Love in Literature: Why Read about it?

Willie van Peer and Anna Chesnokova

Abstract Love stories play a fundamental role in the lives of people, as the theme of love pervades all of literature. And this interest in the topic of love has not waned. Publishing love stories is a multi-billion business. Apparently humans are not content with loving and being loved; they also want to read about other people's love. Why?

In this chapter we propose several motifs for reading about love in fiction, based on insights from sexology and expert relation therapy. Love stories apparently *transfer* experiences through the written word into meaningful experiences that, although knowingly fictional, nevertheless are of the utmost importance to readers. After presenting some data on love literature and basic impediments to human love relations, we offer some escape routes from desire (through death, divorce, and extramarital affairs), arguing that the road to desire in relations is hardly represented in fictional literature, with one exception, what we call "the magic of love". With this we mean that in reading literature words have to be pronounced *ad verbatim* so that, similarly to magical practices, they produce the desired effect on the reader.

In a final section we reflect on the urgent need to investigate reading about love through more rigorous, empirical, research methods than the speculative ones employed so far in literary studies.

Keywords Love · Rationale for love stories · Effects of reading · Love stories · Evolutionary perspective on love · Relation therapy

Introduction: Love?

Is love problematic? It no doubt is. One of the clearest specifications of the problem has been offered by Jared Diamond (2015) in his booklet *Why Is Sex Fun?*. It opens with a view on human sexuality through the eyes of a dog:

> Those disgusting humans have sex any day of the month! Barbara proposes sex even when she knows perfectly well that she isn't fertile (…) John is eager for sex all the time, without caring whether his efforts could result in a baby or not.
>
> But if you want to hear something really gross — (…) when John's parents come for a visit, (…) I can hear them too having sex, although John's mother went through this thing they call menopause years ago.
>
> Now she can't have babies anymore, but she still wants sex, and John's father obliges her. What a waste of effort! Here's the weirdest thing of all: Barbara and John, and John's parents, close the bedroom door and have sex in private, instead of doing it in front of their friends like any self-respecting dog! (Diamond, 2015, 3)

Your dog confirms: humans have the most bizarre love life among all mammals. But what do we mean by the word "love"? While there are many aspects to it (for instance, in a religious or filial sense, or in the sense of true companionship or friendship), in this chapter we follow definition 4a from the Oxford English Dictionary as a standard reference source in the English language:

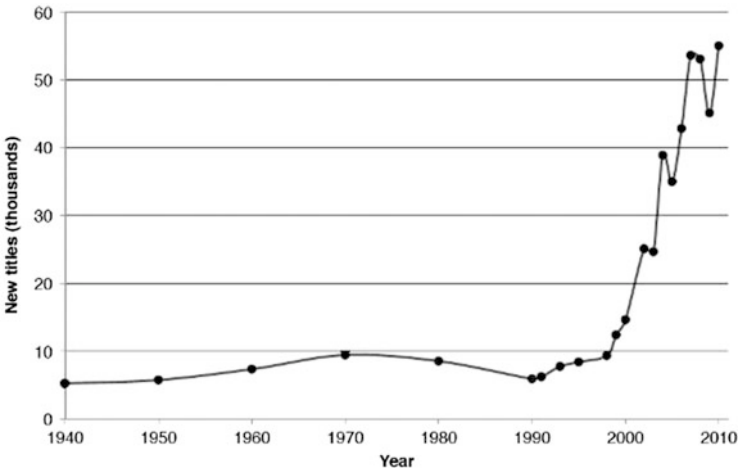
> An intense feeling of romantic attachment based on an attraction felt by one person for another; intense liking and concern for another person, typically combined with sexual passion.

It will be clear from this definition immediately that only humans dedicate themselves to love. Following Perel (2007, 217), "[a]nimals have sex; eroticism is exclusively human". But then, at other moments, people seem to agree with Diamond's dog, when they appear to rely on an instinctual view of sexuality, as confirmed by Schnarch (1991):

> The notion that sex should not involve work continues to claim its own casualties. It coincides with common views of sex as an "automatic" function. (…) One such belief is the idealized, romantic view of sex (171).

