

**WHO IS MORE FRAGILE? A STUDY OF HEROES AND
HEROINES IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY ROMANTIC
FICTION OF MILLS AND BOON**

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Resumen: Desde los comienzos del siglo veinte la internacionalmente conocida editorial Mills and Boon ha publicado historias de amor entre hombres y mujeres. Aunque basando sus héroes y heroínas en arquetipos literarios, los argumentos de sus novelas se han transformado a lo largo del siglo. La finalidad de este artículo es probar que las novelas de Mills and Boon son serios documentos históricos que reflejan cambios de valores sociales y denuncian las dificultades que afrontan las mujeres en un mundo dominado por los hombres. Analizando lugares, sus protagonistas, el matrimonio o las relaciones sexuales, intentaremos demostrar cómo estas narraciones han influido en mujeres de todas las edades y clases sociales sumergiendo a sus lectores en una especial atmósfera femenina.

Palabras clave: Amor, héroe, heroína, cambios sociales, Gran Bretaña.

Abstract: From the beginning of the twentieth century the internationally known publishing house Harlequin Mills and Boon has dealt with a large variety of love stories between men and women. Although based on archetypal literary characters, the plots of its novels have changed throughout the century. It is my purpose in this article to prove that Mills and Boon are

serious historical documents which reflect shifting social values and denounce the difficulties women face in a men's world. By analysing locations, heroes and heroines, marriage or sexual relationships, I'll try to demonstrate how these narratives have influenced on women of all ages and social classes engulfing readers in a unique female atmosphere.

Key words: Love, hero, heroine, social changes, Britain

Love and desire are inevitably linked to social transformations and have the power to motivate changes that cross frontiers. It is not clear if these feelings speak a universal language or are related to social behaviour or different customs. For more than a hundred years, the publishing house Harlequin Mills and Boon has dealt with love and desire exporting its books to many countries including India and Japan, where the publisher has appropriated the manga comic format in order to attract a generation for whom the novel did not do. Its heroes and heroines are inspired in Jane Austen's, Charlotte Brontë's or Daphne du Maurier's novels but, throughout the century, plots have changed in order to satisfy a demanding female audience. In *Reading the Romance* Janice Radway develops Nancy Chodorow's idea that that women read romances to feel nurtured because men in these books are often nurturing figures. On the other hand, in *The Romantic Fiction of Mills and Boon* Jay Dixon contends that it is generally a woman who socializes a man into her world.¹

Detractors such as Julie Bindel believe that these fiction narratives perpetuate the stereotype of the doormat woman, taken by a rude hero, crushed in his arms and transformed into a different type of doormat. Bindel suggests that these works encourage women readers to subscribe to a mythical fairytale, in which men are always saviours. However, supporters such as Daisy Cummins believe that

¹ RADWAY, J. *Reading the Romance*. London, Verso, 1987.

women readers can separate fantasy and reality and do not perceive themselves as lesser beings.² In this paper I propose to demonstrate that Mills and Boon publications are not ridiculously identical male chauvinistic stories, but historical documents worthy of serious study, because they give women power and argue for a societal change from male-oriented to female-oriented. After revising the different categories of Mills and Boon romantic fiction books and their evolution, I intent to analyse their plots, locations, heroes and heroines, attitude towards marriage, work, family, adultery, divorce, spinsterhood, sexual relationships, and their influence on women of all ages and social classes as far as the style in which they are written.

If one is a regular shopper in Tesco or W. H. Smith, one can see the large variety of categories that Mills and Boon offer their readers. Such words as modern, romance, historical, medical, blaze, desire, intrigue or superromance are written in the corners of the books in order to select the most appropriate for your tastes. One of the main criticisms of Mills and Boon books is that their plots are always the same: the marriage of convenience, the career-woman heroine, the wounded hero or the typical girl meets boy. But we can argue that

DIXON, J. *The Romantic Fiction of Mills and Boon 1909-1990s*. London and New York, Routledge, 1999.

² BINDEL, J. and D. CUMMINS. "Mills & Boon: 100 Years of Heaven or Hell?" *The Guardian*. 24 Dec. 2007. <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story/0,,222083,00.html>>. 7 Feb 2010.

there is also a basic storyline in westerns, crime and spy novels such as good guy fights bad guy, good guy wins.

