagreeable person ever and Wickham is the most charming. In spite of hearing some accounts of Darcy being better than Wickham has made him out to be, Elizabeth sticks to her formed opinion, “but you must excuse my not being convinced by assurances only. Mr. Bingley’s defense of his friend was a very able one I dare say, but since he is unacquainted with several parts of the story, and has learned the rest from that friend himself, I shall venture still to think of both gentlemen as I did before” (94). Elizabeth has not fully acquainted herself with all parts of the story because of her strong dislike of Darcy, yet she still believes herself to be right in her formed opinion of his character. She remains firm in her convictions throughout most of the novel, not really taking many things seriously or considering the consequences of her potential mistakes.

But while visiting Darcy’s Pemberley estate, Elizabeth begins to no longer make jokes about her feelings and instead becomes more serious and acknowledges the truth of what she feels. Simply because of her unaltered first impression and what she eventually discovers to be lies told by a bitter Wickham, Elizabeth is amazed to hear different and much more favorable reports of Darcy’s character. After Darcy’s first proposal and a letter explaining his side of events, Elizabeth allows herself to reflect on the way she has been behaving and what she has believed, recognizing the error she has made in believing her prejudice to be accurate,
She grew absolutely ashamed of herself. –Of neither Darcy nor Wickham could she think, without feeling that she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd. ‘How despicably have I acted!’ – ‘I, who have prided myself on my discernment! –I, who have valued myself on my abilities! who have often disdained the generous candour of my sister, and gratified my vanity, in useless or blameable distrust… Pleased with the preference of one, and offended by the neglect of the other, on the very beginning of our acquaintance, I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned. Till this moment, I never knew myself.’ (201-2)

Elizabeth realizes in this passage how prejudiced she has acted towards both Darcy and Wickham, and how vain and stubborn she has been because Darcy insulted her when they first met while Wickham showed her attention. Wickham's charming smile and Darcy's bad manners had Elizabeth convinced she knew all there was to know about their character, not letting herself or anyone else point out her first impression could've been wrong. As Darcy goes through a change of his own Elizabeth begins to understand how wrong she was and how good Darcy is. Seeing everything Darcy does in a completely different view, “She was humbled, she was grieved; she repented, though she hardly knew of what. She became jealous of his esteem, when she could no longer hope to be benefited by it… She was convinced that she could have been happy with him; when it was no longer likely they should meet” (295). This kind of self-reflection that leads the main character to change and become better by the end of the novel is one of the things readers love to see in romance stories. To be able to experience someone seeing a mistake they made and consciously changing to become better translates from fiction to reality to give readers hope that the same kind of internal change is possible for them.

Another kind of change readers enjoy seeing is the change someone goes through to be worthy of love, like Fitzwilliam Darcy. From Darcy's introduction to the reader, he is presented as a proud, arrogant man who only cares about social standing and reputation, “… his manners gave a disgust which turned the tide of his popularity; for he was discovered to be proud, to be
about his company, and above being pleased…” (12). He isn't set up as the typical romantic hero readers are used to and he doesn't outwardly show much emotion. He doesn't like speaking to anyone he isn’t well acquainted with, and further thinks getting to know someone of a lower social class than him is utterly pointless. Though the reader is expected to see Darcy as a gentleman, his manners don't always present him to be so. And it's not until we are more than halfway through the novel that we really develop an understanding that Darcy has more layers to his character than what has been shown. For example, Darcy is overprotective he is of people he cares about that he sometimes oversteps, and the graciousness he has been known to display which his housekeeper Mrs. Reynolds points out, “I have always observed, that they who are good-natured when children, are good-natured when they grow up; and he always the sweetest-tempered, most generous-hearted, boy in the world” (238). Darcy is no Wickham in the way he indicates his preference for someone; his subtle actions reveal his interest more than his words, “…though often standing within a very short distance of her, quite disengaged, he never came near enough to speak” (100). These small actions tell the reader that Darcy is becoming partial to Elizabeth. The narrator is usually imparting Elizabeth’s view of Darcy so all we see of him is influenced by her negative view of him, even though these are signs he is beginning to fall for her, “She attracted him more than he liked…He wisely resolved to be particularly careful that no sign of admiration should now escape him, nothing that could elevate her with the hope of influencing his felicity…” (59). Darcy feels himself becoming too attached to Elizabeth and because of his opinion of her family's social class and behavior he feels it is his duty to distance himself from her. Darcy can't let Elizabeth or anyone think he wants to be connected to someone from a family like hers, which demonstrates the importance of social perceptions of family.
Darcy’s elitism and habit of being quick to judge keep him from allowing himself to feel or show any kind of admiration or preference for Elizabeth solely because he believes she comes from a family that is ill-bred and beneath him. Yet the way he has behaved and the things he has said don't stop Darcy from believing that proposing to Elizabeth will have a positive outcome. When Elizabeth rejects him, citing how he hasn’t been very “gentleman-like”, Darcy goes off to rethink and reflect on everything and take action to right the wrongs that have been brought to his attention, like bringing Mr. Bingley and Jane back together and helping Mr. Wickham financially. Darcy’s second proposal goes much better and he gives a rather long speech conveying how the way he was raised did not teach him everything he thought it did,

“I have been a selfish being all my life, in practice, though not in principle. As a child I was taught what was right, but I was not taught to correct my temper, I was given good principles, but left to follow them in pride and conceit… Such I was, from eight to eight and twenty; and such I might still have been but for you, dearest, loveliest Elizabeth! What do I not owe you! You taught me a lesson, hard indeed at first, but most advantageous. By you, I was properly humbled. I came to you without a doubt of my reception. You shewed me how insufficient were all my pretensions to please a woman worthy of being pleased.” (349)

Thanks to Elizabeth, Darcy has realized that his focusing only on one's social standing when making acquaintances is not the way to live because his judgment may not always be correct. And he then is determined to make right the situations he had created when being too proud not just for himself but also for Elizabeth, “My object then, [...] was to shew you, by every civility in my power, that I was not so mean as to resent the past; and I hoped to obtain your forgiveness, to lessen your ill opinion, by letting you see that your reproofs had been attended to” (349-350). Darcy wants Elizabeth to see that he has taken what she criticized in his character and corrected it in order to be a better man, one worthy of her love. Readers love this convention of the romance genre of a man changing into someone deserving of the woman he wants to spend the
rest of his life with especially when he always had the capacity to be better but the prospect of losing her pushes him to make the change. It is a characteristic of the romance genre that readers fantasize about happening to them.

These aspects of *Pride and Prejudice* I have been exploring – family, free indirect discourse, societal commentary, and character development – illustrate how the novel is considered good literature by academics because it provides the students with opportunities for deep critical thinking and analysis. Austen also tells a narrative that translates a bigger message across the page to readers and challenges them to make connections to themselves and their society centuries later. It is an indication of good literature as well as good romance for readers to be able to connect and relate to the novels they read.

II

Reading a story that you can envision yourself as a part of brings the reader back again and again to experience favorite characters as the archetypes and conventions of the romance genre that they love. Genre and literary archetypes tell the reader what can be expected from certain characters and bring comfort that the story will meet the desires of the reader. These characters often follow a traditional arc throughout the novel that a reader can anticipate but enjoy when the author alters the characters for narrative purposes. *Pride and Prejudice* contains some of the most recognizable character archetypes that one can find in the contemporary romance genre, such as the rake, the villain, and the rebel. Austen develops these archetypes to portray certain narrative moves that are and aren't typical to the romance reader.