Popularity of Reading About Love: Some Numbers

Human dedication to love may already be strange in itself, but there is more to it: this bizarre love life of people gets documented in zillions of stories, both written and oral. Also in paintings and sculpture, in movies, soaps and television series—but in the first place in literature. A few figures may be in place here. Regular "literary" publishing houses turn out an ever-growing mass of fiction. Matthew Wilkens



Graph 1 Number of new fiction titles published annually in the United States between 1940 and 2010

(2011) of the University of Notre Dame is one of the few scholars who keeps track of this, summarized in the graph above (Graph 1). As can be seen from the graph, the development is neither a gradual nor a slow one, but has all the characteristics of an exponential curve, starting around 1990, but accelerating increasingly since the year 2000: between 1990 and 2010 the production of novels multiplied almost tenfold. In 2010, 50,000 new novels appeared in the US alone. No later data are available, but we should not assume that the situation has changed dramatically— even with the advancement of digital reading. Wilkens (2011) suspects that for worldwide figures in the English language the number has to be multiplied by two. Hence some 100,000 new literary works appear annually in the English language. We believe that this is a very conservative estimate. We think so because in the relatively small language area of Dutch (roughly 25 million speakers) there are, as indicated by *Cultuurindex Nederland* (2017), approximately 35,000 new literary titles published every year.

Unfortunately, there is no statistics available on how many of these works deal with the theme of love. Our personal experience as readers is that it will be a fair part of the total number. By the most modest estimate, we are dealing with some 30,000 new literary novels about love *a year* in the English language—with established literary publishing houses. Fortunately for our research, however, we do have figures for novels about love in the more popular genres. Romance is no doubt the largest group in this category. The numbers are staggering. In 2004, 2,285 titles were published in this genre in the US alone (Romance Writers of America, 2008). The sales are equally daunting: in the US romantic fiction generated $1.37 billion in 2008, with more than 7,000 novels published, which equals 13.5% of the book market, with some 75 million readers. Of the entire US population, a quarter read one romance novel or more in 2008 (Ménard & Cabrera, 2011). The stereotype that this

is an exclusively female readership is not wholly correct: 16% of men actually are romance readers (*idem*).

On the international market, a Toronto-based company Harlequin Enterprises Limited is the leading publisher of romance novels series and women's fiction, selling more than four books every second (Harlequin Enterprises Limited, 2019)! Most novels are translations from English, but often with alterations to fit the local taste and historical circumstances. Be that as it may, the numbers are quite persuasive: reading about love is not just popular. It is rampant.

Then there are not merely the numbers of titles, but also the numbers of copies being sold. Of the three erotic romance novels by E.L. James *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011–2017), for instance, as many as 150 million copies were sold worldwide in just a few years. We will refrain from further statistics here, as we believe the numbers speak for themselves. Of all themes in fiction publications, love seems to be one of the most attractive. But why? We will offer some of our considerations in the following section.

Unfulfillment

One of the deep reasons for our hunger for love stories may be unflattering for our own love relationships. This is what David Schnarch (1991), one of the leading sexologists in the world, observes about the fundamental shortcomings of most love relationships, which are experienced as unfulfilling—or "convenient" rather than profound. Love fiction may cater for this feeling of insufficiency. Schnarch (1991) explains this lack of fulfilment in the following words:

> Not wanting to want sometimes surfaces as an attempt at maintenance of ego boundaries; inhibited sexual desire can be created (and maintained) when wanting becomes integrated into either partner's difficulty accepting emotional boundaries. Some individuals would rather be frustrated with a tolerable level of deprivation than cope with the vulnerability of valuing and the hunger of longing (273).

His conclusion, based on an extensive review of the literature, and his experience as a therapist with hundreds of couples (who are actually the courageous ones, who are prepared to invest energy in developing their relationship to a deeper level) is this: "Human sexuality *can* be beautiful and wonderful but this is the exception rather than the rule" (59).[1]

Many people in surveys declare that they are satisfied with their relationship. Satisfied we may be, yes, content, yes, but deep in our hearts we may venture that we are very far from reaching a complete fulfilment of what a relationship could be. But because of the challenge awaiting us and the fear that such a deep commitment

[1]With full awareness of the fact that love and sexuality are different though interrelated concepts, we, due to the limitations of the volume of this chapter, will further on treat them as two facets of one whole.

involves, we renounce this search, and allow ourselves to be content with a *utilitarian* relationship. So let us not deceive ourselves by taking the current ubiquity picture of "happy" couples for granted.

This constellation may explain the enormous (commercial) success of popular romance—and the staggering number of love stories being voraciously devoured by millions. Harlequin Enterprises, which we mentioned above, has an annual revenue of more than half a billion dollars. This search for intimate experiences which are missed (for a variety of reasons) may as well explain the enormous success of *Fifty Shades of Grey* published by Vintage Books in 2011–2017.

