

Knowledge of love: Narratives of romance told by twelve-year-old children

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Abstract:

This article reports research on young people's conceptualisations of love and romance through a gender perspective. The data are stories written by twelve-year-old girls and boys in Norway who were asked to fantasise about their future love life. Their narratives are explored through discourse analysis and semiotics and analysed within a sociological framework. The article has two major aims. The first is to contribute to the methodology of collecting essays written by young people to gain knowledge of their conceptions of adult life. The second aim is to offer new findings on the specific subject of romantic love in contemporary society, by describing how to do love in young people's fiction.

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... My girlfriend and I had planned to go on a safari in Africa, but of course we could not afford it. I was working in the woods, but I was also on the junior national cross-country skiing team. I had one major goal. It was to win the Olympics...Then the Olympics came. When I was standing at the starting line, I thought: "Imagine if I win the Olympics. Then my girlfriend and I can go on a safari." ...I did it. It felt like flying when I was standing on the top of the podium and got the gold medal. I got a check worth 20 000 pounds. When we got home, we packed...The next day we went on the safari. We rented a car and equipment... We were 10 metres away from the car when suddenly a big male lion came running out of a bush. It threw itself onto my girlfriend. I tried to tease it towards me, and finally I made it happen. I had brought a jungle knife with me which I tried to kill it with...I whipped the knife around me, and finally I caught his throat. I couldn't believe my own eyes when the male lion was lying dead. My girlfriend kissed me and said "You

are my hero, you saved my life.” I was speechless. I thought: “Now that I have the chance, maybe I should ask if she will marry me.” But before I was able to say it, she had asked. And of course I said yes. We married at home in Norway... We had children later.

The above story was written by a twelve-year-old boy about what his love life would be like when he was eighteen years old. His story and 54 other stories written by girls and boys of the same age were used in an investigation of various conceptions of romantic love in contemporary society.

Aims

The article has two major aims. The first is to offer methodological contributions. It discusses theoretical frameworks for studying love and reflects upon the method of asking children to write essays as a means of generating knowledge about conceptions of adult life. With the exception of some contributions by Halldén (1997), little has been written in English about using this research methodology. Further, to my knowledge, no studies have used essays written by younger people to learn more about the love lives of adults. This method reveals new insights into the social construction of romance from children who are just beginning to learn about romance and the role of love in family life.

The second aim is to present new findings on the specific subject of conceptions of romantic love in contemporary society. An empirical study of the contents of the concept of love describes doing love in young people’s narratives. Although love and

intimacy is an expanding field of research, few scholars have inquired into the minds of young people in order to produce new insights about their conceptions of adult love life. Using tools from the tradition of discourse and narrative analysis, this article aims to identify gendered storylines and subject positions in stories written by children on this topic.

Analyses of the texts within a presumed hegemonic heterosexual frame of discourse revealed powerful and compound gendered mechanisms.

Theoretical perceptions of love

In the last three decades, researchers have focused on several notable themes of love, and other related themes. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) and Bauman (2003) examined how forces within modernity have worked to undermine the conditions for love. Viewing love within historical and social constructionist frameworks, although with different approaches, Luhmann (1982) and Giddens (1992) have examined how different forms of love have been constructed throughout history. Scholars studying love from a gender perspective have produced several noteworthy empirical studies. Some Marxist influenced feminists have interpreted romantic love as a primarily ideological force operating to conceal the oppression of women in the process of reproduction (Bertilsson 1986: 17; Barret & McIntosh 1991). Post-structuralist theorists Butler (1990, 1993) and Wittig (1992) have critiqued heterosexuality, monogamy and family life as the natural forms of love underlying the hegemony of hetero-normative notions of romantic love. Others, including Haavind (1982), Jamieson (1998) and Evans (2003), have studied how notions of romantic love

reinforce and legitimise gender inequalities in their forms of domination and oppression in the institutions of marriage and family. Eva Illouz explored romance under capitalism in several studies (1997, 2003). Another empirical study (Simon, Eder & Evans 1992), inspired by Hochschild's "feeling rules" (1983), examined the development of emotional norms underlying romantic love among early adolescent females, and Duncombe and Marsen (1993) have explored gendered 'emotion work'. Even though my own work is not directly inspired by the theory or methods of these writers, they have set the stage for studies like mine in making love its own object of research.

I will now attempt to locate my analytical approach within the canon of studies on love that has more directly inspired me in both a theoretical and methodological way, and point out similarities and differences between their approaches and mine. I read them as belonging to a feminist tradition within which love is conceived of as a cultural construct. Empirically, they are analyses of different accounts of love, several of which emphasise the implication of oppression in love for women.