There is also a view among non Mills and Boon readers that its books never change. But they are everything except static. In their early years, during the Edwardian times, the very romance category they acknowledged was the society novel which portrayed a time of hidden fears and general unrest among the English upper classes. It was possible to discern three more subcategories from this early period – the country novel, the city novel and the exotic novel. The first two are set in the English countryside or in a large city or town (usually London) respectively and have hard-working middle-class protagonists, especially independent-minded women, who often suffer economic or emotional hardship before being united with their heroes. The latter is set abroad, generally in a country belonging to the British Empire³. By the 1930s the remaining three categories had merged, resulting in the Mills and Boon romance as it is thought of today. The Mills and Boon romances of the Second World War period depict problems that are specific to females especially the lack of job opportunities for women (both single and married). In the next decades Mills and Boon books concentrate on problems such as combining marriage and career; the healing of servicemen after war;

³ As Joseph McAleer notes, “foreign and exotic [novels] always appealed, especially after the harshness and austerity of wartime, and as more people were going on overseas holidays in the 1950s”. McALEER, J. *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars*. London, Routledge, 1991, p. 244.

heroines desperate to hang on to their autonomy; and the acceptance of all aspects of one's femininity.

Barbara Greenfield lists Jungian archetypal masculinities as including Don Juan, the Trickster, the Hero, the Father and the Wise Old Man. She argues that, from the standpoint of the psychology of women, the most powerful of these archetypes is the Father⁴. In the same line, Angela Miles claims that in romance fantasy the hero is "an all powerful parent who is protecting" the heroine⁵. With these arguments we assume that in all these books the hero is older, richer and more powerful and aggressive than the heroine who waits passively for her prince. Mills and Boon ideology has not generally accepted men who try to re-establish male dominance and a desire to break from the household but a hero placed, not against the home, but against the world. The Mills and Boon hero changes over time as far as women's fantasies of their perfect mate⁶. Thus, we find the imperialistic British hero of the 1910s; the boy hero of the 1920s; the British country gentleman of the 1930s; the mature hero of the 1940s – similar to Mr Knightley in *Emma* who "progresses from father

⁴ GREENFIELD, B. "The Archetypal Masculine: Its manifestation in Myth, and Its Significance for Women" in SAMUELS A. (ed.): *The Father: Contemporary Jungian Perspectives*, London: Free Association Books, 1985, P. 191.

⁵ MILES, A. "Confessions of a Harlequin Reader: Romance and the Myth of Male Mothers". KROLER, A. and KROLER, M. (eds.): *The Hysterical Male: New Feminist Theory*. Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1991, p. 95.

⁶ The only figure-type who embodies the fluidity of the Mills and Boon hero during the last decades is the brother in the sense that the hero and heroine grew up together, the heroine marries the elder brother of the man she was originally seeing or the man who previously dates her sister.

to brother to husband”⁷; the domesticated boy-next door of the 1950s opposed to the hostile “angry young man” figure of the literature of time; the Latin/Arab hero of the 1960s; the sensitive, vulnerable and “secure enough to seek a relationship based on equality and sharing” “New Man” of the late 1980s and,⁸ the apparently indifferent hero of the 1990 and 2000 who is almost always socially the heroine’s peer and is often seen as vulnerable and bound to be loved.

The macho hero conventionally associated with Mills and Boon only made his appearance in the 1970s. He is commanding, dominant, cruel, sexually aggressive but also tender and supplicating⁹. Although seen as a stranger and an enemy by many women with the rise of the Second Wave of Feminism, it is in this period that Mills and Boon authors connect the hero with the female world more than in any other. As the heroine’s skin is often described as being like satin or silk, the silk shirts of the hero –a symbol of his wealth– can be read as linking masculinity with femininity. The heroine battles to make the hero see her as an autonomous individual giving him an idea of the feeling of dependency that women suffer. Both Mr Rochester and the hero of Jessica Steele’s *So Near, So Far* are feminized by a disability and, temporarily abandoned by their

⁷ MILLER, J. *Women Writing about Men*. London, Virago, 1986, p. 75.

⁸ THURSTON, C. *The Romance Revolution: Erotic Novels for Women and the Search for a New Sexual Identity*. Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1987, p. 56.