Reading love stories in this sense creates a *compensatory* dimension to life. This could be called escapism, as some scholars have done—Nell (1988) sees this as one of the possible functions of literature. The question should be, however, why readers *need* this escapism in the realm of love. Again Schnarch (1991) provides an intriguing answer:

> There are too few individuals capable of intense eroticism and intimacy to affect social conventions in a meaningful way; conventional cultural norms support utilitarian levels of sexual intensity (60).

When love becomes utilitarian, the longing for intense intimacy will from time to time override the social conventions, and romance literature then provides an escape valve: "When the goal is to be seen as you want, but not known as you are, marriage can never compete with part-time romance" (371).

But do people really read love stories out of unfulfillment? We do not know. Despite an extensive body of research on reading in a cultural aspect (see, for example, Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009; Zhou, Paul, & Sherman, 2018), they provide no answers to the questions we have put earlier in this chapter, as the issues are themselves not culture-specific, but universal. There is hardly any research on this topic, and what ideas we have ventilated above rest on our intuitions and on anecdotal observations, not on systematic investigation. That there is a need for such research, may by now be obvious.

A Female Existential Dilemma: In the Real World and in Literature

In a pathbreaking research by Johnston, Hagel, Franklin, Fink, and Grammer (2001)[2] two (manipulated) pictures of a male face are presented. One (a) is a very virile face, with square head, sharp stubbled chin and pronounced cheekbones. The other (b) is the same face, but now manipulated to a more boyish, even a little effeminate contour, exactly the opposite of all the characteristics of face (a). Female

[2]For the sake of clarity, the present chapter simplifies the much more complex experimental design. For further details, see Johnston et al. (2001). Recently, the insights of this study have been corroborated by Urszula M. Marcinkoiwska et al. (2019) in the prestigious journal *Nature*.

readers are then requested to choose one of both faces in terms of what they find most attractive in the face of the male *as a lover*.

There is, of course, no room for comparison of different reactions of our female readers in a written chapter in this book. But we can tell them that—unbeknownst to them—their preference for one of the faces will depend on their menstrual cycle. To summarize the results of the study: (on average) female readers will prefer face (b) for most of their cycle, but will have a pronounced preference for face (a) if they are in the time window of their cycle with the highest conception risk (defined as 9 days prior to ovulation). Hence preference for male faces by females is driven by the hormonal cycle. This is perhaps not so strange, as hormones doubtlessly play a role in sexual attraction. More important for our considerations here is that the preferences reveal a fundamental dilemma in females' partner choice. Why would females prefer face (a) over (b) at a time when they are most likely to conceive in intercourse? The standard theory here is that "the masculinity of the face is a reliable physical marker of immunocompetence. (.. .) The end result is that somewhat masculinized faces signal heritable fitness—a healthy immune system that can be passed down to children. In essence, women's preference for 'good genes' that are sometimes better secured from affair partners than from regular mates. Women judge the less masculine faces, preferred during their least fertile days of the month, as a signal of cooperativeness, honesty, and good parenting qualities" (Buss, 2003, 242). Here we have, in a nutshell, and clearly illustrated in an experiment, the dilemma women face in love: in order to secure the careful upbringing of their children, they need a reliable and devoted partner, who is trustworthy, helpful, supportive and child-oriented. Hence their overall preference for "average" male faces (and personalities). On the other hand, they wish their children to be healthy, with a strong immune system, so that their chances of survival are high, the highest possible. And extreme male faces betray such good genes.

This picture of female attraction is further corroborated in the research by Johnston et al. (2001) by tracing females' emotional reaction to the two faces in terms of seeing them as those of a friend or enemy (and lover). And, clearly, face (a) elicits by far the strongest associations with "enemy", and the (b) face scores highest on "friend".

The interesting aspect of this dilemma for our present essay is that this hard choice (whether to go for a "good" though average man or a really virile male type) is amply reflected in literary works. Think, for instance, of the extremely popular—the movie perhaps more than the novel—*The Bridges of Madison County*. Or Alice Munro's story "What is Remembered", Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, or the then enormously popular (novels and movies) of *Captain Blood* by Rafael Sabatini. In the popular genres, the prototype is the "gypsy" passing through the village or the small provincial town. To name only a few of the dozens of titles: *Gypsy Lover* by Connie Mason, *Gypsy Lord* by Kat Martin, *The Heart of a Gypsy* by Robera Kagan, *Mine till Midnight* by Lisa Kleypas, and so forth. The site Goodreads even has a special list with titles on this topic: https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/17755.Gypsies_In_Romance. But THE prototypical example of the dilemma is found in the notorious novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928). When D.H. Lawrence highlighted

this female dilemma—with its concomitant sexual indulgences—society rose up in fury. The fact that we are no longer upset by such stories or scenes is a direct consequence of the power of literature: its contribution to the liberation of female sexuality that has been first imagined and made acceptable to society as a whole by authors such as Lawrence, Flaubert, Tolstoy and Fontane.