The rake archetype is one of the most recognizable and noteworthy archetypes in romance fiction because rakes are often the ones most changed by the end of the novel. Austen
plays with this early depiction of the rake and uses Mr. Wickham to show how dangerous this archetype can be, especially when they don’t go through a fundamental change for the better. Wickham tricks Elizabeth and the whole community of Meryton to believe that he, “...was as far beyond them all in person, countenance, air, and walk...” and how he has been wronged by the ‘proud’ Darcy (75). Wickham garners sympathy from all who encounter him, misleading everyone into thinking he is entitled to more than he has. As the reader is experiencing the novel primarily through Elizabeth, it is not until she learns of the truth from Darcy that it comes to light how much Wickham is a rake who sets himself up to acquire what he believes he is entitled to, whether its money, reputation or young impressionable girls. Reputation is everything in the Regency era, and Wickham is going around to different towns ruining young girls’ reputations looking for someone with a fortune large enough to fund the life he believes is owed to him. He even tries to seduce Darcy’s younger sister as a way to get her money and get back at Darcy, “Mr. Wickham’s chief object was unquestionably my sister's fortune… but I cannot help supposing that the hope of revenging himself on me, was a strong inducement” (195). The rake character often goes through a transformation by the novel’s end, but Wickham isn’t one of them. Marrying Elizabeth's sister Lydia doesn't change his ways, especially since he was hoping to marry someone with more wealth and he doesn't love her, which is usually the main factor that inspires change in this kind of character. Elizabeth observes during their visit right after the marriage, “Wickham’s affection for Lydia, was… not equal to Lydia’s for him… and she would have wondered why, without violently caring for her, he chose to elope with her at all...” (301). Wickham as the rake archetype creates tension between the protagonists that will end up together. He is used as a love interest driving Elizabeth and Darcy apart and as “the wickedest
young man in the world” tempting Darcy’s and Elizabeth’s respective younger sisters toward impropriety and disgrace (280). Wickham’s rake nature is not one that gains any kind of redemption in the eyes of Elizabeth or the reader because he fundamentally is written as a bad guy hiding behind the facade of a good guy and never attempts to change. Austen writes Wickham to be the typical rake in all instances except for the biggest one, changing into a better person in the name of love. Instead of finding redemption in the person he will spend his life with, Wickham is punished to live his life with someone he doesn't really like. He is chiefly used as one of the obstacles the main characters must overcome so they can find their way to each other and as a lesson about not learning from one’s mistakes.

The portrayal of the villain archetype is represented mainly by Lady Catherine de Bourgh in *Pride and Prejudice*. Not only is Lady Catherine seen keeping Darcy from marrying anyone other than her daughter, but she also personifies social class, the main obstacle Darcy and Elizabeth must face in order for them to be together. Austen writes Lady Catherine as this archetype perfectly, for she only cares about herself and her opinions. Lady Catherine has no problem pointing out how improper Mrs. Bennet was for not getting a governess to educate her five children in the socially acceptable skills that would recommend them to a suitable husband saying to Elizabeth, “Without a governess you must have been neglected” (161). As her title implies, Lady Catherine has high standards when it comes to expectations of young women of the period. The Bennets are educated, just not in the way Lady Catherine believes they should have been, and she blames this “defect” as the reason for the young Miss Bennets’ indecent behavior, “I always say that nothing is to be done in education without steady and regular instruction, and nobody but a governess can give it,” implying without a proper governess one’s
education won't be accurate (161-2). Her station gives her the liberty to do as she pleases, and
when rumors begin to circulate that Darcy and Elizabeth are engaged Lady Catherine goes to
confront Elizabeth, “I…am entitled to know all his dearest concerns” and ensure that she
understands she is not worthy of Darcy because of her family status (335). And she throws in
that Darcy has been intended to Lady Catherine’s daughter. She tries to insult and shame
Elizabeth because of her lack of any meaningful connections to anyone of importance or status:
“You refuse, then, to oblige me. You refuse to obey the claims of duty, honour, and gratitude.
You are determined to ruin him in the opinion of all his friends, and make him the contempt of
the world” (338). If they were to marry Lady Catherine would make sure their life would be
difficult, “Because honour, decorum, prudence, nay, interest, forbid it. Yes, Miss Bennet,
interest; for do not expect to be noticed by his family or friends, if you willfully act against the
inclinations of all. You will be censured, slighted, and despised, by every one connected with
him. Your alliance will be a disgrace; your name will never even be mentioned by any of us”
(336). Lady Catherine does not care for Elizabeth’s or Darcy’s feelings in the matter, she only
cares about how it would look for her if her nephew essentially married down instead of
marrying her daughter. In this scene Lady Catherine serves as the catalyst for Elizabeth to stand
up for herself and fight for the chance that she may follow what she desires past social standing,
showing her individualism in a time when young women were expected to comply with the
wishes of those above them in station. Elizabeth is immovable, her individualism coming out in
her confrontation with the obstacle in the way of her staying true to her values of following her
heart and what she knows will make her happy. Not just in the Regency era, but also in modern
times, readers want to see the main character stand up for herself no matter the consequences to get what she wants and staying true to herself is something that keeps them coming back.

The archetype of the rebel is represented also as our heroine Elizabeth. The rebel archetype gives insight into what the norms of society are and if those norms are something that should be followed or questioned, to examine if they are perfect or flawed, and Austen does this with Elizabeth. Austen writes her heroines to be extraordinary in some way; whether that's a good or bad thing depends on the novel you are reading. Elizabeth, as our heroine, is set up to be remarkable in some way, and that would be her individualism, which makes her the rebel. She very often is shown behaving and thinking in ways that are not typical for the period, like when she walks three miles to visit a sick Jane. Elizabeth isn't going to do something unless she knows it will bring her happiness, and she doesn't really hold back her wit, “I always delight in overthrowing those kind of schemes, and cheating a person of their premeditated contempt” (50). Elizabeth is really rebelling simply by being her own person and speaking her mind. When a marriage was proposed not many women were privileged enough to be able to decline the offer, yet Elizabeth rejects two proposals all because she feels the men, as they are, won't be agreeable or able to make her happy in life, “I am not one of those young ladies (if such young ladies there are) who are so daring as to risk their happiness on the chance of being asked a second time. I am perfectly serious in my refusal. – You could not make me happy…” (105). Elizabeth is not concerned with getting another proposal, she considers only what will provide her happiness in her life. During her confrontation with Lady Catherine, Elizabeth is choosing herself and where her heart may lead her over honor and duty, “I am only resolved to act in that manner, which will, in my opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to you, or to any person so
wholly unconnected with me… Neither duty, nor honour, nor gratitude […] have any possible claim on me” (338). Elizabeth’s headstrong nature could speak to why she is Austen's most loved character. She is her own person, fiercely loves her family, follows her heart, and doesn't give up on what she believes will make her happy.

The love story of Elizabeth and Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* is one of the most loved and famous romances. As an enemies-to-lovers romance in modern day terms, Elizabeth and Darcy match each other and their journeys through the novel, just in different ways. Even though they start out hating each other, Elizabeth and Darcy gradually learn more about each other and that knowledge generates an appreciation between them that then turns into love. The transformation of Elizabeth as someone who puts herself first and Darcy as someone who now knows what empathy/sympathy is are valuable themes that allow readers and scholars to recognize the romance genre has more to offer than just a couple falling in love. *Pride and Prejudice* fulfills the expectations of a romance novel that results in it being canonized as good literature while also containing many of the major conventions and character archetypes associated with contemporary romances, and becoming a popular favorite with readers. While the reader watches the main couple find their way to their happy ending, Austen communicates important themes and social commentary that traverse centuries.
Chapter 2: Modern Applications

Just as *Pride and Prejudice* includes character development, familial influences, social commentary, and the typical romance genre archetypes – the rake, villain, and rebel – so too does Georgette Heyer’s *Venetia*. Austen writes timeless narratives that readers can relate to so many years later and Heyer does the same yet in her own way. They follow a similar pattern for a romance plot yet create different novels within the same genre. The characters all have something to protect and guard whether it's their families, emotions, or reputations, though Heyer has them affected differently from the characters in Austen's novel. Anne Lancashire points out how, “Heyer well understood the kinds of characters, plots, settings, and descriptions of social manners that appealed to her readers, and largely followed the formulae she had created, early on in her writing career, that resulted in the best sales of her work” (2). Heyer understood what it took to create characters her readers can fall in love with and narratives they can relate to in the genre that is often oversimplified by others as just love stories.

In this chapter, I will be arguing that the novels within the romance genre are different from one another while also containing similar aspects often found in the genre. I will show Heyer’s skill in creating an entertaining story that explores relatable issues like the pressure to conform to society and how her novel, *Venetia*, can convey value to the reader. As a twentieth-century writer Heyer had more freedom to write her characters openly pushing the boundaries set by society, elevating the foundation Austen produced with her characters. She revamps the endings given to characters to reflect her twentieth-century society while staying true to the eighteenth-century society the novel takes place within. Through Heyer’s *Venetia*, I intend to show the value of the contemporary romance novel by exploring how Heyer utilizes conventions
within the genre to cover relatable themes like the influence of family and having the resilience to go against society’s norms.

