

Feminist Researcher Wishes to Meet Romantic Subject: The “Case” of Mrs. F.

Susan Ostrov Weisser

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Abstract: This article addresses a long-standing gap between theorists and critics in the growing field of Love Studies between those who see heterosexual romantic love as a positive subset of caring love and those feminists who reject it as regressive for women in particular. Opposing definitions of romantic love as either an ideal of equality in heterosexual relations, or an obstacle to, even regression from, that equality, seem challenging for some feminists to reconcile. The article argues instead for a situational approach to understanding the place of love in heterosexual Western women’s lives, specifically through biography and autobiography, as a way to bypass the roadblock of entrenched ideologies. To illustrate, the author explores the relationship between two contrasting personal narratives of courtship: that of Mrs. F., the author’s former research subject, whose traditional romantic narrative structured her life story as told to the author, and that of the author herself, whose personal and professional view has been critical of the ideology of romantic love. The objective of the article is to use life narrative, situated in a particular time and location, to disrupt the uniformity of abstract and enduring ideological discourses of romance, and in doing so, to contribute to a more nuanced feminist understanding of romantic love.

About the Author: Susan Ostrov Weisser is Professor of English at Adelphi University. Her research has centered on women, romantic love, and narrative in nineteenth century literature and contemporary popular culture. She is the author of *The Glass Slipper: Women and Love Stories* (2013) and *A Craving Vacancy: Women and Sexual Love in the British Novel* (1997), as well as editor of two collections: *Feminist Nightmares: Women at Odds* (1994) (with Jennifer Fleischner), and *Women and Romance: A Reader* (2001). In addition, she has written the Introduction and Notes for editions of Jane Austen’s *Persuasion*, Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, and D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*.

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The field of Critical Love Studies is a vigorous and burgeoning one, drawing from multiple disciplines, with or without a feminist point of view. While its diversity of perspectives and methods is certainly a strength of the field, Lynne Pearce has pointed out “the extent to which the social sciences, literary studies and philosophy talk past one another when it comes to research on love and romance” (2015, 1). “Talking past one another” seems applicable not only to varied disciplinary methodologies in love studies but also to feminist critics’ view of romantic love itself as *either* serving the interests of feminism *or* in ideological opposition to it.

It is well known that romantic love has been a contentious site for feminist politics since Mary Wollstoncraft warned women about building a marriage on its foundation. There is, for example, a long history of feminist theorists and scholars bent on demystifying love and its cultural representations: for example, Simone de Beauvoir, Shulamith Firestone, Germaine Greer, Stevi Jackson, Wendy Langford, Chrys Ingraham, Eva Illouz, Laura Kipnis, and many others. An entire tradition of feminist writing critical of popular romance in particular had a sturdy foothold for several decades from the 1970s onward.[1] But there have also been influential attempts to reclaim the positive, even transformational, aspects of romantic love, coming from psychoanalysts such as Ethel Person to social theorists such as Anthony Giddens and beyond. In recent decades, literary critics of popular fictional romances have also tended to celebrate love and its potential for equalizing gender relations (Ang 1987; Goade 2007; Regis 2003, 2011; Selinger 2007; Goris 2012).

I would argue, along with Margaret Toye, a philosopher, that “Love...needs to be taken as a serious, valid and crucial subject for study, especially by those invested in discourses of the other – most importantly, by feminist, critical and postcolonial theorists” (2010, 41). But these disagreements, not infrequently fraught with overtones of attack and defense, most often occur on the abstract level of scholarly discourse and analysis of published texts. Meanwhile, representations of popular romance in fiction and film sell better than ever, and romantic love as the *sine qua non* of intimate, embodied personal experience continues as a modern phenomenon of widespread and increasing importance (Illouz 1997; Ingraham 2005; Jackson 2013). The sociologist Stevi Jackson has put this disjunction well in the title of her 1993 article “Even Sociologists Fall in Love.”

Addressing this disconnection between feminist perspectives and women’s desires and behavior in romance has all too frequently caused division rather than enlightenment in scholarship. My own research interests have been in fictional love stories, classic and popular, a resource for understanding that in my view brings to the table exactly the nuance and emotional immediacy that theoretical abstractions about love may lack. Yet I too have been troubled by the desire to make coherent a disparity between my own view of romantic love and what I see in actual (as opposed to fictional) women’s lives, as well as between what I believe and have experienced in my own.

Contradictory definitions of romantic love as either a subset of caring love marked by an ideal of care and equality in heterosexual relations, or an obstacle to, even regression from, that equality, seem challenging to reconcile. Often theorists, researchers, and critics appear to be too invested in one side or the other of these assumptions and their political

implications to be able to let them go. Yet I would suggest that in order to be truly “critical,” scholarly research in Critical Love Studies must do exactly that. Following Stevi Jackson’s observation that “Feminist critique should focus on what is knowable – the cultural meanings of love, how it is deployed or practiced in the making and maintaining of intimate relationships in specific contexts, and the social consequences of these meanings and deployments” (2013, 35),^[2] I hope to follow my own path to a feminist understanding of romantic love as at once an individual transformative emotion and a social phenomenon situated in a particular time and location. Rather than argue an ideological position, I would like to look at the “problem of romance” for feminists from the inside out or bottom up, so to speak, through the lens of “thick description” in personal narrative, rather than top downward from the heady atmospheric heights of abstract ideology.