This "power" of literature works, however, silently, surreptitiously, as if it were mere entertainment. This force of literature in society uses a ruse, Hegel's *Cunning of Reason* (die List der Vernunft): by acting humbly and outside the great important matters on the world stage and in plain everyday life, and by pretending that in fact it does not have much to do with all that, literature influences world history. In Hegel's *Vorlesungenüber die Philosophie der Geschichte* (1837), Reason moves in the background and lets the human passions work for her own cause and, in comparison with the great (and violent) events on the world stage, takes on the form of a somewhat insignificant and unworldly servant: "This may be called the *cunning of reason*—that it sets the passions to work for itself, while that which develops its existence through such impulsion pays the penalty, and suffers loss"[3] (Hegel, 2008, 129). And scholars who negate this role of literature in world history are simply one of the cogwheels in the mechanisms that the Cunning of Reason employs.

If the above holds, then female readers should be especially attracted to this dilemma of choice for two types of partners. The sales of such subgenres of love stories seem to corroborate this. But what kind of satisfaction do female readers derive from that reading? And what effects do such readings create? We do not know—because there is no research investigating such questions.

A Universal Love Predicament

The preceding section outlined a fundamental dilemma facing females in the *choice* of a love partner. Now suppose a choice has been made, and a new couple is formed, to the satisfaction of both partners. Maybe this satisfaction may last some time. But after the turbulent first weeks and months, in which desire dictates all thoughts, emotions and actions, couples face a problem: habituation. There is, indeed, a — this time universal — dilemma facing all lovers. But we won't know as outsiders, because no one tells you that desire is waning. Did you ever hear a young couple complain that after their initial infatuation, life became much less pleasant than they had anticipated? Not very likely. But descriptions of this process exist, if we resort … yes, to literature! Let us look at one such revelation, in Leo Tolstoy's *Kreutzer Sonata*:

[3]"Das ist die List der Vernunft zu nennen, dass sie die Leidenschaften für sich wirken lässt, wobei das, durch was sie sich in Existenz setzt, einbüsst und Schaden leidet" (Hegel, 1980/1823, 78).

> Love was exhausted with the satisfaction of sensuality. We stood face to face in our true light, like two egoists trying to procure the greatest possible enjoyment, like two individuals trying to mutually exploit each other.
>
> So what I called our quarrel was our actual situation as it appeared after the satisfaction of sensual desire. I did not realize that this cold hostility was our normal state, and that this first quarrel would soon be drowned under a new flood of the intensest sensuality. I thought that we had disputed with each other, and had become reconciled, and that it would not happen again. But in this same honeymoon there came a period of satiety, in which we ceased to be necessary to each other, and a new quarrel broke out (Tolstoy, 1889/2012, 41).

Presumably all couples in long-term relationships, regardless of their culture, will recognize this creeping decline in mutual attraction as "partners' satisfaction tends to be high around the time of the wedding, after which it begins a slow but steady decline" (Hirschberger, Srivastava, Marsh, Cowan, & Cowan, 2009). The fact is that such processes are a universal and inevitable challenge for all long-lasting relationships. It involves yet another dilemma for partners, one that no couple can escape. There are, however, some escape routes.

Escape Through Death

One possibility to avoid the dilemma is death. And the examples from literature are legion: Romeo and Juliet, Troilus and Cressida, Tristan and Isolde, Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and quite a few others.

De Rougemont (1983) has shown how love in western literature is defined by obstacles that often are impossible to overcome, thus leading to the downfall of the lovers: the story-teller "betrays a hankering after love for its own sake, which implies a secret quest of the obstruction that shall foster love. But this quest is only the disguise of a love for obstruction *per se*. Now it turns out that the ultimate obstacle is death, and at the close of the tale death is revealed as having been the real end, what passion has yearned after from the beginning" (54).

The danger of the relationship ending in death may easily spill over into didactic and moralising literature. The pendant of *Romeo and Juliet* exhibiting such moral traffic rules for young couples is Arthur Brooke's *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet*, which antedates Shakespeare's work with some 30 years, and which Shakespeare may well have known while preparing his own production. The moral and poetic differences between both works are glaringly exposed in van Peer (2008). There is even a whole genre dedicated to moralizing through literature, i.e., the *exemplum*, but one may also think of the parables in the gospels. As the example shows, the use of literature to convey established, usually middle-class or religious, values is more or less a matter of the past. Novels of the type *East Lynne* (1861) by Ellen Wood, warning against infidelity, have little appeal for present-day audiences. A rearguard area where moralistic ideas may still be part of story plots is children's literature, but then such stories are rarely about erotic love.