In *Venetia*, Heyer comments on gendered social expectations that were in play during the Regency era; these expectations on how men and women were supposed to act within society are significant because the main characters of *Venetia* function outside of the traditional expectations of those around them. Venetia is living at Undershaw manor, just 15 miles from York, with little to no protection because her parents and older brother are gone leaving her with just her younger brother, his nurse, and the neighbors to look after her. Venetia is often reminded that she is inexperienced and does not understand how the world works outside her neighborhood bubble. Despite her being perceived as naive about certain things she is very well-read and headstrong. But because she is a woman everything she says and does is judged whenever it is different from the expectations of others around her. She knows because of her inexperience within society that she must rely on what she is told and what she reads in order to understand how the world works and the significance of social codes, “I know it would be thought improper if I were to live alone, and though I think it nonsensical I don't mean to outrage the conventions, I promise you. While Aubrey is at Cambridge I shall engage a chaperon” (187). Venetia is aware of the conventions of society outside of Undershaw that she cannot live by herself and she means to adhere to them when she is there but that doesn't mean she prefers it. Additionally, she knows Edward Yardley is the man she is expected to marry but she does not want to because she finds him boring, condescending, and self-righteous. Edward often puts Venetia and women in general down in regard to their thoughts and what they are capable of understanding: “indeed, I should be sorry to engage in any sort of discussion with you on a matter that is not only beyond the female
comprehensions, but which one could not wish to see within it” (233). Unlike Edward, her brother Aubrey and love interest Damerel see Venetia as a person, respect her thoughts, and allow her to be her true self around them, all things society views as strange. Venetia not caring about what people think in society is what leads individuals around her to hold her back, like her aunt Mrs Hendred who tells her “my love, girls cannot be better able to judge of what will suit them than their parents!”, and Venetia points out “But I am not a girl, ma’am, and I have no parents” (234). Venetia has to continually remind people around her that she has been making decisions for herself even though society implies that as an unmarried young woman she is incapable of that kind of control over her life. In a way, Heyer shows Venetia and the reader that ‘if you can't beat them join them’ since Venetia has to join in with the judgment and expectations society places on women and their reputations so that she can beat them from keeping her from Damerel. Venetia is willing to go to the extreme of disgracing her name and reputation by acting with impropriety in public spaces in order to be taken seriously and gain what she wants.

While Heyer’s use of the free indirect discourse technique isn't on the same level as Austen’s, the technique is nevertheless available to leave the reader to have to fill in gaps left by the narrator. When Aubrey is hurt and Nurse and Venetia come to Damerel’s property, they are both frustrated with Aubrey’s stubbornness in listening to them try to take care of him which contradicted Aubrey’s readiness to take Damerel’s advice on his recovery.

She had not been present, but in her absence Damerel (though a sinner) had acted with a promptness and a propriety that won her instant approval. So deserving had he shown himself to be that she listened to his advice, and even agreed that it would be imprudent to mention the episode to Aubrey. Damerel thought that if he were to be left alone Aubrey would fall asleep, to which end he proposed to remove his sister from his side for a while. Perhaps she would like to stroll about the garden: what did Mrs Priddy think? (79)
This is the first occasion Venetia and Nurse are seeing Damerel outside of the gossip and reputation that follows him around and they are both still trying to figure him out. They also are wondering how Aubrey can so freely listen to him over them by suggesting recovery tips when Venetia and Nurse understand his hip problems much more than Damerel. Even in the last sentence of the passage, the reader can't be sure if Damerel is asking Nurse if she would like to walk around the garden or if he is suggesting to Nurse that he takes Venetia on a walk around the garden so that Aubrey can get some rest. Heyer is providing narrated monologue here instead of the dialogue one would typically expect to see intertwining the narrator's voice with Damerel's. Damerel’s cadence is coming through the narrator while the reader is still trying to figure him out and having gaps to fill without the narrator's help in determining whether to trust Damerel or not.

While Heyer uses free indirect discourse in the novel, she also has her characters naming texts and quoting passages that are associated with academics which the characters are influenced by. It's interesting that Heyer has the characters reference and quote poets and novelists and often speak in different languages while discussing things, showcasing how educated the characters are. They drop Latin, lines from poets, and reference authors all throughout the novel, “Quousque tandem abutere, Catilina, patientia nostra,” never providing explanations of what has been said or referenced (74). Aubrey's tendency to always have a book nearby and the exchanges witnessed by others make people worry about Venetia being exposed to the subjects he is engaging with like the story of Oedipus: “‘You will oblige me, Venetia,’ said Mr Hendred acidly, ‘by abandoning a subject which I consider to be extremely improper. I may say that I am excessively shocked to think that Aubrey – for I collect it was he! – should
have sullied his sister’s ears with such a story!” (294). Heyer shows her male and female characters showcasing that they do a lot of reading of the classics and reference that reading all throughout the novel. Even the narrator compares the new life witnessed in Venetia to the myth of Pygmalion, Galatea, and goddess Venus, “Like the statue, she had been brought to life, but not by a goddess, not even by her heroic young adorer, but by her would-be seducer” (110). The inclusion of connections to established concepts and known authors highlights the didacticism that brings importance to Heyer’s literature. Stacy Gillis points out, “Heyer’s repeatedly displayed knowledge of the period acts as an anchor within the Regency, and, by extension, to the world of Austen” (88). This anchor of knowledge is utilized in a way that connects the fictional world being explored with the real world, showing how relatable the novels are by including these teachable lessons. For instance, one of Venetia’s would-be suitors, Oswald, is satirically depicted as the Byronic hero concerned with winning her affections and saving her from Damerel. Oswald’s overindulgence in his feelings leads him to act inappropriately and misinterpret situations, like; asking Venetia to marry him, forcefully kissing her, and challenging Damerel to a duel. Heyer is displaying Oswald’s actions in a purposeful way that conveys a lesson on how one’s unchecked emotions can have consequences. Drawing connections to prominent authors of the period is an important part of Heyer's work because it, “works to draw further attention to the intertextual relationship between her writing and that of Austen, a relationship which should be read as both one of influence of Austen upon Heyer as well as simultaneously a re-orientating of how Heyer can influence our reading of Austen” (Gillis 89). And this relationship shows that Heyer and Austen should be able to occupy academic and
societal spaces because they not only can influence the approaches to reading their work but also can influence the life of the reader.

In *Venetia* family is an important influence on who Venetia is and the things she plans for herself. Venetia is acting as the head of the family in the place of her older brother who is away in the military service, and she takes care of her younger brother who has a “disease of the hip joint” that makes it difficult for him to get around sometimes (8). She makes all her decisions based on the needs of others, rarely acting on her desires first even though she knows exactly what she wants. For example, when her father died she was finally free to go to London and experience all the things she had been reading about in novels, but instead, she stayed at Undershaw because she felt it was her responsibility to step in as the head of the household until her brother Conway returned home, telling Lady Denny “Until he came home to take up his inheritance there was nothing she could do but continue in the old way” (11). And she is close with her younger brother Aubrey so when he doesn't come home from riding his horse one afternoon she is terribly worried about his well-being, “Her fingers trembled as she broke open the letter; she felt quite sick with dread; and in her anxiety to learn the worst never even noticed the ironic formality over which such pains had been spent” (48). Though the letter she receives says to send someone to Damerel’s estate to make sure Aubrey has all he needs, Venetia is annoyed at the suggestion that she wouldn't take these things to him herself and check he is okay. When Venetia goes to Damerel for advice on what to do when she finds herself in tricky situations, she is mainly concerned with how Aubrey would be affected by her decisions rather than with her own desires, “If I hadn’t had Aubrey to think of I shouldn’t have done it, any more than I should have remained here one day after I came of age” (183). Venetia has a very strong
connection to her family, especially Aubrey, and she lets this influence everything she does. Heyer shows the positive role family has in one's life, but she also suggests that one can't let the love of family keep you from following your ambitions. Venetia would very much not accomplish anything she wanted if it inconvenienced Aubrey too much, or Conway had he not married someone.

Heyer has her main characters go through a kind of character development that is more externally controlled than internally. It's what is going on around the characters, in society, that causes them to evolve into distinct people. Venetia is very sheltered and naive but with her parents gone and when her older brother doesn't return home to step into his role as the first-born son, she steps up as the authority figure in the house. Despite her lack of life experience she is loved and respected by all her servants. She has big plans for her life even though they aren't typical for a girl of her age, “Venetia had been born with a zest for life which was unknown to him, and a high courage that enabled her to look hazards in the face and not shrink from encountering them… She wanted to see what the rest of the world was like: marriage only interested her as the sole means of escape for a gently-born maiden” (28). Venetia’s bold nature is viewed by characters who want her to conform to societal conventions as something she will grow out of once she experiences life instead of it being a part of who she truly is. And with Aubrey and Damerel being the only ones who listen when she speaks her mind and take her seriously, they are the ones that become her closest confidantes. Venetia says to Aubrey “I don’t know why anyone should care, but they all seem to think that because I’ve lived my whole life in this one place I must be a silly innocent with much more hair than wit. I’m glad you don’t, love” (145). She is tired of being seen as an immature girl when she knows the role she is occupying at
Undershaw comes with power and responsibility that is undermined by society because of her gender.

