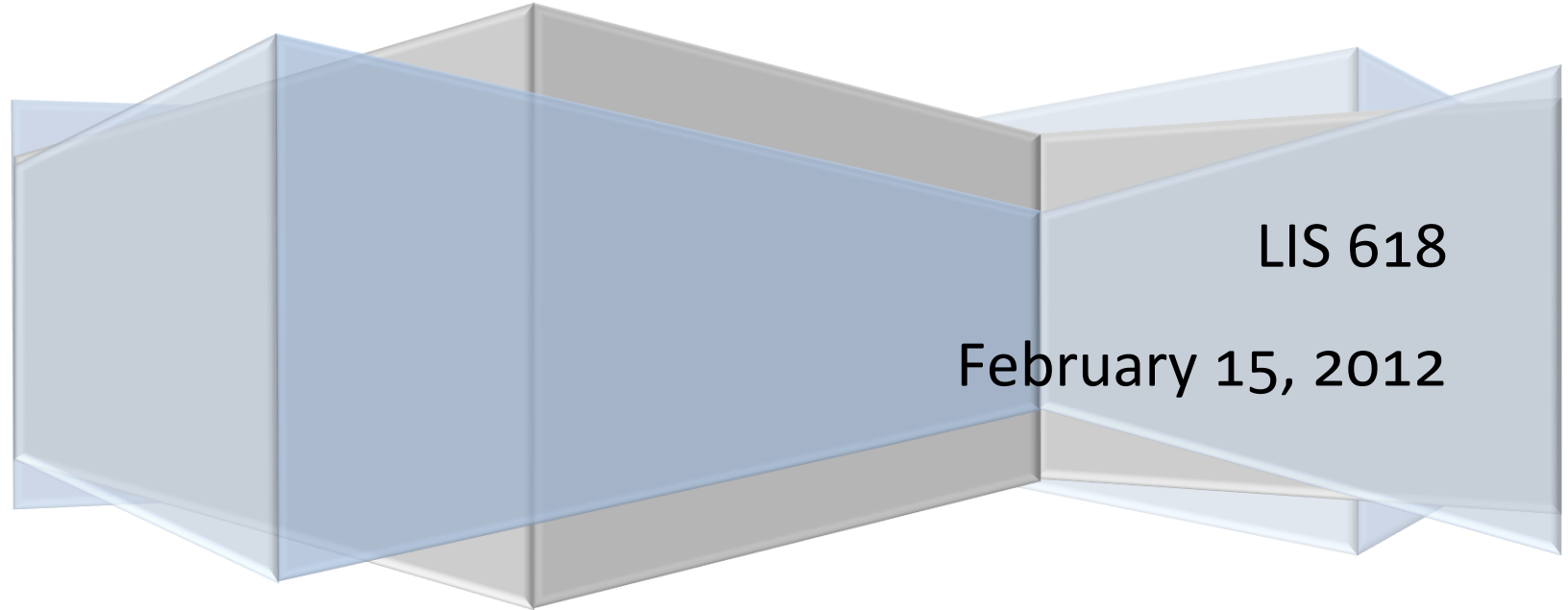


# Romance Novel Analysis

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## Introduction

Romance novels are highly popular among readers of all ages. In fact, Romance Writers of America reported that approximately fifty-five percent of all mass market paperbacks sold in the United States are romance (Charles 1999). Authors and publishers of young adult literature have embraced the genre of the romance novel. As the history of young adult literature has evolved into a literature of its own, the Young Adult romance novel has also changed and progressed over time. The following analysis examines the young adult romance novel as a genre, specifically evaluates three young adult romance novels from different time periods, and addresses the changes in the characteristics that define the young adult romance novel.

## Review of Literature on Young Adult Romance Novels

In the history of literature, young adult literature - that is literature written specifically for the young adult audience, did not begin until after the discovery of the adolescent psychological stages of development (Gann 2012). Original books for young adults were religious in nature then progressed to adult books in which young adults were the main characters (Gann 2012). Finally, books written about young adults from the young adult perspective began to emerge. Maureen Daly's *Seventeenth Summer* was considered by Margaret A. Edwards as the establishment of the "new field of writing for teenagers" (Gann 2012). Coincidentally, Daly's *Seventeenth Summer* is also considered the first young adult romance novel (Cart 2008, 461).