Escape Through Divorce

Or, nowadays, one may escape the dilemma by ending the relationship in divorce. And numbers should not betray us: the divorce rates in Western countries are pretty high: according to the best research, almost half of first marriages in the US end in divorce; see Bramlett and Mosher (2002) and Lebow (2019).

But divorce is a relatively new phenomenon in history. Prior to the nineteenth century, few literary works deal with it. Nowadays echoes of this monumental change in relationships are all over the place in popular literature. We would like to draw attention, however, to the role literature has played in forging this historical change. One of the first to acknowledge the monumental importance of choice in marriage was the poet of *Paradise Lost*. In four different pamphlets, written between 1643 and 1645, Milton argues for the necessity of choosing a partner—but choice inevitably involves the possibility of privately refusing the choice—and that is where divorce comes in. We may not fully appreciate nowadays the revolutionary nature of this proposal, but the religious authorities tried to ban the pamphlets with all their might, and with all the instruments of power that they had at their disposal. Nevertheless, the net result of the polemics involved was that divorce was allowed in specific conditions. It will be clear that Milton owed this success because of his fame as a poet. We also find reminiscences of his argument in his description of the relationship between Adam and Eve in his *Paradise Lost*.

The change in law did mitigate the suffering of incompatible couples in reality, but divorce still remained something not to be spoken of. In fact, it was again in literature that the taboo was broken. Notably the idea that marriage can be terminated by free will of one of the partners is raised in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). Its protagonist, Hester Prynne, is chastised by the community for bearing a child during a prolonged absence of her husband, and for refusing to reveal the father's identity. She remains adamant and encourages her lover to elope with her to Europe, where they can live outside the laws they are subject to in America. Her lover can bring himself neither to execute this plan nor to publicly admit his relation to her, until he dies in her arms years later as a broken man. Thereupon Hester leaves the United States for Europe with her daughter, where she starts a new life, free from the social stigma she endured at home. Like Milton, Hawthorne takes the (for his time) radical position that any rigidity on the inseparability of marriage runs counter to human happiness. It was not long after Hawthorne that divorce became a fruitful topic in American literature, as witnessed by the novels by Henry James, such as *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and *What Maisie Knew* (1897).

Escape Through Extramarital Affair(s)

While escape from this dilemma by death is no doubt the rarest, and divorce is nowadays the most common, there is another escape road, one that is known to all:

that of extramarital affairs. Monogamy, defined as sexual and emotional exclusivity to one romantic partner, "is the standard adopted by the majority of those in committed romantic relationships in Western societies. It is a relationship form that is viewed as optimal and conferred with many social, financial, and legal benefits" (Lee & O'Sullivan, 2019, 1735). But transgression of this standard is profuse. Almost half of college-aged individuals (46.8%) reported lifetime infidelity (Thompson & O'Sullivan, 2016), and almost one in five individuals (23% of men and 19% of women) reported sexual cheating in their current romantic relationships (Mark, Janssen, & Milhausen, 2011). According to Barker (2011), the rate of lifetime infidelity for men over 60 increased from 20% in 1991 to 28% in 2006. The same tendency holds for women over 60 as the statistics went up from 5% in 1991 to 15% in 2006.

Given these figures, it will not come as a surprise that extramarital affairs are well represented in literature. As a matter of fact, such works of fiction are legion. *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary* come to mind immediately, as do others, notably[4]

- *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) by D.H. Lawrence;
- *The Awakening* (1899) by K. Chopin;
- *Adultery* (2012) by P. Coelho;
- *The Great Gatsby* (1925) by F.S. Fitzgerald;
- *The Painted Veil* (1925) and *Theatre* (1937) by W.S. Maugham;
- *Lucy Crown* (1956) by I. Shaw;
- *The Red and the Black* (1830) by Stendhal;
- *The Little Lady of the Big House* (1915) by J. London;
- *And Quiet Flows the Don* (1925–1940) by M. Sholokhov (1965 Nobel prize winner);
- "The Lady with the Dog" (1899) by A. Chekhov;
- *The Forsyte Saga* (1922) by J. Galsworthy.

And many, many others may be added.

> To judge by literature, adultery would seem to be one of the most remarkable of occupations in both Europe and America. Few are the novels that fail to allude to it; and the vogue of the others, how we make allowances for these, the very passion with which we sometimes denounce them—all that shows well enough what couples dream about in the grip of a rule that has turned marriage into a duty and convenience (de Rougemont, 1983, 16).