In the 1980s, a group of critics sought out a new direction for feminist scholarship in women’s personal narratives as qualitative research, notably in the collection by the Personal Narratives Group in 1989 and continuing thereafter (Coslett, Lury, and Summerfield 2002; Jackson 1998; Stanley, “The Knowing Subject”; Stanley 1993, 1995; Smith and Watson 1998). In 1990, Liz Stanley argued for the writing and study of “feminist auto/biography” that would pose fundamental questions for feminism, namely “what ‘feminism’ should look like *in life as well as in textual terms*, what should be the proper relationship between feminist researchers and the ‘subjects’ of their research, what should be the relationship between experience and feminist theory [my emphasis]” (1990, 64). In keeping with what Stanley called a more fluid understanding of selfhood “as fragile and continually renewed by acts of memory and writing” (63), a body of work appeared on the discourse of romance in ordinary women’s life stories (Burns 2000; Griffin 1982; Harvey and Shalom 1997; Hollway 1995; Langford 1995; S. Thompson 1996; Wetherell 1995).

Though my scholarly work has long been in fictional narratives of romance, I also began to study personal narrative early in my career when I assisted in a research study led by the cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner in the mid-1980s. My method here is to re-examine a long-ago subject of this study I call Mrs. F., a woman whose narrative of enduring love shaped her life as she told it to me. Mrs. F. was a “case history” to me when I interviewed her in the mid-1980s. Here, however, I have dissolved the conventional boundary between researcher and subject, between abstract understanding and personal investment, between theory and real-life experience, by inserting my own intellectual and personal responses into the romantic story that Mrs. F. told.

As the reader will see, there is a marked contrast between my own view of romance, rooted in both my feminist politics and my personal experience, and the romantic views of my research subject, Mrs. F., who had strong faith in a predestined “happy ending.” My goal here is to show through example how the specificities of the Love Plot, widely available to women as the chief consumers of romance, can construct not only the experience of desiring love in the moment, but more profoundly structure the shape and meaning of a life in memory, in ways that are not either simply or categorically “good” or “bad” for women.

I have also taken the further step of offering my own story of courtship as counter-narrative. Writing a scholarly author’s private experience would seem to break a fourth wall of traditional scholarship, but in fact there is well-known precedent: among others, Nancy K. Miller has written about women and sexuality in “My Father’s Penis” (1991), while Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s “Dialogue on Love” (1998) deployed a first-person narration of her own experience in therapy in order to explore a different sort of love (see also Sedgwick 1987).

As Liz Stanley noted, feminist autobiography is “characterized by a self-conscious and increasingly self-confident traversing of the conventional boundaries between different genres of writing” (1990, 65).

When Mrs. F. related what she remembered of her life and the place of love in it, her story, told from memory, triggered strong memories of my own later in life. In a way, it might be said that the Love Plot (or the Marriage Plot) as a concept in fiction seems to have “worked” as a guiding principle for Mrs. F., my research subject, in a way it did not for me. By adding my own story to hers, I hope to go beyond categories of “happy” and “failed,” or love-as-caring versus love-as-desire. Instead, I attempt to see myself and Mrs. F. as women whose romantic hopes were subject to personal histories, social goals, and gendered expectations, while also respecting the force of love’s pleasures and its possibilities for self-realization. The challenge here in telling these doubled stories, my own and Mrs. F.’s, is both personal and political: first, to understand what we mean by “love,” and also what feminists – including myself as a feminist scholar – may do with that understanding.

“Life as Narrative”: The Project

It is common to reread books or see beloved old films again and again and bring new perspectives to them at different stages of our lives. But it is not often that academic researchers revisit a study to which they contributed decades ago, and view the results through the differently colored lenses of personal experience. Recently, after completing a book about women and love stories, I found myself thinking in a new way about a particular woman, the subject of an exhilarating project on life stories conducted by the cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner in the mid to late 1980s. When I was assigned to interview Mrs. F., she was about the same age I am now, in late middle age.

The point of this project, for which Dr. Bruner had a Spencer Foundation grant, was to study the ways in which selfhood is constructed through narrative.[3] My own role was to interview the subjects and then help the four other members of our research team, all psychologists, to analyze the structures of the subjects’ self-narratives from a literary point of view. It was an unusual opportunity for me to learn outside my own field of literature, and, not least, tremendously interesting to see how people told their own life stories on the spot when asked to do so.

It might have seemed unlikely that I would be much influenced by Bruner’s work, since it was far out of my field of expertise. When I joined Dr. Bruner’s project in the 1980s, I was completing a doctoral dissertation on women and sexual love in British novels. The Bruner study I worked on for five years was not concerned with concepts of romantic love in narrative or the particular social circumstances of women, my primary interests. But I learned a great deal about the intersection of humanist understandings and social science from the pioneering work of Dr. Bruner, especially the uses to which we put language, and the way we construct the world through perception, memory, and story (Bruner 1986, 1987, 1991).

When the project was completed, the story of Mrs. F.’s life and the romance that forms her story’s core continued to haunt me, and I began to wonder why. Perhaps it was because she shared some elements of my own identity: like Mrs. F., I was born and grew up in

Brooklyn, NY, in a white working-class neighborhood, and both of us married and had children while young. The similarity, however, ended there. Mrs. F. was not educated past high school, whereas I have an Ivy League PhD; she had not attempted a professional career, and I eventually achieved my early goal of becoming a professor; and, not least, she was, by her own self-description, long and happily married, and I am long and (more or less) happily divorced.