But as Venetia realizes she loves Damerel as more than a “dear friend” and that most of her companions have been trying to keep them apart, Venetia sees that she must take things into her own hands with a little more force in order to have the life she wants. It becomes clear she must do more than speak her mind if she wants to be taken seriously. Venetia is awakened on her London trip to the power social standings have in relation to friendship and marriage, and that she must navigate these tensions with precision if she wants to prevail over society. While plotting a course back to Damerel, Venetia discovers everyone was keeping a major secret from her, solidifying her desire to no longer be the naive girl everyone treats her as and unapologetically stand up for what she wants. Venetia is delighted to learn not only that her mother is alive but also that she can use this information to be with the man she loves, “when I think of all the nonsense that has been talked about my reputation, and my prospects I wonder I am not lying rigid on the floor and drumming my heels! Damerel must have known the truth… There is more of my mama in me than you have the least idea of, and the only eligible husband for me is a rake!” (257). With the discovery of this information and her deployment of it in her favor, Venetia has realized that the world is not like the one she read about in books and poems and that she can't always believe what she's told, especially when it comes from people who have no right to intrude on things that aren't their business. She is represented at the end of the novel not as the naive girl everyone thought her to be but as a headstrong, independent woman because she fought for the man she loved despite the reputation and perception of them both. Venetia understands that she can’t rely on others so much because their intentions may not align with her
beliefs. For readers, this is a valuable lesson because it shows that trusting certain people can lead to them trying to control your life based on things that aren't authentic to yourself.

In the same way that Venetia learns she can’t trust others’ opinions because they may be undependable, Damerel too learns that society is holding him back. Damerel’s character develops through the novel subtly, influenced by the people around him to not let the opinions of society control him. He is only seen as what his bad reputation has painted him out to be and he fully embraces it. He thinks this reputation is the best way to keep people at arm's length due to the guilt he feels about his past mistakes. He indicates to Venetia that his plans were not to stick around in the neighborhood for very long until he met her and his interest in knowing her better was piqued, “I own I had not meant to stay in Yorkshire above a few days, but that was before I made your acquaintance. I am going to remain to the Priory for the present!” (35). But as the novel progresses the reader gets to see that he is not the bad guy society has assumed him to be. As he becomes closer with Aubrey and Venetia he opens up to them and finds it is nice to have some friends that like him enough that he doesn't have to hide behind the mask of his reputation. His feelings for Venetia grow quickly and he changes his plans from a short stay at the Priory to indefinitely because of them. Damerel drunkenly admits to Marston when discussing their future plans, “and don’t ask me when I mean to leave Yorkshire! I can’t tell you. My intention is to remain until Sir Conway Lanyon comes home, but who knows? I might fall out of love as easily as I fell into it: that wouldn’t amaze you, would it” (131). Against his better judgment, and in favor of his newly developed feelings, Damerel is beginning to allow his emotions to control how he lives his life instead of the opinions of society. Marston has never seen him infatuated like this before, “he did know that in all the years he had served his lordship he had never seen
him dangling after such a lady as Miss Lanyon. He had never seen him behave to any of his loves as he was behaving to her” (98). He is showing the reader that Damerel has shifted; where before he didn't care about the women he got involved with, now he cares a great deal, so much so that he doesn't want to stain Venetia because of society’s presumptions about who he is as a person. So when her uncle offers to take her to London with the intention of removing her from Damerel’s proximity, Damerel encourages Venetia to go because he wants her to experience the things she wants while staying in good standing within society. Damerel suppresses his feelings towards her so she can have a chance at a socially acceptable life, sacrificing the hope that had been growing that he would be able to be with her. Recognizing the importance of Aubrey’s well-being to Venetia, Damerel offers to look after him in her absence, “Let him come to me! Tell him he may bring his dogs, and his horses - whatever he chooses! I’ll engage myself to see he comes to no harm, and hand him over to that grinder of his in good trim. If he were here you wouldn't fret yourself to flinders over him, would you?” (211). He keeps this connection to Venetia, through her brother, which will only torture him because he doesn't want to give her up completely yet. He thinks because of his bad reputation he doesn't deserve her so he accepts just being her friend who supports her ambitions and looks out for her when he can. In the end, when Venetia shows up fighting for him Damerel sees her determination in being with him despite the implications that come with marrying him and finally accepts he is worthy of her love.

Overall *Venetia* allows the reader to see characters they find relatable tackle obstacles that may happen to them in the real world, and offers possible ways the reader could face those obstacles. Heyer has her characters learn important lessons that set them on paths that could result in the kind of lives they want to live. Venetia has a strength to her that allows her to break
away from the norms of society the people close to her are trying to get her to stick to. And Damerel finds the strength to allow himself to look forward at how his life could be instead of backward where society has led him to believe he needs to continue to influence his life. Thanks to family and friends both Venetia and Damerel are able to witness the way society keeps people from happiness in life and how they must find within themselves the acceptance of this in order to flourish in life. As the reader witnesses Venetia and Damerel’s journey to love and happiness within a place that tried so hard to control them, the reader is able to learn that change and growth from within can change your life. Looking beyond what year the reader is living in or what novel they are picking up to read there is something for them to learn about themselves and something to learn about society within the pages of the novel.

A century separates Heyer’s *Venetia* from Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*; however, they are both writing on topics that speak to what their readers can relate to. Their novels convey messages on family, personal growth, and societal expectations with their main characters navigating a world that is full of judgment. *Pride and Prejudice* and *Venetia* both fall within the romance genre but they occupy different categories – enemies-to-lovers vs. friends-to-lovers respectively– and therefore operate differently in relation to character transformations. The romance genre is where authors like Austen and Heyer can explore similar character arcs and themes without the stories feeling the same. The genre gives the reader a feeling of comfort and familiarity while delivering completely different novels that include similar conventions. The main characters can be used to represent real-world problems that the reader can symbolically encounter. Venetia and Elizabeth are both headstrong, independent protagonists that go on a journey that affects the way they see themselves and society. Elizabeth discovers that sometimes
her first impression of someone can be wrong and that she shouldn't hold that against them; Venetia discovers that the society she read about in books isn't the one she lives in and that she must look out for herself first. Here, Austen and Heyer have the reader experiencing a growth in the characters that every person goes through at least once in their lives making the novels relatable to a variety of people. The reader is getting to navigate maturation in a safe space knowing that the journey isn't easy and that some mistakes along the way are okay because they offer chances for growth.

Elizabeth and Venetia both have agency over their lives while still being restricted by family and society. Elizabeth is able to have a certain freedom in living her life as long as she marries well so she isn't a financial burden to her family; Venetia as well is able to live her life how she wants to a certain degree while being expected to marry well. They both reject proposals in favor of marrying for love and get rewarded for staying true to themselves by the guy they marry coming with financial security, which was not easy to come by. The reader might interpret this treatment of the protagonists as a message from the authors about the value that can come from following your heart and sticking to your principles. Society’s power over people is something Heyer and Austen are speaking about when they have their main characters challenging the norms of their time and the reader across the years can connect to the desire to live their lives free of outside judgment. Elizabeth shows great care for her family, worrying about them when bad situations arise and wanting to help them however she can; Venetia also cares a great deal about her family, putting a lot of her plans on hold and never making a decision before considering how they would be affected by it. While it is commendable to care so highly for one’s family and be willing to be anything for them, Venetia and Elizabeth are
prevented from attaining the dreams they have because of their families, and Austen and Heyer are stressing to the reader how this can hold you back. Family is a big influence on one’s character and these authors are showing the reader that connection can be good and bad for how one is presented within society.