For a book to be deemed a “romance novel,” the main emphasis must “focus on the romantic relationship between two people” (Charles 1999). Romance novels for young adults, according to Cart, followed Daly’s “pioneering example” with “fluttering hearts and fragrant flowers” for several decades (Cart 2008). In the 1960’s, with the change of young adult literature to more realistic situations, the young adult romance also began to express more realistic relationships. Not all romances are happy, nor do they depict traditional scenarios of boys pressuring girls for sex and have punitive consequences such as pregnancy prompting marriage as a result of having sex. This new era of realistic fiction writing embraced the “sexual revolution” and created an opening for “first-time sexual experiences in young adult fiction” (Sullivan 2004, 461).

Dramatic changes in young adult romance over the last thirty-five years include authors graphically portraying characters engaged in intercourse, masturbation, and oral sex; and more significantly, authors showing their characters engaging in sexual activity without consequence (Sullivan 2004, 461). Romance novels “allow readers to absorb information on many topics. In some cases, romances help readers come to terms with difficult social issues such as substance abuse, gangs, date rape, diseases, etc., knowing that there will be a ‘happily ever after’ ending (Charles 1999).

The young adult romance novel continued to change. In fact, according to Caroline McKinley, young adult literature has evolved during the last decade (McKinley 2011, 38). Today’s young adult romance novels may not end in “the happily ever after,” but the protagonist does develop or mature from the situation in a positive manner.

Romance fiction also “empowers” women (Charles 1999). One of the ways in which female readers have become empowered through the romance novel has to do with the changing

portrayal of the female protagonist. More and more, today's female protagonists are no longer portrayed as un-sexual, trying to fend off over-eager boys (McKinley 2011, 38). Female roles are more defined and self-confident in their own sexuality and feelings and the stories are depicting sex and sexual behavior in a less negative light (McKinley 2011, 38-39). This form of empowerment is afforded through the premise that "Books are possibly the safest place for them to learn about sex - not just the physical part but also the complex web of emotions that accompanies it. Through fictional characters, readers can ponder multiple perspectives and gain insight into this new world that they are beginning to encounter. They can consider how they might feel or act in a given situation and can empathize with a character" (Stone 2006, 463).

Despite the content, romance novels are not all "about sex" (Charles 1999). In fact, Charles and his colleagues postulate that romance novels are about "committed, loving, monogamous relationships. Some romance novels do contain sensually passionate love scenes, but then again, some don't. In current romances when love scenes occur, they take place in an atmosphere of commitment--we're not talking sex gone amok!" (Charles 1999). However, the young adult romance is considered contemporary realistic fiction, and "contemporary realistic fiction is not shying away from issues that have an impact on young adults" (Stone 2006, 463). Romance novels for young adults contain sexual content of varying degrees because sex and sexuality are a large component of teen life (McKinley 2011, 38). Young adult romance fiction and content contained, therefore, "should be considered as unique information sources that can offer young readers both realistic and needed information about sex and the sex act as well as a private, safe space to try on new feelings of sexual desire" (Pattee 2006, 30-31) despite the adult inclination to "think that if sex is not mentioned to adolescents, it will go away" (Edwards 1994).

## Summary of Sample Young Adult Romance Selections

### 1. *Seventeenth Summer* by Maureen Daly

Angie's seventeenth summer, the one following graduating from high school before going off to college, is all about her romance with Jack. The story takes place in the late 40's, perhaps 50's, before television in the days of radio for entertainment. Angie is the third of four girls to Mr. and Mrs. Morrow. Her oldest sister, Margaret, is engaged to Art, who usually visits Margaret on Sunday afternoons. Her sister, Lorraine, who is home from college for the summer, also has a dating relationship with Martin. Angie spends most of her summer dating Jack, doing household jobs like gardening and dishes, and spending time with her younger sister, Kitty.

Angie's relationship with Jack starts out with him asking her out and her needing to get parental permission (Daly 1942, 9). In fact, most if not all of their dates take place after she receives parental permission. This is somewhat in contrast to her older sister, Lorraine, who does not ask and just goes, sometimes at the disapproval of her parents as well as her older sister and her fiancée.