But it was not so much the similarity of background that drew me to Mrs. F.'s story as it was her strong and unquestioning belief in the value of love and marriage. I had a certain pride in having risen above my origins from working class to professional middle class, both in my feminist politics, and it must be confessed, in being introspective and self-aware. Yet Mrs. F. appeared to be happier in love and more successful at romance than I felt myself to be. Her narrative stands on her deep conviction that marriage is a woman's Happy Ending, the source of her security and fulfillment, through which a woman becomes truly herself. Though I felt and still feel that I began to be my genuine self only when I was alone again, I paid an enormous price for this discovery, sacrificing exactly what Mrs. F. says she gained, and never recovering it in quite the same way as when I thought I had it. This disturbed and challenged my feminist rejection of the romantic mythos: what is a happy ending, after all?

Initially, I had a surprisingly strong sense of dismay toward and distance from Mrs. F. In some way she was both unknown yet disturbingly familiar to me, almost akin to Freud's idea of the Uncanny. In Freud's theory of the disorienting mix of familiar and unfamiliar, it is the familiar that is the root of the trouble: the return of the repressed. Revisiting the case of Mrs. F. seemed a unique opportunity to confront that decades-old but lingering apprehension. What exactly did Mrs. F. remind me of, and why did I wish to avoid it?

The "Case" of Mrs. F.

Mrs. F, an Italian-American mother of four grown children and part-time worker in her husband's small business, was a member of a family who had volunteered for the research study on which I was assisting. This family was specifically chosen for no other reason than their "ordinariness" and their willingness to tell the story of their lives. The F.'s were a long-married couple in their early sixties with working class roots. Mr. F. operated a small business, and they were living in Brooklyn, NY, in a house they had owned most of their adult lives. Mrs. F. had spent most of her life as a "housewife," raising her four children full-time.

Though our research team was very little occupied with questions of gender, I could not avoid thinking about the social conditions of everyday living for women, especially those women who identify themselves with family and home. Mr. F., interestingly, spoke of his wife as not *there* in the real world in the same way he is:

"Uh my home life is pretty good. Uh with my wife and I – I don't think my wife was as educated as I would like her to be, although she graduated from high school. But she seems to be very bent on different things. She's too compliant; she doesn't know the real world, the way things are."

At the time of this project, I was a new scholar, having spent most of my adult life until then raising three children while studying for a hard-earned PhD in literature. I was also both a new feminist and a new leftist, views that had evolved alongside my doctoral studies. My initial response to Mrs. F. was that she was a sort of woman I already knew, and not necessarily in a warm and pleasant way. But then I do not have warm and pleasant feelings about my less-than-happy lower-class Brooklyn girlhood, which I thought of (only when I had to) as peopled by *many* Mrs. F.'s – legions of women, in fact, all defining themselves through others, unthinkingly accepting their given role. I confess I had some discomfort with Mrs. F. based on my own predispositions: that is, her narrative seemed to press on the story I told myself about my own life.

Mrs. F. – And Me

Though Mrs F and I both came from working-class neighborhoods in Brooklyn, she had Italian roots while my family was Jewish. We were more or less secular, an anomaly in the deeply religious Irish-Italian neighborhood of my youth, where many children in my neighborhood went to Catholic school. Mrs. F. reminded me of any number of women I knew when I was growing up: hard-working rulers of the domestic space, never expected or expecting to leave the world of women and children, utterly devoted to their families and sustained by close networks of relatives and friends in their daily tribulations. For them, womanhood seemed fixed, both in the geographical space of home and as a metaphor of stability and cohesive values, while masculinity was conceived as a progression toward the open-ended world of earning money, public acknowledgement, decisive choices, “action.”

My own mother did not seem to be one of these women, however: she was not at all like Mrs. F. – which is to say, the Mrs. F. in my mind. My mother was neither one of Betty Friedan’s desperate housewives nor a conscious rebel. She was, however, alienated from her time and place. I knew that my mother wanted to be very different from the others on our “block,” at least. As a young woman, she had emigrated alone to New York from England, as did my father, who met her at his brother and sister-in-law’s home in Brooklyn. Because, like my father, she had been forced to leave school after the primary grades, she was never able to earn a decent wage when I was growing up, nor could she afford to stay home as a traditional housewife, as did Mrs. F. It seemed to me as a child that she did little else but work at one low-paying job after another, coming home to cook and clean after a long day.

But though uneducated, and painfully self-conscious about that, she read a good deal of fiction when she had the time, and had fierce, consuming hopes for her three children. My older brothers and I were going to go to college and become “somebody,” meaning professionals who were respected for their work, who liked their work, and (not least) who earned more than my father did doing maintenance in the dank tunnels of the New York City subway system, a filthy, dangerous, and low-paid job he bitterly despised. I breathed the atmosphere of my mother’s thwarted ambition as naturally as I did her love of fiction and her contempt for the neighborhood around us. Her body was that of a lifelong menial worker, but her head was in the middle class.

My mother did not live better than her neighbors did, but her children were going to, if she had any say in it. That emphatically included her only daughter, who was going to be,

just as much as her sons, the educated professional she had missed becoming. I was not going to marry the neighborhood, meaning I was meant for larger stuff than living on a street like this one in Brooklyn, bearing children and waiting at home for my husband to dole an allowance out of his working-class pocket.

