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25

The Traditional Romance Formula

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Romances are based on a traditional formula, which has many variations:

1. A girl, our heroine, meets a man, our hero, who is above her socially and who is wealthy and worldly.
2. The hero excites the heroine but frightens her sexually.
3. She is usually alone in the world and vulnerable.
4. The hero dominates the heroine, but she is fiery and sensual, needing this powerful male.
5. Though appearing to scorn her, the hero is intrigued by her and pursues her sexually.
6. The heroine wants love, not merely sex, and sees his pursuit as self-gratification.
7. The two clash in verbal sparring.
8. In holding to her own standards, the heroine appears to lose the hero. She does not know he respects her.

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9. A moment of danger for either main character results in the realization on the part of the hero or heroine that the feeling between them is true love.
10. A last-minute plot twist threatens their relationship.
11. The two finally communicate and admit their true love, which will last forever.

Why is the reader fascinated by this formula? It tells her that she can have the romance she was brought up to believe in; that her life can be exciting and happy; that she is desirable sexually; that true love lasts forever.

The novels also fulfill her sexual fantasies. Throughout each romance she can imagine taming a devilish man who first lusts for her, then respects and loves her. She doesn't mind knowing the outcome of the plot. In fact, she wants to. It's the satisfying ending she wants to believe in. The formula is unbeatable.

FIRST STEP—THE TIP SHEET

Each publisher has a different approach to the category, so you as a writer must send a self-addressed, stamped envelope (SASE) to the publisher of your choice, asking for a tip sheet that will give you that publisher's requirements. Your letter will be addressed to the editor of that particular series, for example: Editor, Candlelight Ecstasy Books, Dell Publishing Company, etc. You can get the publishers' addresses either from the reference book *Literary Market Place (LMP)* in your library or from the current *Writer's Market* in your local bookstore.

A good tip sheet will tell you the requirements for a certain publisher. Some sheets are much more detailed than others. If, for instance, you want to write a Gothic romance, you will be told to omit the occult, or to use the occult, or to have any ghostly happenings explained away logically. The ages of the hero and heroine will be specified. You will be told what type of heroine is desired and whether first- or third-person point of view is preferred. If a second man or woman is to figure in the story, you will be informed of this and the role that character will play. The location, in general, will be suggested, as will the amount of sex that is permissible. Finally, you will learn the precise number of words your story is to be. Since each editor's needs vary, the tip sheet is essential to the writer.

Most publishing companies put out a tip sheet for each romance line they handle. Some editors of contemporary lines say that tip sheets are a thing of the past. They prefer to *tell* authors what they want or to send "guidelines." Don't be dismayed. No matter what form the requirements take, formula romances are just that. Discarding tip sheets and pretending no formula exists or calling the novels "mini-mainstream" does not make blockbusters out of series romances. . . .

THE HEROINE'S IDENTITY

Who will your heroine be? How old is she? What is her status— orphan, governess, actress, president of a firm? What goal in life is she working toward, or what problem is she trying to sort through? This goal or problem helps to give her an identity and an interest other than the hero. She is a cheerful, spunky person, quite all right without the hero; but he enters, he adds perfection. To appear strong, she must start with a life outside that with the hero, and her goal must not be to find him.

If the heroine has been widowed or divorced, the pain of that experience should usually be out of the way. If the former husband is in the picture, she is over her love for him and feels some other emotion, such as pity. The reader does not want to be reminded of "lost love" but rather of "new love."

An old lover or even the villain, who has earlier raped the heroine, may have affected her psychologically; and sexual tension may result as the hero tries to overcome her resistance. However, the heroine usually is readily able to put a past romance or rape from her mind and approach the future in high spirits.

THE HEROINE'S VULNERABILITY

The heroine of most romances is vulnerable. She is often much smaller than the hero, tiny against his massive frame. If she is tall, like some of Georgette Heyer's Regency heroines, he is usually taller. The suggestion is always present that he could, if he so desired, rape her; that she is in his power.

A hero is rarely short, but Anne McCaffrey in *Ring of Fear* has been able to portray a short hero who is masculine and masterful:

I was close enough now to see the light dusting of black hair on his tanned arms and across the muscular plane of his chest, making a thin line down the ridge of the diaphragm muscles, disappearing into the excuse for a bikini he was wearing, which barely covered nature's compensation for his lack of stature.

There was a satisfied expression in his eyes when I jerked mine back from where propriety decreed a well-bred miss ought not to look. He looked suddenly so knowing, so smug, that he was no longer an *objet d'art*, but man, male, masculine. . . .

He soon shows that he is able to rape her if he wishes.

To add to the drama of the heroine's vulnerability, she usually is alone in the world, with few people to depend upon. Also, few people, if any, would ask questions if she were to disappear. This isolation creates suspense.