How characters behave in the social world can have a variety of results, however for Darcy and Damerel because of how they interact with others they were met with primarily negative judgments. As the love interests of the novels, Darcy and Damerel discover that they are worthy of love despite how society labels and views them. Damerel views himself as more than his past mistake and Darcy sees that he needs to let go of his prejudices. They both allow how society perceives them and others to control their potential for love. Their growth as characters gives the reader hope that they too can experience a change within themselves that leads to self-acceptance. Heyer and Austen are conveying to the reader (through the male characters who by society’s standard for men, shouldn't indicate that they have feelings) that being vulnerable and not being afraid of showing your feelings can garner positive results. They are shining a light on what can happen when you don't hide but embrace your feelings and the change they inspire since you are very often acting off of those feelings you are trying to suppress. Austen and Heyer have written complex characters who face situations and feelings that challenge not just their outlooks on life but also the societies they live in. These characters encourage readers to embrace their feelings and bring comfort to them in knowing they are not alone in the struggles they face every day; they see it’s possible to overcome what they once felt they couldn’t. These authors have their characters communicate lessons to the reader that family and personal growth are important to your quality of life and that society's influence shouldn't
keep you from staying true to your beliefs. As Austen and Heyer showcase captivating character arcs surrounding the hope of finding love, their novels also have archetypes that are found throughout different genres of literature that maintain respect in the 21st century.

The contemporary romance genre, and its authors, do not get that respect Austen has because Austen doesn’t have her characters engineering their love matches; when they do characters like Lydia in *Pride and Prejudice* don’t get an explicit happier-ever-after conclusion. Heyer is able to write her characters with more freedom in making decisions because she was not bound to the social conventions of the Regency era like Austen was. The romance genre archetypes Heyer implements are the villain, rake, and rebel, though the interactions between characters manifest themselves differently throughout the novel because the characters are so acquainted with each other. The formation of the character archetypes in *Venetia* and the way they develop throughout the novel is driven by the characters wanting to protect each other from being hurt but the protection isn't always wanted, warranted, or appropriate. The messages may seem similar but they are done in different ways arranging a new interpretation of the romance stories readers love.

The villain archetype in *Venetia* is ideological, represented as social norms being forced onto the characters, such as the importance society places on the conduct and reputation of individuals, expressed through characters that act as gatekeepers to normality. The villain is portrayed through neighbors and family, mainly Lady Denny and Mr Hendred, that try to control Venetia in instances they believe she is naive about and keeps her from what she wants. Lady Denny and the other people living around Undershaw often talk about how different Venetia and her brother are. Lady Denny “decided that notwithstanding the claims of her invalid children it
was her duty to drive over to Undershaw, to see for herself how much truth there was in Oswald's allegations, and if necessary, to take such steps as would bring to an end a very dangerous situation”, believing it is up to her to protect Venetia (137). Lady Denny feels it is her responsibility to keep Venetia on the ‘correct’ path in life because her parents and older brother aren't around. But this leads her to overstep the boundary as a friend many times, preventing Venetia from her desires,

...she abandoned the attempt to bring him to her own way of thinking, merely saying that something must be done, since it was nonsensical to suppose that because Venetia was five-and-twenty she could be trusted to manage her own affairs. No one could be less trusted to do so than a girl who could count on the fingers of one hand the bachelors of her acquaintance, and so might be depended on to fall in love with the first man of practised address who crossed her path. (143)

As close to Venetia as a mother, Lady Denny thinks she has every right to meddle in Venetia’s life, but not only is it none of her business she also never considers or asks what Venetia may want or how she feels. It was because Lady Denny wrote to Mr Hendred that Venetia was getting too close to falling in love with Damerel, on top of Conway's new family pushing Venetia to leave Undershaw and run a house on her own, that Venetia's uncle came to take her to London out of obligation. In the absences of her real parents, Venetia is left to rely on people like Lady Denny and her uncle Mr Hendred to help her navigate the parts of society she is not familiar with, but they never take into account that Venetia is sensible enough to make the right choices for herself.

Lady Denny and the Hendreds paint Damerel to be the villain of the novel but really it's them. They have respectable standings within society and think Venetia should be listening to what they tell her is right and wrong with no opposition. They feel Venetia could be in danger of
becoming like her mother so they try to influence her away from anything that may put her on the same path. Mrs Hendred tells Venetia,

“... I’m sure I don't know how - but that doesn't signify, because Lord Damerel said that he knew well that it would be infamous to take advantage of you, when you knew nothing about the world, and had never been beyond Yorkshire, or met any other men - well only Mr Yardley! - so that you were almost bound to have fallen in love with him, and how could you understand what it would mean to be married to a man of his reputation? And you don’t understand, dear child, but indeed it would be ruinous.” (238)

They think they are protecting Venetia but they are actually harming her. They keep secrets from Venetia thinking they are helping her but they are doing the opposite, pushing her farther from their influence and into her independence. The emphasis they place on reputation is insincere. While they never let her forget that she can't know anything because she hasn't experienced life outside Undershaw they all are okay with her marrying Edward, the only guy outside her family that she's known, yet when she meets someone who she likes, who is thoughtful and has a better estate than Edward, Lady Deny and Mr Hendred claim she is naive, wrong and can't marry him because he is judged and held to the reputation he acquired in his youth. They put all this importance on reputation and societal standings but when considering Edward and Damerel for marriage on paper versus in person the only negative Damerel has is that he perpetuated negative perceptions of his reputation through his interactions with many women. The reader can sympathize with Venetia and Damerel because the circumstances of having someone think they know better than you simply because they are older or more experienced than you that they get to invalidate what you want is really frustrating. Venetia doesn't need protection from herself; she needs protection from people like Lady Denny and Mr Hendred, who assume they know what's best for her.
Characters like Lady Denny and Mr Hendred aren’t the only things that operate from a belief that they know best. In Venetia, the rake archetype is Damerel who was given the label, by society, because of what happened in his youth, not because of his actual personality. Damerel is what one may call the misunderstood rake or the reluctant rake because as a character he doesn't act improperly yet because he made the mistake of loving a married woman and handling the consequences of that terribly he doesn't do much of anything to show his good character. Society has painted him out to be this bad guy because of the perception that he goes around ruining others’ reputations. “He was dangerous; his conduct had been inexcusable; and to meet him again might be demoralising to one who had led so cloistered a life as hers had been,” is how Venetia thought of Damerel before meeting him (41). As he gets to know Venetia and they become friends the reader sees that Damerel is opening up more. His facade begins to slip away, “Perhaps to remind you, my dear, that although I am obliged at this present to behave with all the propriety of a host it’s only a veneer – and God knows why I should tell you so,” and he finds himself being able to be honest with Venetia (89). Damerel and Venetia bond over the fact that they are judged harshly by things from their pasts and once Damerel has fallen for Venetia his actions are focused on protecting her from him rather than fighting for her: “He was taking this affair hard, and that was not like him, for he was an easy lover, engaging lightly in his numerous adventures, foreseeing at the start of each its end, and quite indiscriminating in his choice. He was a charming protector; he would indulge the most exacting of his mistresses to the top of her bent; but no one who had seen his unconcern at parting, or his cynical acceptance of falsity, could doubt that he held women cheap” (131). He actually doesn't view women as disposable but plans things out in order to protect himself from being vulnerable and his heart from being hurt.
He transforms into the hero that sacrifices what gives him hope for happiness in order for Venetia to have a chance at happiness, “I never wished to hurt you. The devil of it was, my dear delight, that you were too sweet, too adorable, and what should have been the lightest and gayest of flirtations turned to something more serious than I intended - or foresaw - or even desired! We allowed ourselves to be too much carried away, Venetia” (208). Damerel admits that falling in love was not what he expected to happen and that acknowledgment of his feelings is what shows he is deserving of Venetia’s love. Damerel ends up with the girl because his love for her has changed him into the best version of himself and because she has fought for them to be together. The reader gets to experience what happens when you let society control how you live your life and how being the best version of yourself despite societal gossip can result in you being rewarded.