Certainly one area of difficulty for me in understanding Mrs. F. was that she seemed an envoy from this neighborhood, which symbolized my childhood feeling of not-quite-belonging either to the working class or the middle-class, of being out of place. I did not know why my parents, particularly my mother, detested our home, since it was all I knew, but I sensed that something was deeply wrong with it. Though I did not yet understand the concept of class growing up, I see now that this has been enormously important to me, informing my experience of having made it into a professional caste. Even today I avoid returning to that part of Brooklyn, located literally as well as metaphorically at the very edge of the borough. Brooklyn itself is quite diverse, with a number of neighborhoods now hotly sought after by young people and families moving from Manhattan. But fashionability has not yet reached the particular area where I grew up, nor would that sweeten it for me. I still feel oddly but utterly alienated on the few occasions I have passed by the tiny attached houses with religious icons on the drab lawns, and low, bare, unattractive stores with small apartments above them on the (to me) dreary shopping streets. I cannot wait to get “home”, meaning where I now want to live, not where I came from.

For me, growing up meant getting myself out of that neighborhood and into a Big City, which I did as soon as I finished my (then) free public education at a city university, the only possible choice for a girl like me who had to live at home for financial reasons. No one supported that move away from my origins more than my mother. Much later, as an academic, I learned the vocabulary and concepts that allowed me to see her as a sort of feminist: she believed, unlike many of her peers in that neighborhood, that girls had abilities equal to boys, and that women were entitled to careers that would bring status and self-respect. My mother warmly sustained her daughter’s efforts to live out those ambitions: “If I’d only been a man, I could’ve made something of myself,” she used to say, with weary frustration. At the time I only knew that she and I were a team, with the united purpose of getting me to the goal line of success, as she defined that term.

Mrs. F seemed to me, therefore, uncannily, and therefore disturbingly, a woman like my mother (situated in the same kind of neighborhood and class), but also very unlike my mother (who was not a “housewife,” and did not want to be where she was). You might say that Mrs. F. was the icon of the woman I felt I could have become, had I remained in that geographic and social place: the return of the repressed.

Mrs. F. Tells Her Life

Mrs. F. had anxiously indicated on the phone to me that she was afraid she would not do the right thing in the interview, the only one of her family to express that fear. Unlike other family members whose responses ran about forty pages when asked to “tell your life story,” Mrs. F. produced brief associative clusters, consisting of comments, opinions, and tidbits of information, often about others: her husband’s and children’s characters, their “problems” and deficiencies, the possibility of “coping” with something called Trouble:

“I’ll start at the beginning, but roughly, childhood was half and half. I would have preferred a better childhood, a happier one...but with God’s influence, I prayed hard enough for a good husband and He answered me.

I got a very good husband, a little stubborn at times, but I’ll take the stubbornness for the goodness that he’s got there. I had four nice children, a little, shall I say, spoiled [laughs], all spoiled because of my husband, he’s very easy. If it was up to me I think I would have been a little bit more stricter, but I think on the whole they turned out with less problems than a lot of other people.

The major part of that is not being on dope...I am blessed that my kids didn’t start it.

Other problems with them, you can’t let that go and have them perfect.

Healthwise, up until the time I was 53, I had terrible health. After that I had a woman’s operation, which I think helped me a lot, and I feel much better. I think I can cope better with things.

God bless my husband. He had a lot of patience with me, and my family. We had everything thrown at us because of my family. His family, he was only boy and he had everything from the time he was seven years old. I think the life we both had as children, I think we both wanted something different when we got married....

But I think what he went through, and what I went through, we built a better marriage on it. To a point I think we try to make our children not have too much of [the troubles] we had. I think we spoil them sometimes for the outside world. And I think that’s what spoiled our two oldest children, their marriages. My daughter is with a very nice man. I would have preferred someone else, but it’s up to her. My son, I’m still upset over him. It’s six years that he is divorced and he just doesn’t seem to pull out of it. He seems to compare other women to her, which isn’t fair for him to do that, but I don’t know. I really don’t know, and I don’t understand him now anymore. That’s in general.

The only thing I can keep saying is I have a very good marriage, and hope and pray my kids will get the same type of a marriage that I had. Outside of that, I don’t know. I’m happy. I’d like to be in better health now, as my husband and I are getting older, especially him, but I’ll take whatever God has given me.

And that’s about it. Forty years of it [marriage] and it’s all in there... That’s it.”

And that *was* it. The research team could hardly believe she had nothing more to say when asked for a life story, at least until questioned in the next part of the interview. My mother, a

voluble talker, could have gone on about her life (and did) until the cows came home, and if I had been assigned this task of telling my own story, I probably would have self-consciously affected themes, plot, and subplots. But I did thoroughly understand Mrs. F.'s orientation around Trouble, especially her troublesome children (who both have Troubles and are a Trouble to her). My own three children's troubles still often seem like the moles in a Whack-a-Mole game of life; as soon as you smack one down, more pop up in unexpected places until you run out of time. I pictured Mrs. F. paroling her grounds daily with mallets, on the ready to attack when Trouble inevitably visited her once again. My mother was the same way, so that made three of us.

The Feminist Researcher Interprets Mrs. F.'s "Story": Gender and Romance

Mrs. F.'s husband and four children, two daughters and two sons, had each narrated their life stories more or less according to the traditional linear plot tracing maturational development. Yet strikingly, Mrs. F.'s spontaneous "life story" seemed more concerned with her family's lives than her own. If there is a unifying theme in Mrs. F.'s life-as-a-text, it is that marriage has been her lifelong work of construction, its "happiness" her safety net, its aim the carving out of a private haven in a problematic world (to paraphrase the historian Christopher Lasch).