The physical relationship between Angie and Jack is almost non-existent. They kiss only a few times throughout the entire summer; the first time after only three dates which Angie describes as possibly forward behavior (Daly 1942, 67-69). They often hold hands. Although told from Angie's perspective, there is no mention of physical intimacy between Margaret and Art. However, Lorraine tells Angie that she and Martin "neck" which is considered a word you don't use (Daly 1942, 136-138).

Jack tells Angie he loves her (Daly 1942, 249) and wants them to get married so that she will not leave to go off to college (Daly 1942, 320). Angie does not tell Jack she loves him, but thinks she does earlier in the story. In the end, Angie says good-bye to Jack and goes off to college, knowing she would never be anything quite as wonderful as that summer.

## 2. *Forever* by Judy Blume

Katherine is a senior in high school who meets Michael at a friend's New Year's Eve party. They start dating immediately. Katherine doesn't usually ask permission, but usually tells her parents she is going out. The only time she does ask parental consent is when she wants to go to on a long-weekend ski trip with Michael and his sister and brother-in-law (Blume 1975, 48-49). The story follows their relationship which lasts through early August. From the beginning, sex is a large topic in the book. The friend who has the New Year's Eve party is discussed as "been laid by six different guys" in the opening, first sentence of the book (Blume 1975, 1). Katherine and her best friend, Erica, talk throughout the book about sex and losing their virginity (Blume 1975, 27). Erica wants to lose her virginity, while Katherine is very open about her feelings as she tries to decide what she wants in terms of sexual experience.

Katherine and Michael explore physical intimacy and progress quickly from kissing to heavy petting to sexual intercourse. Katherine and Michael believe they are in love which makes their sexual relationship all the more meaningful, and that their love and relationship is *forever*.

Katherine's parents seem to discern that there is a physical relationship between Katherine and Michael. Although there is no strong outward sign of disapproval, her father warns her that she is too young for adult life-long decisions (Blume 1975, 54, 74). Her mother tells her she needs to make responsible decisions and gives her an article about adolescent sexuality (Blume 1975, 77, 102). Her grandmother sends her information brochures from Planned Parenthood and asks that Katherine not tell her parents, which leads to Katherine going to Planned Parenthood to acquire birth control (Blume 1975, 109-110).

Michael's parents are not mentioned very much. Katherine doesn't even meet them until Michael's graduation six months after she started dating him (Blume 1975, 159). Michael's sister and brother-in-law allow the couple to go skiing for a long weekend with them and give Michael a key to their apartment. There is no mention of direct supervision of Michael, no concern his sister or her husband would come upstairs and catch them in the same bed during the ski trip, and no concern over his prospective use of the apartment.

Katherine and Michael's relationship ends after they are separated by summer jobs. Katherine's parents arrange for her to go to camp with her younger sister as a tennis counselor and Michael goes south to work for a relative. They are convinced their love will last forever, despite this separation, and write each other daily. After Katherine's grandfather dies around mid-July, Katherine acknowledges to herself that she is starting to have feelings for another counselor at camp. When Michael comes

for a surprise visit, Katherine is unsure how she feels and they break up; Katherine is not sure she's ready for a forever love.

3. *The First Part Last* by Angela Johnson

Bobby's girlfriend, Nia, is pregnant. They must tell their parents who are all very disappointed in them. Bobby and Nia must decide what to do about the baby. Bobby is sixteen, graduating from high school early, and decides to keep the baby and raise her on his own. Although Nia's parents say they support him in his decision to keep Feather (Johnson 2003, 125), Bobby receives little assistance from anyone.

Throughout, Bobby goes back and forth as he tells his experience of adjusting to fatherhood, caring for his newborn baby, and balancing school responsibilities with reflections on his life and his relationship with Nia prior to the baby's birth. Bobby shares his struggles with school, with adjusting to meeting the needs of a baby, and his own feelings of wanting to be a kid himself.