The Cauldron

But if these escape routes are not taken, the couple is in a cauldron of a terrible strain, trying to reconcile the conflicting prescriptions dictated by the universal predicament

[4]We hope it is clear to our readers that all titles referred to are not necessarily our favourites, nor are they in any sense reading "recommendations"—they are merely examples of particular types of love stories. We are engaged in a descriptive effort here, that should in no way be seen as normative.

of long-term relations. The outcome is often decided in accordance with societal norms, and these are imposed by one of the imperatives: the one representing security, associated in most cultures with having a stable partner next to you. If the couple does not take any escape road, only two possibilities are left, and the choice is often easy for many couples. The choice is between *indifference* and going through the *cauldron*. By the former we do not mean indifference toward the partner. In fact, quite the contrary is the case if this path is taken. We are then in a predicament in which everything is geared toward stability, security, certainty, durability and so forth. The indifference is to a deeper level of emotion, and it entails a rejection of desire. The result is usually also immobility: the couple does no longer evolve, but rests assured in self-contained gratification. Nothing new, let alone spectacular, is expected any more. These are the stable partnerships of which our society is largely composed.

It is clear why this road of "indifference" is so often and so easily taken: the alternative is rather frightening—which is why we have chosen the metaphor of the "cauldron": living through the demands of family care and at the same time keeping the mutual attraction awake—and live—is neither easy nor mollifying. It is disturbing instead—something we already hinted at in Sect. 42.3 of this chapter.

No one has described the fundamental trial so succinctly and so eloquently as Esther Perel in her 2019 TED talk, which we would like to quote here:

> the reconciliation of two fundamental human needs: on the one hand, our need for security, for predictability, for safety, for dependability, for reliability, for permanence—all these anchoring, grounding experiences in our lives that we call "home". But we also have an equally strong need, men and women, for adventure, for novelty, for mystery, for risk, for adventure, for danger, for the unknown, for the unexpected, for surprise — for journey, for travel. So reconciling our need for security and our need for adventure into one relationship — or what we today like to call a "passionate marriage" used to be a contradiction in terms. Marriage was an economic institution. (.. .)
>
> But now we want our partner to still give us all these things, but in addition I want you to be my best friend, and my trusted confidante, and my passionate lover to boot. And we live twice as long (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sa0RUmGTCYY&t=213s, accessed January 2, 2024).

The cauldron then is the place where these two forces collide. If the outcome is not indifference (the solution previously outlined), then the partners face a continuous renewal of their desire. This is a rather frightening (and arduous) prospect, which is why most couples say "No thanks" to it. Not surprisingly, therefore, is the fact that we find little about the cauldron in literature. Maybe *Middlemarch* might qualify, or *Pride and Prejudice*, or—doubtlessly a courageous endeavour—A. de Botton's *The Course of Love* (2017). But in general love literature is more about the spectacular things, like death, or adultery. The day-to-day trouble of keeping the relationship passionate is awesome. As Schnarch (1997, 404) remarks: "[l]oving is not for the weak, nor for those who have to be carefully kept, nor for the faint of heart. That's why there is so little of it in the world. Love requires being steadfast through many difficulties." Or: "for possession is often the death of love. (…) I condemn love without enjoyment as severely as I do enjoyment without love. I leave you to draw the inference" (Casanova, 2006, 756).

Perhaps the most important reason why people avoid intensely pleasurable sex is also the least mentioned: *it hurts* (Schnarch, 1991, 467).

The Magic of Love

The previous sections have outlined a number of aims and ways to read about love. In this section we will deal with one of the rarest, but also one of the most profound modes of treating love in literature: living through the literature of love as magic. What do we mean by this? A good example is provided by Lisa Appignanesi (2011). She begins her book *All about Love* with a personal confession—when she first became aware of the word "love". She must have been about 7 years old, and the awareness came through a traditional French song, "A la claire fontaine" ("by the clear fountain"). It tells the story of unfulfilled love: a lover finds the water of a spring so clear that he bathes in it. Then follows the refrain:

> Il y a longtemps que je t'aime
> Jamais je ne t'oublierai.
>
> (I've loved you for so long,
> I will never forget you.)

Áppignanesi (2011) writes that the song haunted her during childhood, and released emotions in her of sufficient weight to stay, even while its meaning remained opaque, though realizing that the word "love" harboured a multiplicity of profound significance. She then cites a number of other memories that meant an encounter with love: *Á la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, *Gone with the Wind, Romeo and Juliet*, *West Side Story*, and so forth, to make the point that our image of love is intimately linked to individual life stories.