Reading Mrs. F.'s story, short and lacking in literary detail as it was, I believed I recognized in her the women in my own Brooklyn neighborhood. That is, the home, the "inside" world, though busy and hard-working, was a separate realm from the "outside," largely male "real" world, defined as an arena of public activity that includes privilege, economic control, and authority. Mrs. F. referred to her father's word as if it were law: "It was his way or no way at all," "You didn't have a say about what you wanted or liked to do."

In her text, Mrs. F. seems to mediate between the two worlds through a connection with males and their privileged power. Pleasing a male – obeying a father, caring for her husband, praying "hard enough" to God the Father – appears often in her interview. As distant as I felt from Mrs. F.'s generation and way of life, I recognized with some distaste that inner universe populated by important men. In my own non-religious childhood, God was not one of those male figures who conferred protection and blessings, as he was in Mrs. F.'s. But as an only daughter, I was keenly aware of the deep hopes my mother, as a young woman, had once invested in finding a man to provide for her, emotionally and financially. I heard almost every day the many ways that marriage had radically failed her expectations on both counts.

My own father was not dominating in the way Mrs. F.'s father appears in her account; unlike Mrs. F, I had little sense that my father was directing what I was going to do. He was adventurous, pleasure-loving, and an admirer of beauty, both artistic and human (the female variety), while my mother was responsible and worried. She felt he had left her holding down the fort with little firepower; her early belief that his untutored brilliance would somehow later pay off in a middle-class life had not materialized, leaving her suspicious of men and their promises. This cynicism about romance contradicted the dominant narrative about femininity before the post-war women's movement. Yet her bitter disappointment came

from her deeply-held faith that men were *supposed to* provide, the unquestioned dream that happiness lay in catching the right one. She had not landed the right fish, due to her naively foolish faith in romantic love, she believed, but it went without saying that I could – and would, if I would learn from her what was good for me. It was her mission to help me so I would not suffer as she had. To my mother, a woman could not achieve the social status or personal integrity that signaled she had “arrived” unless she had both a man’s job – and also a man.

The Love Plot

Most interestingly to me, in the question-and-answer part of the interview that followed the request for a “life story,” an actual story finally appeared in Mrs. F.’s text, and it was preeminently a love story. Mrs. F. spoke of courtship, and, in particular, of one moment of courtship, as the high point of her life’s drama: the Glass Slipper Moment when the Prince recognizes Cinderella as his one true love. This was an episode that, by its very atypicality in the life she describes, served her as an emblem of what she *could be*, her imaginative possible self. In *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, Jerome Bruner remarks that “the realm of meaning, curiously, is not one in which we ever live with total comfort” (64). It is this discomfort, he speculates, that drives us to utilize “the capacity of language to create and stipulate realities of its own” (1986, 64), fashioning “possible roles and possible worlds in which action, thought, and self-definition are permissible, or at least desirable” (1986, 66).

In this love story, Mrs. F. relates her parents’, friends’, and culture’s expectations for her: “I was pressured into doing the first engagement, because all the other girls were doing that.” Yet as an engaged young woman, she said, she was out with a girlfriend when Mr. F., her future husband, came in the door, and “the first time I put my eyes on him, I said to myself, ‘That’s the one I’m going to marry.’” Later in the interview, Mrs. F. says she turned to her friend and declared, “I’m going home with that man tonight and I’m going to marry him,” while resolutely taking her engagement ring from her finger. In the same way, she asserts that they decided to marry when they did “‘cause *I wanted* to be with him”; at another point, she adds, “it was *just* – I wanted to be with him and *that was it*” [my emphases].

Mr. F., by contrast, tells a different and distinctly less “romantic” story in his own interview. He says:

“And then I met my wife and we got married. And I think I should have waited a little longer to get married... I wasn’t secure enough in a job... I think I got married because there was pressure from her family, ‘cause she was engaged to someone else when she met me.”

Mr. F. concentrates on practical circumstances, ironically naming “pressure” from family as his motive to marry, while Mrs. F. portrays herself as a romantic rebel against the social and familial “pressure” to marry another man. Mrs. F. focuses on her own agency in the question of marriage: she says that though her husband never assented “in so many words,” she assumed that if he did not want to marry when she did,

“...when I set the date I think he would have said, ‘Let’s wait awhile.’ I think he would have said that.”

He did not ask her *not* to set the date, and so she took an active role in formalizing the engagement. She relates that when he vaguely mentioned getting engaged in a year’s time, she pronounced, “By next New Year’s Eve we will be married.” “He never argued with me,” she adds sweetly.

Clearly, within the realm of love and courtship, Mrs. F. experienced herself as being entitled to and having enjoyed a good deal of *legitimate* power (Kitzinger 1995; Miller and Cummins 1992; Rudman and Heppen 2003) extending forward from that early moment. To Mrs. F., being in charge of love and marriage is an empowerment that is wholly expectable in a woman’s life, and the romantic story serves as the legitimating force of her entire history. There is, Mrs. F. says near the end of her interview, “no greater triumph” than “finding someone” to share your life with.

In the genre of romance, “finding” the right man is often a specific point in a heroine’s life that entitles her to a seemingly unbounded freedom to choose for herself. For Mrs. F., this agency is the very opposite of the rules in her own childhood and youth, where women served men’s purposes and desires: “The women were taught the man is everything and that’s it.” Romantic mystification blurs the question of choice: she describes herself as “very surprised” when falling in love with Mr. F. (“I couldn’t understand why I picked him”). Again, when she broke off her engagement to her previous fiancé, she was convinced she was doing the right thing and felt no guilt: “I haven’t got the slightest idea why.” Mrs. F. provides no explanation as to what she did not like about her former fiancé, what she preferred about her new suitor, or the consequences of ending the engagement. This contextual gap in the story seems not to trouble her in the least: the romantic moment is all.