The rebel archetype is Venetia who is seen standing up for herself and her agency over how she chooses to live her life. Everyone has opinions about Venetia because she doesn't have a lot of dealings with society outside of her small circle but they forget that “she was five-and-twenty, a woman of superior sense, and calm disposition; and … very well able to take care of herself” (94). In reality, she is only inexperienced when it comes to romantic encounters with men. Even though Venetia fiercely reminds them when they overstep, “Now say what you will, but try to recollect, Edward, that I am my own mistress! You appear to believe that you have authority over me, but you have not, and so I have told you very many times,” Lady Denny and Edward, especially, attempt to hold power over her by invalidating her opinions (273). Repeatedly she speaks her mind yet no one takes her seriously, only her brother and Damerel do. Venetia has strong thoughts, opinions, and plans for herself that are different from the norms of
the society she lives just outside of and she understands that if she were to enter that society she would need to conform, to a certain degree, to them in order to not disrupt the system. Her behavior is summed up, by others, as a lack of understanding of how society functions; however, Venetia does understand society, she just doesn't care about fitting in it, “No be serious, Damerel! you must know I don't care a rush for fair names - witness my pleasure in your company” (183). Her indifference surrounding the influence of reputations and gossip play into her plans to be with Damerel when she considers pleading her case to his aunts and when she meets with her socially disgraced mother. Venetia doesn't care about how things will look to others when it concerns herself and what she wants. At this point in the novel, she actually wants her good name to be scrutinized and ruined because it would make things easier for her to be with the rake Damerel. Venetia has an awareness that she doesn't know everything while also pushing against the expectations she does know to gain the life she believes will bring her happiness. When she realizes the reason Damerel had acted strange during their last visit was because of the efforts of her uncle, not his true emotions, she knows then that they are meant for each other and she won't let anyone stop her from going to him and settling their future together: “But you cannot hope to reestablish my credit, and I would much rather you didn’t make the attempt… you see, it’s my whole life I’m fighting for and I can’t be sure that even now it’s not too late” (275). Venetia is fighting for control over her life in a society full of people who are so concerned about her life instead of living their own. She is being controlled by the people around her and their perception that she needs protection from herself and society, while restricting her within the society so that she is unable to experience and mature within it. But Venetia doesn't let the people who don't understand her true nature keep her independence bottled up to the point
where she ends up unhappy because that's how society works. Venetia inspires readers to follow their hearts and stay true to themselves when their own happiness is on the line because no one knows what's best for you better than yourself.

The romance genre has a lot of archetypes repeatedly used, but these archetypes are often used in different ways in order to tell stories that aren't as formulaic as critics make them out to be. Jane Austen and Georgette Heyer are authors that employ the same archetypes but with different outcomes. Both Austen and Heyer have the main couple's villains as societal expectations represented via status and reputation. Certain characters in their respective novels are designated to work to keep the couple from being together by using positions held within society as leverage. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the villain is personified as Lady Catherine, who explicitly stands in the way of Elizabeth and Darcy being together because they are from different social classes. In *Venetia*, Venetia has a similar stance on society's thoughts on a person, not caring what is said about a person and instead caring about what she is shown of their character. Lady Denny and Mr Hendred step in to keep Venetia from Damerel because he has a bad reputation despite him acting with propriety toward her. Heyer and Austen have their villains think that they are protecting the protagonists when in reality they are only concerned with protecting themselves.

Heyer and Austen’s use of the rake archetype is done differently: one is rewarded and one is punished. For Heyer, she has her rake Damerel ultimately rewarded not only because he is the hero of the novel but also because he changes to accept the love he thought he was unworthy of. Austen has her rake character Wickham punished because of his fundamental selfish nature that leaves him unopen to changing for the better as a person let alone changing for love. Now
while both rakes end up married by the end of their respective novels, it is implied that Damerel will have a happy fulfilling life because he truly loves the woman he is with as opposed to Wickham who will live a bleak life with a woman he was convinced to marry for appearances. Austen and Heyer have the main protagonist as their rebel archetype, standing out from society with their blatant indifference for the opinions of others and their tendency to speak their minds. Elizabeth and Venetia are both headstrong characters who challenge the societal norms of their novels that say women must behave in certain ways. One reason Elizabeth is the rebel is because she rejects two marriage proposals because she is steadfast in her desire to marry someone who will make her happy and she will accept nothing less. Venetia is the rebel for the opposite reason: she doesn’t dream of marrying for love but desires to set up her own house with her younger brother in the city and only intends to marry for convenience, of course until she falls in love with Damerel. Venetia and Elizabeth have the freedom to shape their futures in a society that didn't see many women of their status being able to do the same and that leads them to be lovable and relatable characters. Austen and Heyer’s endearing characters that follow their hearts is how their novels come to be considered good romance novels because these characters are complex and convey the navigation of emotions that are equally complex. The reader is able to be transported to a new world and vicariously experience their fantasies in a safe way.
Chapter 3: Twenty-first Century Connections

Entering the Twenty-first century, the romance genre includes similar patterns used by Austen and Heyer. The social commentary, character development, family influences, and use of archetypes are incorporated into the fictional stories told as a way for the author and reader to tackle personal issues of the real world. These fictional stories have a value that should be recognized beyond readers of the genre. Colleen Hoover is a modern romance author who explores meaningful topics with her novels and *Confess* is one that deals with obstacles everyone can relate to, like overbearing loved ones and societal principles. Hoover follows in the footsteps of Austen and Heyer by creating a relatable story with loveable characters who have complexity in their motivations. She has characters who embody the romance genre archetypes – the villain, the rake, and the rebel – while also facing how family and character development can play an influential role in their lives that the reader encounters. Hoover modernized these conventions to fit the conditions of the society of the 21st century reader.

The influence of family in the novel *Confess* affects how the characters make important life decisions. The dynamic between parent and child is challenged with the main characters having to step up as parents due to the loss of loved ones and having children of their own and having to grow up quickly as a result. After the loss of his mother and brother, Owen Gentry was left to watch his father struggle with depression and drug abuse. Owen has gone from son to caretaker to supplier for a man who used to be his father, “I saw the life seep right out of his eyes. And I haven’t seen it return since the night it happened” (108). He felt it was his duty to step up and help his father make it through each day even when it put his future at risk. It’s not
until Owen takes the fall for his father's reckless behavior and goes to jail because of it that
Owen realizes something needs to change if the relationship between him and his father has any
hope of getting better in the future, “I’m enabling, and I’ve been doing it for years. And now I’m
paying the ultimate price…” (135). Owen needs his father to want to get help in order to be a
part of his life as well as keep his career as a lawyer. Owen tells his father, “You’re killing
yourself, and I won’t let the guilt of seeing you suffer excuse the things I do for anymore…I’ve
been waiting for years. I don’t have anything else left in me to give” (157). Owen is tired of his
father not realizing the damage his drug problem is causing to their relationship as father and
son. Owen allows his family to keep him from completely pursuing his dreams but with the
prospect of love in play, he has to set aside his love for his family in order to fight for a chance
of love with Auburn. Hoover is exploring what happens when one’s family negatively influences
your life similarly to Austen having Elizabeth deal with her family’s behavior, mainly her sister
Lydia, negatively impact her life. Austen’s embarrassing family behavior is raised by Hoover to
include the more contemporary problem of drug use to show the reader what strength is needed
to overcome family by finding your voice and standing up for yourself and your life.

Hoover sets up the main characters to develop internally through the acceptance of their
flaws that are acknowledged by other characters. Auburn begins the novel dealing with the loss
of her first love, Adam, and trying to establish her independence with his family and confidence
within herself. She had her son at 15 and, believing she was doing what was best, gave custody
to Adam's family while she lived with them and finished going to school. Five years later she has
done everything Lydia, the grandmother to Auburn’s son, has asked her to but Auburn still isn't
respected enough to be trusted with the responsibility of taking on a more prominent role with
her son. Auburn puts others’ advice about what is best for her son above her own ideas and knowing she wants more for herself she learns that she must take things into her own hands and fight for her future with her son: “I’m at the point where I don’t care what it takes to get more time with AJ; I just need it…I’ll do whatever it takes to get my son back” (127). Because of Owen, Auburn realizes she is a strong good mother and that she is capable of standing up to Lydia to be given the responsibility she’s asking for, “And in those four years, Owen is the first person to ever say anything that makes me feel like I’m capable of being a good mother” (109). Auburn must force Lydia to see that even though she has had custody of AJ most of his life Auburn has been there as his mother and should be able to take care of him. Auburn gets a lawyer involved in her plans and manipulates Lydia telling her, “he’s my son, Lydia. He needs to be with me. And if I have to use your son against you in order to get my son back, then so help me God, I will” (203). Auburn is done being walked all over when it comes to spending time with her son and with the help of Owen building her confidence she was able to achieve what she set her mind to. Hoover is showing that sometimes the strength one has within needs to be seen and brought out by someone else. Readers can relate to this and may even read romances like Confess to be inspired by the self-confidence and growth the main character experiences to know they can do it in their own life.