Although the story begins with the Bobby's sixteenth birthday and Nia telling him she is pregnant (Johnson 2003, 5-6), there is not much in terms of sexual content in the story. Only one other time do Bobby and Nia have sex while she is pregnant, and other than kissing and curling up together, there is little descriptive narrative of the sexual encounter (Johnson 2003, 47-49). Bobby and Nia maintain their relationship throughout the story. It is only Nia's vegetative coma that results from a prenatal complication that brings an end to their relationship. Bobby never says he loves Nia, but the narrative of his visit to Nia when he tells her about the baby suggests a strong



emotional connection. The story ends with Bobby going to live in a small town called Heaven where his brother lives to make a life for himself and his daughter.

## Young Adult Romance Novel Selections Compared to Literature Review

*Seventeenth Summer* is considered the first YA romance novel (Cart 2008, 461). The subject of love and sex are treated very much as they would have been during the era in which the story was written. Sex is not mentioned. “Fast girls/boys” is used to refer to those who participated in such activity. There is the sense that sex in a dating relationship was not to be expected or even discussed. Dating itself was to be more proper, with girls asking their parents for permission and the boy coming to the door when he came to pick her up. Dating led to going steady which was considered a form of pre-engagement. The story starts with the beginning of summer right after school gets out in June and ends in August when Angie leaves for college. The story drags on in slow moving, long descriptive narratives about life and summer events imitating the long, slow days of the summer season. Likewise, as the summer draws to an end, the pace speeds up with Jack declaring his love, wanting to get married, trying to find a way to stop summer from ending.

Daly’s expression of Angie’s innocence, the lack of her understanding about “fast boys” like Tony, and even her confusion over “necking” correspond with the way most girls were in that time period as well as with the content of material for young adults. Since Daly’s *Seventeenth Summer* is considered the first young adult romance, the only comparisons to other young adult romance comes from those that followed. According to Cart, Daly’s “sweetly

innocent” and “pioneering example” led the romance novel as a genre for several decades (Cart 2008, 46).

Not only was Daly pioneering romance novels, she was also pioneering young adult literature as a literature of its own. Early young adult fiction of that era was not known for being written from the young adult perspective nor was it known for real-to-life situations. Daly’s *Seventeenth Summer* follows the tradition of the time with its happy and nothing bad happens type of story.

In the late 1960’s, as young adult literature took on more young adult problems as themes, the romance novel followed suit. Also considered a landmark in the genre of Young Adult romance literature, Judy Blume’s *Forever* “revolutionized the treatment of sex in young adult fiction” and was “the first to break the taboo by showing teens enjoying sex and going unpunished for their actions” (Sullivan 2004, 461). Although written in the 1970’s, there is nothing detailing the time period within the story. However, Blume writes from the “problem novel” perspective. Her use of realistic fiction supplied a platform for the deliberate intent of providing factual information through the candid descriptions of sexual experiences and intercourse as well as the gynecological exam (Blume 1975, pg. 120) from Katherine’s point of view. The progression of the story is fast paced and very direct. The protagonist is very strong and descriptive not only about her feelings, but also about what she experiences physically. Blume treats the subject of sex seriously through the protagonist’s personal discussion about her physical and emotional feelings, not only about sex but also about the relationship with Michael. Katherine wants things to progress sexually with Michael (Blume 1975, 93-94). The only concern is unwanted pregnancy which birth control is not only used, but also discussed. Because

of the time period in which Blume wrote *Forever*, there was some concern over sexually transmitted disease which Blume also addresses.

The freedom to express themselves sexually is very open for both Katherine and Michael, which shows a progressive shift in young adult romance literature from earlier portrayals of the non-sexual female. Although it is Michael who initiates physical intimacy and could be viewed as the sex-driven teenage male to be fended off, Blume clearly and descriptively reveals Katherine's own sexual desires and drive. Likewise, Katherine is not simply caught up in the heat of the moment, but thinks rationally about what they are about to do. She is the one who says they need to use birth control in order to not get pregnant (Blume 1975, 95). Blume's Katherine renders the empowerment of females as described by Charles, McKinley, and Stone's reviews of young adult romance literature in that she has her own sexuality to explore without inhibition (Charles 1999, McKinley 2011, 38; Stone 2006, 463). She is not the mere object of the teenage boy's sexual advances, but a sexual being herself. In the end, Katherine also comes away with a greater sense of self. She knows she did love Michael, but she is not ready for the forever form of love.