Similarly, the partner of one of us used to sing a ditty for her father:

> Alle dagen komt ze vragen of dat ik haar gaarne zie.
> (All days she comes asking me whether I love her.)

And, like Appignanesi (2011), also not grasping the scope of the meaning contained in the words, she nevertheless revelled in singing it to her father. Maybe many readers of this chapter cherish such memories, or (parts of) texts that are intimately linked to love. How many, we do not know—there is no research. What *kind* of scraps of songs, poems, movie dialogues are remembered, we do not know either—there is no research. We are equally ignorant of the influence of such memories on people's actual love life—there is no research.

We do know that this form of confrontation with love started by the Provençal "troubadours" in the eleventh to twelfth century, notably by William IX of Aquitaine, Jaufré Rudel, Bernard de Ventadour, Arnaud Daniel, Bertrand de Born, with poems celebrating *Amor de lonh* ("love at a distance"). Presumably the apex of this

kind of amorous involvement is Dante's *Vita Nova* (1294). The lovers only exchanged looks three times, and before they were even in their teens, but this was the beginning of a life-long devotion to the beloved, culminating in the ultimate union in the third volume of the *Divine Comedy*. The *Canzoniere* by Petrarcha (1374) is another example, but the examples quickly multiply when one starts thinking of it—some fictional, like *Tristan and Isolde*, some real, like the love of Abelard and Héloïse. The stories need not even be about sexual love; much of the poetry by the mystics is of the same orientation, that of Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179), Meister Eckhart (1260–1328), Ruusbroec (1293–1381), San Juan de la Cruz (1542–1591), and many others. The longing is now for a union with the Deity, but framed in erotic terms, not uncommonly borrowed from the Provençal troubadours, as is the case with the Flemish mystic Hadewijch (thirteenth century).

Such are the narratives about love that, as we hope to have demonstrated in previous sections of this chapter, permeate literary history. But what about the readers of such stories? Are they also ready to pick up the magic of love? The short answer to the question is: yes, they are. Casanova regularly, in his *L'histoire de ma vie*, quotes from *Orlando Furioso*, mainly from passages to do with erotic love. He knew the poem by heart—but one should realize that it is a rather long poem: it spans almost 40,000 verse lines! Why would anyone go to the trouble of memorizing such a horrendously long text? The answer shimmers through when one reads his comments: it is because he is in love with the poem—basically he is *in love with love*. It is the magic of the text that attracts him, and Casanova, one of the key figures in the art of love, is enchanted with the magic of love, sung to its apex in poetry. What is the ultimate attraction of this fascination? Maybe it is that "phantasies—sexual and other—also have nearly magical powers to heal and renew" (Perel, 2007, 155).

The word "magic" in the title of this section has therefore to be taken seriously. We indeed propose that this kind of reading literature is akin to magical practice: the words of the magic charm have to be pronounced *ad verbatim*, or the spell will not work.[5] It is a behaviour that is already present early in life: witness small children's vehement protests when an adult deviates from the wording of a well-known story or fairy-tale: to the child, the "magic" of the tale is destroyed when the formula is not pronounced correctly. Parents often wonder why this is so important for the children—we believe this is the reason: the self-soothing through the story can only take place if the magical formula is adhered to literally.

[5]As a literary motif it is also well known through Goethe's *Der Zauberlehrling*, popularized first through Paul Dukas' symphonic poem "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" and later through Walt Disney's "Fantasia".

Conclusions and Recommendations for the Theory and Practice: Research into Love Reading

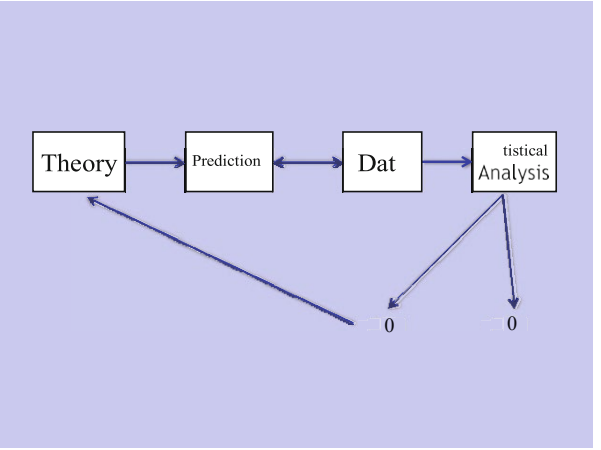
All previous sections of this chapter have ended with the admission that we hardly know why people read about love—because of the lack of research. Nor are we informed about the effects of reading about love, again because of the lack of serious research. In the face of our ignorance we should ask ourselves in earnest whether we should not leave our armchairs (or libraries, for that matter) and start investigating the place that literature on love has in the lives of people. We are still massively unaware of what literature *does* to readers (van Peer and Chesnokova 2019), why they read (about love in the first place), what emotions are evoked by such kinds of literary pieces, or how such poems, stories, or theatre plays influence people's lives. In order to find answers to such questions one will have to look at *real* readers "in the flesh", and about the only way to address such issues is through empirical research, following the established standards of using the methodology in the Humanities, literary studies in particular (van Peer, Hakemulder, & Zyngier, 2012). This leads us to reflect on the state of art in the area and the ways to improve it in this final section that follows.