In Mrs. F.’s short life narrative, her story, she says, is “all in there,” referring to marriage and family. As a feminist, I wanted to identify and sympathize with her view of what made her happy. But this seemed to me less a story of “free choice” than a myth that served regressive social purposes. For me, her view of love and marriage was simply the adult version of her childhood’s dictum, “the man is everything.” Hers was the romance that women of my mother’s era tried to have in that time and place, where finding the right man for life was everything, the key to stability, happiness, and success as a woman. I could so easily have lived out that idea, and then I would be another who recited that story.

A Different Story: My Courtship

Mrs. F.’s romantic story of courtship and marriage could not have differed more from my own. Hers is imbued with transcendent feeling that signals the emotional high point of a life, a silent certainty that determines its direction. You love a man because you “just know” that he is The One, even if you are engaged to someone else. This knowledge is magically mutual: you both “just know” that you will marry and begin a new life, whether or not the timing is practical, and what’s more, it all works out for the best, the Happily Ever After of the Love Plot. Difficult matters of money, living arrangements, and family approval fall before this greater force like so many trees before the determined lumberjack’s axe.

In my own teenage world, romance was a powerful secret fantasy of my own (as it is for many teenage girls), in a way as private and embarrassing as sex. My mother's ideal of marriage, on the other hand, imparted over many years through conversation and gossip, was a matter of choosing a husband of reliable character and the ability to provide the best lifestyle possible. She frequently denounced romance as having led to her own ruinous mistake of marrying the wrong (i.e. "unsuccessful") man for blind love instead of security.

Getting married was not at all on my mind when I was attending public college while living at home, starting at age seventeen. My brothers had gone to school there too (also living at home, it goes without saying), so this order of things was ordained for me. Thanks to my mother's guidance and approval, I was busy trying to do well in my studies, with an eye to finding a profession that would fulfill and support me. The possibilities of graduate school and leaving New York were still open and exciting, if unnerving. At age nineteen, I had never lived or traveled alone in my life, never had a bank account, driven a car, or made a life decision on my own.

Besides doing well academically, I was finally realizing, after a long and lonely spell in high school, that I was no less attractive to males than most other girls, and that gave me a new sense of power and confidence. Just after my second year of college, I was enjoying the company and attentions of an attractive young man I met while working at a summer job. He seemed to like me a great deal; in fact, we had exchanged shy vows of (not necessarily eternal) love. This was very agreeable.

Then, one ordinary day, unexpectedly, my mother proposed marriage to me. Four or five months into my pleasant relationship with this young man, also a college student but from an upper middle-class family, she sat me down over the usual cup of tea and asked if I loved him. A quick and definitive answer was obviously required. "I guess so, yes, sure," I said, defensively – after all, he was spending a lot of time at our house, including sleepovers many weekends (in separate rooms, to be sure). In reality, I was far from sure this was the right person for me, and in fact had not given it much thought.

"So would you like to marry him?" she went on, looking alarmingly serious. "Maybe I will, but we're in college," I replied – there was a safe out! "Well, I have a way for you to get married," she announced, and swiftly outlined a plan by which two young college students could set up a household while costing their parents no more than they were already spending to support them at home. Her lively dark eyes were animated as she counted up the part-time jobs, the summer work, the efforts at frugality. Like a modern Mrs. Bennet, nothing seemed to give her more satisfaction than planning how to "settle" her daughter for life.

I could have said no. But I wanted to see how my boyfriend felt about it, to test out how much he valued me. And when I presented the idea to him, half-laughingly, he looked thoughtful, said he would ask his parents, and then they loved the idea because they had married early themselves. Suddenly it seemed less like a joke and more like an opportunity. It was the beginning of something, the first big thing ever to happen to me, a drama. I found myself spinning fantasies of setting up my – I mean our – own little place, imagining a lifetime of emotional insurance against the isolation I had felt as a high school wallflower. The greatest pleasure of all came from the idea that a man had recognized *me* for who I really was, had picked *me*... sort of. The shoe fit, and I was therefore a kind of princess, or even (what was to me far better) Elizabeth Bennet or Jane Eyre, underneath my anxiety and ordinariness. The stew of psychological insecurities and pragmatic considerations that

motivated all this suddenly shaped themselves into a wonderfully familiar form: I was the heroine of a new story, a romance, part of a traditional feminine narrative that would uplift me for a lifetime.

I wanted so much to be part of this story that I told myself I was in love, since it seemed required to take the next step. Before you could say Glass Slipper, there was a cheap ring on my finger (selected by my mother and me, paid for by my mother), a shabby wedding hall was booked (approved by our parents, disliked by my fiancé and me), and the next thing I knew, I woke up like Sleeping Beauty and was married for decades. As you might have guessed, this did not turn out to be the love story I imagined.

My mother's wedding proposal was in the mid-Sixties, twenty years after Mrs. F.'s courtship. It was a time when everything was about to change for girls like me, when the feminist point of view was beginning to critique the traditional narrative of love, but this was not yet available to me. I did once ask my mother why she had set her cap for me at such an early age. "I could see you needed somebody," she replied. Did I? Then too, I think she suspected that cohabitation (as sociologists call it) was in the air, and from there, abandonment and ruin.

My mother no doubt would have interpreted this situation quite differently: it was not repression or control, it was a mother's love and care. From her point of view, she was trying to protect me from the emotional and financial privation she had endured in her own marriage by reverse engineering, doing it right this time. To her, marriage itself was not the problem – it was finding the right man, fixing someone in place who was devoted to you and also made enough money to keep you secure.