Although equally a young adult romance novel, Angela Johnson's *The First Part Last*, contrasts significantly to the other two romance novels examined. Not only is the story portrayed through a male protagonist, the writing style of alternating between then and now scenes is also unique. While definitely an element and underlying theme of the story but unlike Blume's *Forever*, sex is not the focus of *The First Part Last*. Likewise, the emotional connection is an element of the story, but it is inferred that Bobby and Nia love each other even though it is never stated. It is the dynamics of a committed relationship as a central theme and

not “sex” that Johnson’s *The First Part Last* takes in following the progression of young adult romance into current themes in contemporary romance fiction as described in “Romancing the YA reader” (Charles 1999).

Another contrast in the comparison of Johnson’s *The First Part Last* to Daly’s *Seventeenth Summer* and Blume’s *Forever* that develops the Young Adult Romance is that the male/female roles seem somewhat reversed. Most books deemed “romance novels” are told from the female protagonist point of view. However, Johnson advances the young adult romance to the male protagonist as Bobby tells the story. Bobby is also the one who takes the role of parent, taking care of the baby, a role typically given in the past to female protagonists.

Along with Blume’s *Forever*, Johnson’s *The First Part Last*, follow the more well-defined model of young adult literature in that the parents are less involved in the decision-making of the young adult. Perhaps Blume used the parents for the informational source that they were for the topic of sex and relationships in *Forever*. Johnson, on the other hand, allows Bobby to make his own decisions, but also uses Bobby’s parents to mirror Bobby’s role as the parent. It is Bobby’s dad who actually is nurturing while Bobby’s mother is more emotionally detached and business-like.

Although both Bobby and Nia admit to making a mistake, the mistake seems more in the resulting pregnancy than in sex itself. Outside of the discussion of the pregnancy, there is no prior discussion of their sexual relationship. The only “sex scene” in the book (pg. 47-49) leaves the reader to know that sex was taking place rather than a descriptive act by act narrative like those found in Blume’s *Forever*. Birth control is discussed, but not in direct relationship to the resulting pregnancy. Likewise, the topic of sexually transmitted diseases is also mentioned.

From this, Johnson's attitude toward sex is seen as the intention to inform the reader that there are potential consequences to sex, including pregnancy. Pregnancy results in a baby. Decisions do need to be made, and those decisions are not easy. This progressive psychological development for the character follows the current trend in young adult literature today.

Johnson's *The First Part Last* clearly typifies the contemporary realistic romance in young adult literature today. Moving away from the middle-class, white traditional families, Johnson furthers the contemporary fiction dynamics by writing about African-American characters, differing family structures, and realistic problem situations involving life and sex. Teen pregnancies do happen, and boys are affected just as much as the girls. Bobby's credible illustration of a teenage boy's life in the midst of childhood parenthood follows Stone's research that indicated "Through fictional characters, readers can ponder multiple perspectives and gain insight into this new world that they are beginning to encounter. They can consider how they might feel or act in a given situation and can empathize with a character" (Stone 2006, 463).

## Conclusion

Without a doubt, the young adult romance, along with young adult literature as a whole, has evolved over the years. The movement to more contemporary and realistic subject matter in fiction proves to be valuable information to the young adult reader, information the reader is also increasingly interested in. This is evidenced in the shift of narrative noted between Daly's *Seventeenth Summer* and Blume's *Forever*. Due to the overwhelming fact that young adult readers have such an interest in matters pertaining to relationships and sex, authors are no longer afraid to include such content that was once considered to be taboo, such as sexual behavior and

intimacy, in their works (Stone 2006). The information found in young adult romances today often is utilized as a supplement to curriculum designed to teach sex education (Pattee 2006, 30-32). Textbooks provide factual and scientific information while “the best novels on the subject go beyond the facts to the emotional implications of love...these have something to say about love that cannot be learned from information books” (Edwards 1994). While not all young adult romance contains explicit sexual narratives, authors today are more comfortable including content. Good writing will not include that which is unnecessary for the overall theme and purpose of the book (Stone 2006, 464). As young adult literature continues to delve into topics, situations, and characters that meet the needs of their readers, the young adult romance genre will continue to follow. The treatment of love, sex and relationships in stories provides young adults with that which they can relate to, find relevance in, and learn from.

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