Until recently, most of what went on under the name of "research" in literary studies was either anecdotal or speculative (with the exception of some thorough historical research). Thus we have an enormous mass of subjective opinions, views and interpretations of literature mostly by professional academics, but we have hardly any empirical data on how real readers outside the academy deal with literary texts. By "empirical" we mean that data are collected independently as a means of openly verifying the correctness of claims about literary experiences in the reading act (see Chesnokova and van Peer 2021; van Peer and Chesnokova 2022). Fortunately there is now an international society that professionally caters for such research: the International Society for the Empirical Study of Literature[6] (see the website: https://sites.google.com/igelassoc.org/igel2018/home), which also publishes the high quality international journal *Scientific Study of Literature* with John Benjamins (see: https://benjamins.com/catalog/ssol).

When it comes to such empirical research there are basically two types of investigation: qualitative and quantitative studies. To start with *qualitative* studies, they are generally used to *explore* issues about which not much is known, usually done through observations that may lead to the formulation of more accurate hypotheses, which are then often checked in *quantitative* research, which aims at the establishment of valid and reliable knowledge about reality. Methods used in qualitative studies are mostly interviews, protocol analysis, focus groups and the like. There is some such research concerning the reading of love stories, especially with respect to romance novels. A central figure in this area is Radway (2009), who observed women reading such romance stories and tried to come to some insights into their reading habits and motivations. Unfortunately, (and this seems symptomatic for this approach) few of the gained insights are formulated as testable

[6]Its acronym, IGEL, is short for the society's original, German, name: Internationale Gesellschaft für Empirische Literaturwissenschaft.

Fig. 1 Theory testing model



hypotheses. Why is this so important? Basically the reason is that qualitative studies are done with a limited number of participants without the data being transformed into numerical form, thus preventing any (statistical) generalization. Without such inference statistics, it is impossible to say to what extent the observations may be generalized. How crucial that is, turns out when some of the conclusions of qualitative research *are* actually more strictly examined in a quantitative investigation. And how necessary that is becomes evident from the scientific literature. Iqbal (2014), after a review of this literature, concludes that "it remains unclear whether romance novels influence readers' attitudes and beliefs or whether they preferentially attract readers with particular attitudes towards sexuality" (302).

In general, such research follows a model of testing claims by confronting them with observations, somewhat in the following form (see Fig. 1).

The original claims are cast in the form of predictions, which are then matched to independently collected data. These data are subjected to a statistical analysis, first of all to see whether they are in the predicted direction and whether they are convincing enough to be accepted and generalized. This is expressed in a *p*-value, which stands for error probability, which should, naturally, be as low as possible, in any case lower than .05 (which equals roughly 5%). The procedure and rationale for doing so is explained in detail in van Peer et al. (2012) and in van Peer and Chesnokova (2022). Results in the predicted direction that have error probabilities lower than 5% (*p*-values lower than .05) are then taken as support for the claim(s) in question. What one has to realize in this kind of research, is that the results may contradict one's own opinions—which can be painful in a certain sense for the investigator(s). With the qualitative approach, it is much easier for the researcher to beat about the bush.

An investigation of some claims about romance novels has been carried out by Bun (2007). She extracted several hypotheses about romance reading from the existing literature and tested them to data collected. The important result from this study was that most hypotheses advanced in the qualitative studies were not confirmed in a more rigorous study. For instance, Radway's claim that women choose

romance stories that support the beliefs and values they currently hold, was negated by the data: "Choice of romance novel genre was not shown to correlate to reader's [*sic*] already held beliefs" (Bun, 2007, 59).

As a conclusion, it must now dawn on us that a lot of work awaits us, work that requires another way of looking at literature (and maybe also about love) than we have hitherto been used to. We hope some of us will be ready for this change of perspective.

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