I differ from both my mother and Mrs. F. in important ways that reflect living most of my adult life in the decades after 1970. But at that moment when my mother proposed marriage to me, we all inhabited the same romantic universe. My mother could envision a professional career for a woman in a way that her own parents could not, but not life without the romance of marriage. She simply could not conceive of it: for her, the world was too dangerous for a woman to navigate on her own. If you were not born a man, the next best thing was to marry one. Though my mother was a feminist heroine to me in some significant ways, her view of men and love took me down a road that felt irreversible for a long time, one I wish I had not gone along (with). For this reason, when I met Mrs. F. and heard her story decades ago, it was as important for me to distance the romantic in Mrs. F. as it had been for my mother to recuperate the losses of romance in her own life through me.

Cynical Researcher, Romantic Subject

I see consciousness as the key to my own endeavors, both personal and professional, as well as the foundational principle of my feminism. Though I was married myself when I interviewed Mrs. F., I no longer believed in the ideal of womanhood as desired object of the courting man – or afterwards, as the key-holder of the heart in the domestic space of marriage. Mrs. F.'s storied moment of romantic transcendence seemed to me an idealized and sentimental retelling of events as a drama of epic proportions simply to justify a decision made long ago. On the other hand, as a feminist and professional (the professional my mother had wanted me to become), it was very important to me to avoid positioning myself as Mrs.

F.'s superior in my role as audience to this woman telling the story of her life, so I consciously resisted this alienation.

But there was something unacknowledged and conflicted in my approach to Mrs. F.'s story that went beyond my political critique of the traditional woman's role, or my professional struggle to be objective, or my desire as a feminist to connect with Mrs. F. That is, Mrs. F.'s description of herself as the romantic heroine of her own story had touched a nerve in me. In coming to terms with Mrs. F.'s story, I had to come face to face with a cast-off "Mrs. F." in myself: in effect, with a troublesome version of my own life.

Seeing from the inside out what Mrs. F.'s story meant to her, her own interpretation of her life, I had to conjure up and meet halfway these "uncanny," disowned aspects of myself. First, there was the part that did not like to see myself as belonging to my own working-class background. The work of climbing out of the lower class through marrying a better-off man has always been a staple of women's stories in our culture, beginning with Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*. Thinking of myself as of that place meant the certainty of living under the gloomy shadow of my mother's frustration as a woman, in the milieu that shaped her eagerness to rush me into an early marriage.

Second, there was a buried piece of me that envied the way Mrs. F. had lived out the fantasy of romance and marriage that colored her life and made it cohesive. Where romance had played a secret role in my own psychic life as a second to the real-world imperative to marry, in Mrs. F.'s telling it was marvelously public, proclaimed out loud with complete confidence in its future success – even when all plot elements seemed to weigh against it (as in a Hollywood romantic comedy, where falling in love with Mr. Right while engaged to the wrong person is very common). For Mrs. F., romance had meant escaping the domination of her father and the "everybody's-doing-it" nature of early marriage in her peer group. That her romance had led to the right marriage was its final justification. This was, to her, a wonderful outcome that echoed the larger purposes of unseen forces in the universe that choose our appropriate destinies beforehand. In my view, those enabling or crushing forces are economic, cultural, and social, with individual psychology thrown in for good measure. I am sure I would have appeared coldly cynical to her, while to me, she was subjugated and self-deceived... but also, as far as I could see, happy in and with her self-deception.

Now, I certainly did not want to be Mrs. F, and never had, any more than I wanted to be a duplicate of my mother (and my mother did not want this for me either). Yet my envy of her romantic solution lived on in shadow form, within some guarded place in me, *even though I had no faith in the concept of a "romantic solution" itself*. Despite my feminism, I still longed, at a subterranean level, to trust in the Love Plot. Forced to think about Mrs. F.'s love story, I was confronted (and astonished) by a hidden self I had needed to leave behind so as to shape the newer and better story of my autonomous life post-divorce: a ghost of self that whispered urgently, *I wish romance had worked this way for me*. Yet in fact I had no way of knowing if what Mrs. F. described had been, in reality, as she had said it had. Could Mrs. F. afford to tell, or view, the narrative of love any differently, given how much she had invested the rest of her life in its ethos?

I was a much more ambitious young woman than the character Mrs. F. appears to be in her narrative, where she talks very little about the questions of class, money or education that preoccupied me. In her romantic story, all these issues are resolved with the choice of the right man. And while Mrs. F. said she was "shy" and always had difficulty speaking up in public, I make my living by speaking in front of classrooms. But in a way, Mrs. F. was more

determined, more of a rebel than I was, at least in her telling. I married the man my mother wanted me to, when my mother told me to, though at the time the choice felt like mine; Mrs. F., on the other hand, emphasizes her rebellion in fighting for her heart's desire. The irony is that for me, marriage (rather than romance) was both a way of formally escaping from my parents' household and grip, while also, paradoxically, submitting to my mother's final bid to be the force that controlled my destiny (for my own good, needless to say).

Though I first heard Mrs. F.'s narrative from an assumed position of my own authority, I have acquired, over the span of years, a certain humility, admiration, and eventually, sympathy for her and her story. This sympathetic understanding has also extended to my mother, who led me down a garden path that resulted in too-early marriage and eventual divorce and emotional pain. Was my mother, a generation ahead of Mrs. F, then a feminist, though she did not know the term? I would say yes, compared to other women she knew, just as Mrs. F., younger than my mother, was able to use certain key terms and concepts of feminism (though still not the word), such as "fighting for what you want," in ways she said the women of her family had not. But these insights only went so far for my mother and Mrs. F., given the burdens of their lives and times.