In Kay Thorpe's *Lord of La Pampa* (Harlequin Presents), the blond heroine from England has not made connections with her dance troupe in Argentina. She signs on as a cocktail waitress, only to learn that she is expected to

entertain the men more intimately. The hero rescues her by buying her time then asks her to marry him so he can collect his rightful inheritance. She is alone in the world. What can she do? He reminds her that the nightclub owner has taken her on his payroll:

"... he will expect suitable return. Should it be denied him he may find other ways of extracting a profit. You have heard of the white slave traffic?"

Giving the heroine no choice in the matter keeps the reader sympathetic toward her. The sexual undertones of this scene are obvious, and it is dramatic to think she has just been saved only to be victimized.

If the heroine has a supportive family, its members are usually geographically remote, making it easier for the hero to hire or abduct or marry the heroine. The family may simply be financially unable to help the daughter, as in Richardson's *Pamela* in which the parents lack power to confront the gentleman abductor.

The youthfulness of the heroine can also add to her vulnerability. To the hero's thirty or thirty-five, she can be as young as seventeen, too young to have had a past. This age difference helps to ensure that she is a virgin, and the suggestion is that she is therefore more desirable and, again, more vulnerable.

In some romances, especially contemporaries such as Dell's Candlelight Ecstasy line, the heroine is not a virgin. This fact does not mean that she has experienced the ultimate in love. Her earlier sexual experiences could have been unsatisfactory because of a lack in the husband or lover. Even if her sexual experiences have been satisfactory, no man's lovemaking can compare to that of the hero. . . .

THE COMPLEX HERO

The setting and the heroine help to dictate who the hero will be, and he comes rapidly onto the scene. Though he is usually about ten years older than the heroine, this does not always need to be the case. In Jocelyn Day's *Glitter Girl* (Jove Second Chance at Love), the hero and heroine were in school together and knew each other well before the heroine married a wealthy man and moved away. Now she is back in town, where her first love has become financially successful. But does he trust her to love him for himself rather than for his wealth? Here their similar age is effective.

In period pieces, an age difference is more natural than in a contemporary story. Also, in the Harlequin Romance type of story, the young innocent needs someone older on whom to depend. In the racier contemporary, an age difference is no longer necessary. The heroine portrayed as older is more likely to have a career and is less likely to need an older man to direct her. Today, the two leads can come together as equals.

That the hero is wealthy is never what basically attracts the heroine. But, let's face it, a rich man is the man he is because he has had the power to make money, so that power drive is part of what attracts her.

The hero is a combination of Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* and Rhett Butler in *Gone With the Wind*. He appears proud, disdainful, certainly sure of himself, strong, and virile. His outer demeanor cloaks a man who is complex and, most important, loving. But his gentle nature has been carefully masked, perhaps because life has jaded him, perhaps because he carries a deep hurt from the past. Here is mystery.

The chemical reaction between hero and heroine is at once apparent to the reader. Laura London describes Katie's meeting the hero in *The Bad Baron's Daughter* (Dell Candlelight Regency):

He was the most attractive man Katie had ever seen. Once, as a little girl, when Katie's father had been teaching her how to ride, typically on far too large and temperamental a horse for her tiny size, he had sent her to jump a five-barred gate. The horse had refused, sending Katie flying to the ground with a force that drove the air from her lungs. She felt that same breathless confusion now, as the crowd parted to allow her a clear line of sight.

The sensuality of the horse imagery adds to the power of the description.

At this stage of a story, the hero and heroine feel worlds apart. He looks down on her as an utter innocent—or a schemer, for such goodness cannot possibly ring true to him. She, on the other hand, sees the hero as one who scorns her for her youth or lack of position, or some other reason of which she is unaware.

His scorn for her is apparent mainly through his smiles, which are *mocking, caustic, ironic, sardonic, superior, and/or frustrating*. His sensuous lips are continually curling into one of the above. However, you needn't always define the smile. When Thomas in *The Reluctant Duke* comes to propose to Catherine, he cannot help noticing her younger sister, Julia:

While this exchange was going on, the Duke raised his quizzing glass to look more closely at this younger sister who appeared so lively. The mother thought she caught a slight smile on his lips, but what it meant she could not tell.

As the romance progresses, the heroine often depends upon the hero, whether wishing to or not. If she is in danger, she is sometimes saved in spite of herself. She usually sees *him* as the danger and often sees another man as the one who can help her. That she has the situation reversed is obvious to the reader.

How can the reader trust the hero, even though the heroine does not? Obviously, we can recognize him anywhere. The more sadistic he acts, the more certain we are that there is a heart of gold (not to mention a bank account) beneath the surface. . . .

No matter how she reacts, the hero must save her from some unfortunate situation, such as a fire or other accident, or he might save her from her own misconceptions. Sometimes he saves her from both. Often, she saves *him* at some point in the story. . . .

RAPE AND NEAR-RAPE

The most innocent of romances implies that the hero, if he so desires, can rape the heroine. The reader must be aware that the hero is free to do with the heroine as he likes. His size in comparison to hers helps to remind us that he is in control. That he doesn't take advantage of her characterizes him and shows how truly he loves her.