The villain archetype is represented by Lydia and Trey who use the power they have to control and manipulate Auburn's actions under the guise of protecting AJ. Lydia is keeping Auburn from her son and Trey is keeping her from being with Owen and using his relationship with AJ as a reason for her to be in a relationship with him. Lydia continuously shows no empathy towards Auburn, not caring when missing their meetings or phone calls, or blaming
Auburn when things go wrong. Auburn doesn’t do anything wrong to warrant the treatment she receives from Lydia but Auburn believes it stems from the end of Adam’s life, “I don’t think she liked how Adam felt about me, and I certainly know she didn’t like the amount of time he wanted to spend with me” (145). Adam loved Auburn and wanted to spend his final days with her, but Lydia wanted the time for herself and sent Auburn away. And while Auburn just wants to spend more time with her son, Lydia only sees her as an inconvenience, as an obstacle getting in the way of her life with her grandson. Because Auburn is a young first-time mother, Lydia uses that, along with the official custody she has of him, against her to control access to AJ. Lydia says it's all done in order to protect AJ but even Owen notices that the way Lydia treats Auburn is manipulative, “I can tell you that what I just witnessed was a woman who takes advantage of your insecurities” (109). Lydia isn't the only one using her position to control Auburn and her time with AJ, Trey is as well.

Lydia’s son Trey is also a villain because he wields his power to manipulate both of the main characters to selfishly get what he wants. Trey uses his power as a cop over Owen and his influence with his mother over Auburn. Trey is able to paint Owen to be the bad guy, a rake ruining Auburn’s life because of the mistakes Owen has made, but really the bad guy is Trey. He exploits his power as a cop to intimidate Owen to stay away from Auburn going to see him in jail to send a message: “He stared at me for several minutes without saying a word. I stared back. I don’t know if he thought his mere presence alone was enough intimidation, but he never did speak. Just sat in the chair for ten solid minutes, staring at me” (150). Trey sees Owen as a threat to his future with Auburn and does whatever is necessary to keep him away from her. Trey even broke into Owen’s studio to set him up for possession and send him back to jail, mocking Owen
and Auburn when they confront him, “And who will they believe? The addict and the whore who got pregnant at fifteen? Or the cop?” (195). From the outset, Trey, like his mother, makes comments that lead Auburn to feel inadequate as a mother, and he uses that insecurity of hers to push his own agenda. He convinces Auburn to look past his aggressive outbursts and argues that he is her best option to get Lydia to allow her more time with AJ. When he feels he is losing her to Owen, he takes things into his own hands by falsely taking Owen to jail a second time and blackmailing her to go along with his plan if she wants to see her son – “I suggest if you want to continue being the half-assed mother you are to my nephew, you’ll say whatever the fuck I tell you to say” (197). Trey is definitely operating as a villain because of his use of his position as a cop to get Owen and Auburn to comply with what he thinks is best for his life with no regard for them. Hoover is using the villain archetype similar to the way Heyer uses Lady Denny and Mr Hendred in Venetia. Auburn is controlled by people close to her who think they know best because of the knowledge they believe is superior to her natural instincts.

The rebel archetype is represented by Auburn and her determination to do whatever it takes to get what she wants, which is to play a larger role in her son's life. Auburn was brave to decide at such a young age to become a mother and make the subsequent choice of signing away custody while she finished growing up. Now that she has finished school she wants nothing more than to be with her son as much as possible and is trying to show Lydia that she is capable if just given the chance. Auburn rebels by continuing to be a part of her child's life, despite having no legal responsibility for him. She shows her strength and determination by facing obstacles every day to get more time with her son and showing that she is willing to do whatever it takes to be with him. For example, in the aftermath of the situation with Trey trying to force himself onto
her, she tells Owen, “I have to do whatever I can to keep my relationship with my son intact. If that includes forgiving Trey and having to apologize to him for what happened between you and me… then that's what I have to do” (186). Even after the scary situation of Trey physically assaulting her, Auburn found herself willing to put that aside to be with AJ. Auburn also shows her independent nature when she takes action against Lydia and Trey to restore the lives they have been controlling. Auburn goes to someone with power and uses them to blackmail Lydia and Trey about custody of her son and freeing Owen from jail, “If you sign the custody papers and Trey drops the charges against Owen, I won't forward the e-mail that contains this conversation to every single officer in Trey’s precinct” (203). Auburn strengthens her backbone to force them to take her seriously and see that she has what it takes to use their downfall to her advantage since their endless manipulation is what drove her to take this action. Her repeated efforts to be clear in what she desired were ignored, much like Venetia and Elizabeth in their respective novels, leaving Auburn to take drastic measures to shape her life to be what she wants it to be. Hoover adapts the rebel archetype to show the reader that standing up to authority that takes power too far can be rewarding and have positive results.

In Confess Owen is the rake archetype operating similarly to how Damerel did in Venetia; he goes along with what others paint him out to be because it is easier than trying to show that he is different. Owen feels that he must protect Auburn from him even though that leaves him unprotected, and he therefore makes sacrifices that put his happiness in jeopardy. He tells Auburn “I may be the one with the criminal record, but he’s the one you should be careful of,” indicating to her that her perception of him and Trey are not entirely what they seem and she should be cautious of who she gets close to (121). Similar to the previous rake figures discussed,
his feelings and hope regarding Auburn inspire Owen to fight for Auburn to get what she wants. When she calls him out for not reporting the break-in at his studio, he tells her it's “only because I’ve ruined my credibility” and that it would look pathetic for him to make accusations like that against the police (186). He hates seeing her selflessly give in to bad circumstances in order to be close to her son when she deserves more – in the same way that he knows he deserves more but can’t because of his decisions: “She’s telling herself that I don’t understand because I’ve never been in her position. She thinks all the mistakes I’ve made in the past were made out of selfishness, rather than complete selflessness” (186). Owen has sacrificed a lot for the people he cares about, but nothing more valuable than his reputation. Trey, making the case to Auburn, says “Owen has a criminal record. I don’t know what kind of hold he has over you, but you can’t blame me for thinking about the safety of your son, Auburn. You can’t be upset that I’m trying to do what’s best by getting him out of your life, so you can focus on AJ” (200). Owen’s bad reputation is the result of him trying to protect the people he loves but because he caught the attention of some powerful people, like Trey, Owen has been met with consequences for his selfless actions. Again we see the villain of the story trying to use who they believe is the rake against the protagonist to get what they want. But the rake proves to be the better person and is rewarded for sticking to what they believe no matter what others perceive them to be.

The opinions of others impact a lot of characters but no more than the main characters and when Auburn stands up for herself the reader can see a connection to Elizabeth and Venetia as both heroines and rebels. Auburn takes a similar journey of growth that Elizabeth and Venetia take where they all realize their independence and strength can be used to achieve their dreams. Auburn isn’t a rebel archetype with the same ideals as Elizabeth and Venetia, but she is like them
in facing any obstacles that get in her way and fighting against the people who try to hold her back. Auburn learns that her impression of people can’t always be trusted and, like Elizabeth, she must address her mistake of believing the false intentions of certain characters. Additionally, Auburn is like Venetia in showing her determination to be with her love interest and the way she orchestrates them being able to be together in the end. Auburn shows how she is willing to do whatever it takes for her life to turn out how she wants it to be, just like Elizabeth and Venetia. Their independence and resilience is what draw the male leads to them.

Notably the heroines of these novels are not the only characters who have insecurities that need to be faced, the rake and villain archetypes also exhibit complex characteristics they find themselves dealing with throughout the novels. Owen is misunderstood like Darcy and Damerel, due to what motivated the decisions he made and how those decisions affect his chances for happiness. Like Darcy, Owen wants to remedy his past and be a better person to be worthy of the love interest of the novel, and like fellow rake Damerel, Owen is willing to sacrifice his happiness and future in order for her to be happy and achieve the dreams she worked towards for a long time. Alternatively, Lydia may be able to get away with acting out of love and care but it’s expressed in a way that stands in the way of the protagonists' success like previous examples of the villain archetypes in Heyer and Austen’s novels, Lady Denny and Lady Catherine respectively. They believe they are acting with the best intentions but those intentions ultimately hurt and hinder the main character from the people they love the most. There is no sacrifice in their actions towards the main character, just conceited motivations. Trey is a villain in doing whatever he wanted for himself with no real regard for others. He only cares about how things will affect him, really leaning into the rake category with how selfish and manipulating he
is but staying as the villain because he is a major obstacle in the way of the couple being together. The character archetypes operate similarly and differently across these three romance novels but still leave an impact on the reader.