Looking at myself in relation to Mrs. F. and my mother, I can see that I made the leap from working-class to middle-class due to living in a different space of history from either of them, and also thanks to my mother's forward thrust of determined ambitions for me. But perhaps because my youthful desire for passionate love was repressed in the interest of marrying young and (supposedly) safely, the hope of meaning through romance, so important to both my mother and Mrs. F., clung to me as a haunting dream all the while I inched toward professional success. The story of my marriage and divorce is too complex to render here. But I can say that the Love Plot both sustained me imaginatively with its double promise of intense excitement and lifelong security, yet also constrained me with the anxieties lurking beneath the polished surfaces of its story. Today the Love Plot has continued to shadow women through the generations after mine, weaving in and out of our expectations for what love should be, now more than ever spurring envy of the glittery celebrated or fictional lives that we encounter everywhere in the public arena (Illouz 1997; Ingraham 1999, 2005).

Conclusion

I cannot renounce the working-class girl I was (and am still at heart), because it means disowning my origins, but neither can I take up Mrs. F.'s romantic view that romantic love is every woman's destiny uncritically. Unlike Mrs. F., I resist the idea that romance is mysterious; for me, romance is an expression of desire we are taught how to tell in story form, woven with threads of hope and driven by needs we only dimly sense. There is no way I can know for certain if the mythos of love "worked" for Mrs. F. as she said it did, but as Stevi Jackson advised, I can investigate how it works, the influence and persistence of its cultural forms. Having devoted much of my life as a scholar to trying to understand the Love Plot, I want to own up to the dream without being owned by it. If, as Dr. Bruner argued, we construct our world through narrative, for which culture gives us the instructions and tool-

kits, it follows that we can also *re-construct* its meaning, revising that narrative when we acquire new tools (Kehily 1995; P. Thompson 1998).

I agree with Shulamith Firestone that love itself is not the “problem” with romance, and I acknowledge that feminism can benefit from recognizing love’s transformative potential for personal growth and egalitarian relations. Yet insofar as the Love Plot has been normative and gendered, I believe (like Firestone) that we should simultaneously be conscious and wary of its potential for other effects, which include the erasure of a history of oppression, and the narrowing of other possibilities, especially for women.[4] The very concept that shapes pleasure and meaning in romantic relations can also limit a life by hiding a power imbalance and renaming it as love. Additionally, I believe more study is necessary to shed light on the often-ignored question of why romance is still consumed mainly by women, in spite of its “equalizing” effects.

Is there a way for feminists to claim love that goes beyond the sentiment of virtue rewarded, that recognizes both love’s capacity to limit and harm as well as to give joy, that questions the definition of a happy ending, and makes space for more transgressive sorts of romance than those rigid forms that dominated popular culture in the past? Can we transcend both denunciation and idealization to embrace love as passionate, often selfish pleasure, rather than attend *only* to the pretty side of love as the starter yeast for unselfish caring and commitment?

It has been a personal and political challenge to simultaneously tell Mrs. F.’s and my own (real-life) stories with sympathy, while also critiquing the love story with a political eye. As a feminist, I wish to embrace the paradoxes of love as experienced, rather than line up squarely on one ideological side or other as to whether love is “good” for women. Instead of either looking up at romance admiringly, like Mrs. F, or down at it, as my mother had, I have attempted to look at romance with awe and appreciation for its power, just as I listened while Mrs. F. narrated her life to me, and marveled at the workmanship that went into constructing that seemingly simple but quite intricate system of signs and wonders that is the love story.

There is now a large body of theory, analysis, and criticism of those forms of popular romance whose audience is mainly women, but the feminist work on romantic discourse in real women’s lives begun in the mid-1990s seems circumscribed and underdeveloped by comparison. The critic Ien Ang has written that

“By taking seriously the love for romantic feeling as a starting point for engagement with ‘non-feminist’ women, a feminist researcher might begin to accomplish a comprehension of self by the detour of comprehension of the other, in a confrontation with other women who might have more expertise and experience in the meanings, pleasures and dangers of romanticism than herself. What could change as a result... is not what... ‘we’, as self-proclaiming feminists, are struggling for, but more importantly, the sense of identity that is constructed by feminism itself.” (1988, 189)

Though narration of and reflection on lived experience cannot resolve every problem for feminists in addressing heterosexual romance, my hope is that a more immersive understanding through biography and autobiography may disrupt the uniformity of abstract discourses of romance, and in doing so, contribute to a more complex, nuanced, and yes, more critical (in the most generous sense) view of romantic love.

[1] For short histories of these views, see Goade 2007; Hollows 2000; Pearce and Stacey 1995; Radford 1986; Regis 2003, 2011.

[2] See also Ferguson and Jonasdottir, "Introduction" to *Love: A Question* (2013), and Jonasdottir, "Love Studies" (2013).

[3] Several publications resulted from this research project: Bruner 1987, 1990; Bruner and Weisser 1991; Weisser 1996.

[4] Berlant's "Intimacy" (1998) is a provocative discussion of the problematics of contradictory desires and "polar energies," played out in the zone of intimate life. Berlant also illuminates the limitations of the public fantasy of domestic intimacy and the "life narrative it generates," excluding alternative plots (285). See also Illouz (2012).

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