⁹ “On the whole novels where nice docile heroes play second fiddle until the final scene do not have the same punch as where the hero is the dominant character”, says Boon.

patient heroines, learn how it feels to be helpless and to be forced into dependency¹⁰. As Elaine Showalter points out, “the woman’s man’ must find out how it feels to be a woman”¹¹.

Like the heroes of Mills and Boon, romances reflect the different female characteristics that are predominant in certain decades, although do not necessarily embody the feminine type in society. For instance, the 1920s were dominated by the image of the “flapper”, which originally had sexual connotations but also came to reflect the social tensions over unemployment, socialism and middle class fears of workers’ revolt. However, Mills and Boon books of the period rarely portray a flapper as a heroine. This maybe precisely because the social problems the image of the flappers symbolized could not be negotiated in a romance. The flapper is a useful shorthand image of a certain type of femininity that is in direct contrast to the femininity of the heroine. In my view, Mills and Boon heroines are far from the stereotypes of feminine passivity that their critics led us to expect. They are usually working women who are not prepared to take their men as they are, with all their masculine imperfections, but who seek to transform them through love, to bring them into the feminine value system.

McALEER, J. *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars*, op. cit., p. 205.

¹⁰ STEELE, J. *So Near, So Far*. London, Mills and Boon, 1986.

¹¹ SHOWALTER, E. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture*. London, Virago, 1985, p. 152.

In the 1920s Mills and Boon authors already start with economically independent clever travelling heroines who earn their own living, generally as journalists or novelists, and marry Greek god-like heroes with little education and no work skills. Dixon remarks that this is clearly a reflection of the loss of the potential income of the male members of the family after the First World War and the lack of the financial resources necessary to support women in a life of idleness at home¹². The heroine of the 1930s is described by Alison Light as “growing up to become older and wiser than their menfolk and consequently to mother them”¹³. They are sensible, unassuming, self-reliant and quietly efficient with a muted sexuality which lies in their quality of reserve; like Charlotte Lucas in Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* they sacrifice the romantic in favour of the domestic. This type of heroine is a constant of Mills and Boon novels from the beginning, continuing through the decades. Also in the 1930s the figure of the orphan becomes a symbol of all that Britain had lost in the war, and as a reflection of their own feelings of abandonment. The prevalent image of the 1940s is that of a housewife, mother and worker. They embody the stabilising and civilising influence that the image of women symbolized immediately after the Second World War; an image that was in Elizabeth Wilson’s words, “particularly important because [the

¹² DIXON, J. *The Romantic Fiction of Mills and Boon 1909-1990s*. op. cit., 33.

¹³ LIGHT, A. *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars*. London, Routledge, 1991, pp. 84, 108.

country] was haunted by the fear of destruction and the end of all civilization"¹⁴. They are not submissive but strong females who make the man believe that he is not the master in his own home — home is the female sphere where the heroine reigns.

In the 1950s Mills and Boon heroines combine labour and love, joining together activity and identity. Portrayed as glamorous career women, there is no sense in Mills and Boon domestic novels of the 1950s of what Betty Friedan called "the problem with no name" for American and British women in *The Feminine Mystique*¹⁵. From the 1960s on we are overcrowded by Betty Neels' nursing heroine who is described in *The Secret Pool*, as a small beautiful mouse who "runs the home she shares with her three elderly aunts with the same effortless efficiency that she brought to her work"¹⁶. The 1960s' heroine is economically independent and emotionally no longer tied to home. She may be a secretary, but she is not a "dolly bird" or a "sex kitten," although she does not model herself on her mother. The heroine of the 1970s can be interpreted as fighting for what she wants and sees herself equal to men. The Mills and Boon novels of the Thatcherite 1980s have heroines who are corporate executives; they are the equal of men in public power, because of their economic wealth. In the 1990s and the first years of the twenty-

¹⁴ WILSON, E. *Only Halfway to Paradise: Women in Postwar Britain 1945-1968*. London, Tavistock Publications, 1980, p. 126.

¹⁵ FRIEDAN, B. *The Feminine Mystique*. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1963.

¹⁶ NEELS, B. *The Secret Pool*. Richmond, Mills and Boon, 1960, p. 187.

first century women have been working for a long time, have a nice house and, previous relationships which represent a threat to the hero. The novels of this period even present the hero as taking over some of the domestic chores: scraping potatoes and making tea in the kitchen. In direct opposition to the cult of women as home makers that the women's magazines upheld and the role society assigned them "as consumers, not producers", Mills and Boon heroines are strong-characterized heroines who work for a living¹⁷. Work is seen as a contribution to the national effort, not simply as a matter of personal choice.