Often the two are entirely alone, as in Barbara Cartland's *Touch a Star* (Jove). During an elaborate Venetian party, the hero takes the heroine to a deserted island on his estate. No help would be forthcoming were she to need it. So the setting in itself creates some suspense while adding to the reader's sexual fantasy.

In Kathleen E. Woodiwiss's *Ashes in the Wind* the heroine, Alaina, fears the hero. "They were in the house alone, and there was no one to stop him if he chose to take her again." Notice that their situation is spelled out for us.

In most romances there is a touch of sadomasochism. The plot in which the husband or lover rapes his wife or loved one and she enjoys it is not uncommon. Woodiwiss gives us such a scene in *Ashes in the Wind*, in which the hero, Cole Latimer, intoxicated, ravishes Alaina, who makes an unsuccessful attempt to stop him. That she desires him, too, is evident. Moreover, since Cole is drunk, he is not in complete control of his actions. This intoxication is a way of including him in a rape scene and minimizing his responsibility so that the heroine—and readers—can remain sympathetic to him. Moreover, we do not blame the heroine for losing her virtue.

Another familiar plot is one in which the hero holds the heroine captive with the constant threat of rape, a threat that she, while claiming to abhor, actually finds exciting, even fascinating. Violet Winspear in *Palace of the Pomegranate* (Harlequin Presents) goes so far as to have her heroine whisked across the Persian sands by the mysterious Kharim Khan. In one scene, after undressing the heroine so she will not get a desert chill, and roughly drying her with a towel, he says:

"You deserve the taste of the whip, my little filly, rather than petting—but come, why be shy with me any more? I know how beautiful you are, and you know that I don't intend to let you go. Be kissed instead of bruised. It is far more pleasant, for you, for me."

As he caresses her, she fights back "with all the desperation of a little animal." This fiery spirit fascinates the hero; and out of such tauntings and strugglings comes an ending of true and lasting love. It is just such animal imagery and the idea that the hero loves the heroine because she is beautiful

that cause some to condemn the romance as degrading to women and others to read romances.

Near-rapes by the wrong man are also described in a sensuous manner, but he is described in far different terms than is the hero. The villain's breath is disgusting and his kisses wet in Granbeck's *Maura*:

His weight was overpowering. She was thrown back to the bed and he fell on her, pinning her arms. His mouth searched wetly. When his lips brushed her cheek, she twisted away. His sour breath sickened her and the intimacy of his body on hers was obscene.

When it is the hero who is drunk and rapes the heroine, Woodiwiss writes about "the brandy taste of his mouth." The touch of the hero's body is desirable even though feared.

The reader must not feel disgusted by the actual rape scene. Early in the "bodice-ripper" romance plot, the heroine is usually raped by the hero; and we must remain sympathetic with both characters. In such scenes, the writer must be especially careful to motivate the actions of the two. These rapes are more acts of passion than of violence, and we mustn't feel as we would while reading about an actual rape.

Though the reader feels good about the scene, the heroine feels guilt and anger. Her emotions make her at odds with the hero, who has caused her to lose control. She will show him she doesn't need him (since she has just shown him that she does). Her pride has been hurt. She also has been reminded of feelings she has not been aware of or has been repressing. Now her confusion of feelings is uppermost in her mind, and she resents the one who has caused such doubt.

AROUSING THE READER

Romance writers use strong adjectives and verbs to draw the reader into the love scene. As you write, try adjectives such as *burning*, *hungering*, *throbbing*, *exploding*, or *scalding*. Forget the verb *to be*. Instead, try verbs that convey action or emotion such as *plunged*, *stroked*, *caressed*, *quivered*, *writhed*, *pressed*, *searched*, *arched*, and *moaned*, to name a few.

When passion subsides and contentment follows, the pace slows and less dynamic verbs take the place of explosive ones. Pacing is important in sex scenes. You as writer may move from short, abrupt sentences to lyrical metaphors to slower-paced moments in which the couple can languorously enjoy each other.

Breathless interjections can lend immediacy as in Charlotte Lamb's *Duel of Desire* (Harlequin Presents):

He paused, his breathing rapid and harsh. "Did I hurt you? Darling, did I hurt you?"

"No, oh, no," she whispered. Her hands pressed him down to her. "Oh, Alex, darling, I want you so much . . ."

He groaned, his body trembling violently. "Deb... Oh, God, Deb, I love you like hell..."

You will learn to allot little time to sex scenes with a woman other than the heroine, and your adjectives in such scenes will not be flattering. She will sound sensuous but not as desirable as the heroine because of your adjectives and verbs. In Granbeck's *Maura* Beau makes love to Irene:

Then they were together, hands exploring, mouths tasting, until their bodies met in passion. She clawed at his flesh and writhed, to meet his body. His hard muscles moved under her hands and his mouth stopped her cries until all thoughts were blanketed by exploding pleasure.

Similarly, when the wrong man makes love to the heroine, you will remember to give him less space and see that his sexual prowess does not compare to that of the hero. . . .