Hoover’s work covers issues that the reader may be seeing or experiencing in the real world. There are life lessons and challenging concepts in Hoover’s work that can be taught to students to develop their critical thinking and analytical skills, just like in the works of Austen and Heyer. Hoover has the ability to occupy the academic and social spaces with respect because she employs the themes and archetypes that Austen and Heyer used with her own authorial touch. The romance genre gives the reader a feeling of comfort and familiarity while delivering completely different plot lines that include similar conventions. The main characters are used by the authors to represent real-world problems that the reader can vicariously encounter. These novels, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Venetia*, and *Confess*, share conventions of the contemporary romance genre, but each novel develops these conventions in different ways.

Romance can paint a more pleasing picture than reality; it can be a fantasy that brings comfort when the reader is in an unfulfilled place physically or mentally. Janice Radway sees contemporary romance fiction as “an intensely felt but insufficiently met need for emotional nurturance” (119). Suppose an autobiography can be used to share knowledge about someone else’s life and be on *The New York Times* bestseller list. Why can’t a romance sharing the life of a fictional character who happens to fall in love have the same respect given when that novel makes the same list? Both genres can elicit emotions from readers, offer opportunities to gain knowledge, and allow readers to experience something new. Yet the autobiography is considered
realistic and beneficial to readers while the romance is thought of as mere ‘fantasy,’ a story so unrealistic it is considered to be unattainable in the real world and consequently devalued. When evaluating the value of novels, it is better to look at how they affect readers’ emotions and perspectives, rather than how “realistic” they are.

Reading fiction provides an escape into a new world, for the reader is leaving reality and entering a fantasy. The experience can be relaxing, exciting, and educational. The author is creating characters that the reader is able to connect to and embody to face internal and external struggles. Anyone can relate to wanting to escape their life, and the romance genre can bring to life desires that don't occur in reality; fantasies are discovered, new places explored, and emotions felt that may not be attainable to the everyday person. I read contemporary romance to escape reality and to experience things unavailable to me, especially to experience through the main characters a love so strong it conquers all. I, like most romance readers, want to know that the things we desire and fantasize about aren't as unrealistic as society makes them out to be. As Roach argues, “Romance is fantasy in the sense of pleasure and escape from reality, where true love does not always conquer all nor heal all wounds—key premises of the romance narrative. But more specifically, romance does deep psychic work for its readers by functioning as a fantasy antidote to patriarchy, to the extent that it is still a man’s world out there…” (9). Readers don’t definitively need a true love match to happen to them in the real world, they just want to be able to believe that that kind of love is possible. Being able to experience something not readily available in our society is one of many reasons romance fiction is so popular and why women are the main target demographic. Women are often left disappointed with the type of recognition and affection they receive, and romances give them the chance to vicariously experience what they
are missing through the main characters of romance novels. Knowing how the story will end and
that they will get what they desire from reading the romance means that the readers of these
novels will always walk away feeling happy, satisfied, hopeful, and comforted.

In the fight for acceptance and respect in society, women are set up never to reach the
proverbial finish line. Society influences what we should eat, how we should view ourselves,
what we should do, and what/who we should love. Men didn't, and don't, want to lose the power
and control they have in society so when women start to do something like writing a good
romance novel, or gaining success not connected to a man, then society tries to suppress them or
paint whatever they are doing as a bad thing. Roach asserts, “It is the foundational premise of
hetero-normative masculinist culture: that a woman must be under the protection of a man,
yoked to him and to at least some extent in his control” (6). And so it makes sense that as the
romance genre gained popularity within society and with primarily women readers, men and
society began painting the genre to be something inherently negative. Society has branded
reading romance fiction as something to be ashamed of – so much so that readers hide when they
read it or lie when asked about what's on their e-readers. Being able to explore and experience
new places and feelings should be viewed as a good thing, and by reading one can find a story
that evokes emotions not felt on a daily basis.

Society likes to profit off of women and their successes but doesn't like giving those
women recognition or praise for creating something that is popular. Contemporary romance
fiction is not truly respected even though it dominates sales at publishing houses like Harper
Collins and Penguin Random House, and rises to such success that some romance bestsellers are
optioned to be adapted into different forms of media. So while enjoying romance novels is still
not something women can freely do without negative connotations plaguing them, big companies get to exploit the benefits of romance fiction. Jane Austen’s novels are considered literature because they are looked at with higher standards as part of the literary canon and thought of as challenging, unlike novels by authors like Georgette Heyer or Colleen Hoover. The more modern contemporary romances are thought of as simple and unchallenging by scholars and critics resulting in the predominantly women readers feeling ashamed of reading something they enjoy.

There is a lot that goes into writing a compelling enjoyable romance and there are many reasons why someone chooses to pick up a romance novel yet society asserts the inclusion of sex to be the only reason someone would want to read romance. Romance fiction is capable of being so much more if only scholars, critics, and society would give it a real chance because “romance reading triggers a more complex reaction than straightforward happiness—and that this reaction might have something to do with the desire to read more romance” (Goris 4). The desire to read novels within the romance genre can be much more than just wanting to read a love story for readers and these novels tackle serious themes that can be analyzed by students.

In this thesis, I have put the love story aspect aside to focus on the more thought-provoking ways a romance novel can operate. These authors I have been discussing are doing more than writing about two characters who fall in love. Their novels span across three centuries – the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries – which functioned differently in terms of female agency, but Austen, Heyer, and Hoover were able to write stories that follow heroines who challenge what it means to have agency over one’s life. Heyer and Hoover’s freedom to write independent heroines came from social expectations of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries for women being changes enough that their “ruined” characters find and achieve
redemption and love while Austen’s nineteenth century “ruined” character is literally and metaphorically isolated. They all are bringing to light societal norms that aren’t always perfect; they are showing how similar social and ideological pressures are affecting the characters and their lives; they are including major conventions and archetypes of the genre that speak to how and why certain characters act in certain ways. Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* challenges female education to be something more meaningful than just playing the pianoforte and dancing. Austen shows that women have ideas and opinions of their own fostered by learning, and reading. She highlights the influence of family on her characters revealing who finds family important, which characters tend to take advantage of their family, and how family impacts their lives. Heyer’s *Venetia* explores gender expectations society has set in place for young women living in the city and in the country, where they must always have someone acting as a chaperone. With the theme of family, Heyer emphasizes how her characters’ care for family can get in the way of them experiencing and living their lives to the fullest. And Hoover’s *Confess* spotlights how family can be a character’s worst enemy and the need to distance from them in order to be truly happy. *Pride and Prejudice, Venetia,* and *Confess* all have the archetypes of the villain, the rake, and the rebel, with the author of each novel having the characters play into and sometimes against what is anticipated. Austen represents the rebel archetype by seeing Elizabeth Bennett always speaking her mind and then standing up to Lady Catherine about how she intends to live her life with no regard for others’ opinions. Heyer gives her rake archetype Damerel a happy ending with *Venetia* after accepting he is more worthy of her love than the dangerous man society had him believing he was, which is different than Austen’s rake Wickham who had a rougher time being married to someone he doesn’t fully love. Hoover had one of her villains, Trey, act with his own
intentions in mind so much so that insulting her wasn’t the worst thing he did to Auburn. Where insults were the worst thing Austen and Heyer’s villains Lady Catherine and Lady Denny did, usually acting off of the misplaced desire to protect a main character. Not every archetype will operate in the same way as the author will often need the characters to do certain things to push the narrative of the novel forward.

While the characters falling in love with each other was not my main focus that doesn't mean it doesn't hold an important part of a reader's desire to read novels from the genre. I believe that the contemporary romance genre has more to it than love and the critics who paint it in a negative light can begin to give the contemporary romance genre the chance it deserves to prove its value as good literature. All one has to do is be mindful to look for that value. These romance novels check the boxes on what good literature and good romance are, scholars and critics just have to take the first step of accepting romance into more spaces like the academic one in order to expose more people to the genre’s potential for lasting genuine respect. I have demonstrated that there are conventions, themes and narrative techniques that are present in romance novels that can be used to foster critical and analytical thinking skills in students. Austen, Heyer, and Hoover write their romance novels differently bringing unique value to readers and students. Each author is able to produce a novel that showcases characters who are strong, independent, and relatable in their motivations, beliefs, determination, feelings toward others, and self-reflection. The messages and skills that students could be gaining from the work the authors of romance novels are doing is being impeded by the stigmas that undermine the genre within society. If we open our minds to see the value in contemporary romance fiction, then readers and students can have the chance to be affected in positive ways.
Bibliography


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