In Mills and Boon novels the heroine fights to include the emotional world of interpersonal relationships in the workplace as in, again, Jessica Steele's *So Near, So Far*. Many of those working women, who own their own companies, as in Candace Bushnell's *Lipstick Jungle*, are able to organize their time to suit themselves and their family commitments, and seek an end to the division between the domestic world of love and the public world of business as far as a transformation of the workplace to suit women's needs¹⁸.

That Mills and Boon romances only became sexual in the 1970s is incorrect. Sex has always been a part of them but it is the emotions of sex that the authors concentrate on, and not only the physical

¹⁷ BERGER, N. AND J. MAIZELS. *Women –Fancy or Free? Some Thoughts on Women's Status in Britain Today*. London, Mills and Boon, 1962, p. 30.

¹⁸ BUSHNELL, C. *Lipstick Jungle*. London, Abacus, 2005.

aspects. From the beginning, Mills and Boon novels make explicit the link between love, marriage and sex even out of wedlock. "Sex between husband and wife became commonplace in Mills and boon novels in the 1960s" but from most decades, the heroine has been a sort of Daphne du Maurier virgin or has had premarital sex, which is not condemned in the novel, except in the 1980s with the awareness of AIDS when this attitude changed somewhat¹⁹. However, adultery has always been seen as morally wrong by Mills and boon authors.

It is true that in the 1970s, with the erotization of the Latin and Arab hero, that the books link sex with violence and rape. Wife abuse was rediscovered as a social problem in the mid-1970s, and in 1988 Mariam Frenier, basing her argument on 1970s' Mills and Boon novels, was contending that: "Harlequins tell wives that if they behave like battered women they will obtain and keep a good marriage"²⁰. But it can be argued that Mills and Boon authors are strongly pro-divorce especially from the 1960s when there was agitation in society for divorce reform, which was achieved with the 1969 Act. On many occasions sex is used by the hero as a weapon in order to dominate the heroine, a fact that for many feminists only reinforces the idea that violence from a man towards a woman is an

¹⁹ McALEER, J. *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars*, op. cit., p. 279.

²⁰ FRENIER, M. D. *Good-Bye Heathcliff: Changing Heroes, Heroines, Roles and Values in Women's Category Romances*. New York, Greenwood Press, 1988, p. 39.

indication of his love for her. But a Mills and Boon heroine objects to sex without love, the hero is eventually tamed, breaks down and begs the heroine for her love.

Mills and Boon style should not be compared to other types of literature. They use an intuitive style which involve emotions and imagination in order to envelop the reader. Authors are not concerned with a particular vocabulary. Alan Boon once admitted the restorative quality of his novels and commented that they “could take the place of valium”²¹. Mills and Boon readership extends across all cultures, ages and class background. Readers include stay-at-home moms, working women, executives and students. Strongly attacked by some feminists, Mills and Boon novels are just pleasurable texts. These feminists should not be derisory of other women, but they should try to understand them. Mills and Boon accepts that society is ordered so as to give men the advantage but does not preach that women are subordinate to them. The company obviously fulfils some need women have, judging from their sales.

Among the many conclusions we can draw, we must highlight the following:

²¹ McALEER, J. *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars*, op. cit., p. 2.

Mills and Boon romances engulf readers in a unique female atmosphere which encompasses both the reality of the world in which they have lived since the beginning of the twentieth century, and the world of their hopes and dreams.

Mills and Boon works insist on equality of the sexes portraying the hero as the heroine's peer and showing the multitudinous possibilities of women's positions in society.

Mills and Boon novels neither compete for literary prizes nor offer any practical solution to the particular problems of their readers, but denounce the difficulties women face in a world that is organized by men for their own comfort.

Mills and Boon romances are about making the hero "emotional," breaking down his barriers and bringing him into the female world of love.

Mills and Boon novels may be full of patriarchal propaganda or may be escapism addressed to women who can separate reality and fantasy and like a touch of chivalry. In fact, all of us want to be adored and rich and I think it would be a shame to lose that from the culture altogether.