Wendy Langford's *Revolutions of the Heart* (1999) provides a detailed analysis of the accounts of fifteen British women pursuing a 'new romantic ideal' that is intimate, equal and emotionally satisfying: "The main objective of the book is to tell a story of contemporary love, grounded in the first-hand accounts of fifteen 'ordinary' married women (p. xiii, 1). It compares their 'real' experiences of love to cultural narratives of romantic love. Even though Langford uses a psychoanalytic perspective, she claims that "love as we know it today has come into being over time" and "all such love is

‘romantic’ love in the sense that it is always necessarily mediated through cultural conditioning – through the stories that societies tell their members about the nature and meaning of desire and attachment” (p. 2). Falling in love is a cultural experience. Further, despite its crucial place in our world, Langford argues that our attempts to realise the new romantic ideal remain hardly studied and even less understood. Love remains ill-defined, assumed rather than explained, and coded as mysterious and impenetrable (p. 4). Langford’s studies of dreams, or hopes, as opposed to realities yield insights into how exercising faith in ‘falling in love’ is a means of salvation. Langford’s analysis is more about what can be obtained from love, than about how scripts of love are constructed. My preference is to explore the contents of these scripts. While Langford interviews women who are disappointed by love they have ‘experienced’, I explore boys’ and girls’ conceptions of love that precede them actually having ‘experiences’ of love. A premise of my methodological approach is that conceptions come before experience – “discourse” comes before “practice”. Romance derives its power and strength through an already intense awareness. What I refer to as knowledge of romance goes from being explicit taken-for-granted (“discourse”) to becoming the embodiment (“practice”) we later are seduced by. I use these taken-for-granted to explore the socially constructed love lives of adults. This is an anti-essentialist perspective, in which the voices of young people are not understood as being authentic, but rather as fresh articulations of clichés and stereotypes.

Pearce and Stacey (1995) suggest that the narrativity of romance crosses the common sense boundaries of ‘fact and fiction’, ‘representations and lived experience’, and

‘fantasy and reality’. They argue that ‘real’ love is best understood as a narrative. Our relationships, as well as our readings or observations of love are conducted in accordance with cultural codes and conventions embedded in romantic scenarios. Similarly, Robert Sternberg (1996) suggests that “we often enter into relationships with (unconsciously known) ideal story plots with slots waiting to be filled” (p. 71). While I also believe in studying story plots, I take a step further and try to draw out ideal story plots with corresponding subject positions in the romantic narratives of twelve-year-old children.

Linda Christian-Smith’s (1990) study of representations of femininity in popular teen fiction could also be called a study of feminine subject positions. In her book “Becoming a Woman Through Romance” she “analysis the ways in which symbolic forms such as popular romance fiction both shape and regulate definitions of femininity, class, race, sexuality, and age” (p. 5). Her main finding is that the plots of romance fiction are structured around narratives of transformation. ‘She’ becomes ‘Somebody’ through having a romance with a special boy. Both Christian-Smith and I focus on adolescents. An important difference, however, is that she analyses fiction produced *for* adolescents, while I have analysed fiction produced *by* them. Further, while she analyses the mechanisms that shape and regulate girls, I have teased out different romantic subject positions accessible to women *and* men – subject positions that also regulate their lives. Further, while Christian-Smith builds a critical analysis through which power can be revealed in its ideological form, I base my argument on a Foucauldian understanding of power within the discourse-analytic tradition. In this

tradition, power does not exist externally to discourse. Power exists *within* love – that is, in what we understand love to be.

I share the view of power presented by Sara Ahmed in her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* (2004). She studies feelings in texts within the public sphere (p. 12–14), in order to show how objects of emotion not only circulate, but are also appropriated as ‘mine’ or ‘ours’ (p.15). Rather than asking ‘What are emotions?’, Ahmed asks ‘What do emotions do?’ (p. 4). She claims that feelings do not reside within subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of their circulation (p. 8): “Emotions should not be regarded as psychological states, but as social and cultural practices” (p. 9). I treat love in a similarly constructivist manner. I attempt to extract the different methods, means and recipes of romance. I attempt to study what romance ‘does’ by analysing different storylines and positions that are attractive and appealing. My research differs from Ahmed’s, primarily with regard to the material we choose to analyse, and with regard to my interest in the specifics of various love plots.

Stivi Jackson (1993) also makes the feminist claim that emotions are cultural constructs rather than pre-social essences: they are socially ordered, linguistically mediated and culturally specific (p. 39). She further notes that feminist scepticism of love has a long history. Its first wave contained a utopian vision of a less exclusive and possessive form of love (pp. 40, 41). Simone De Beauvoir paved the way for the second wave of feminist analyses, which viewed love as a means of gaining women’s acquiescence in their submission. Jackson further claims that romantic conventions tell us that love is in essence indefinable and mysterious. Thus, there is no way of

exploring love except through the ways in which it is talked and written about. However, language itself contributes to the cultural construction of emotions, and is the means by which we participate in creating and sharing such emotions. The scripts and discourses of love and romance circulating within our culture help shape our experiences and understandings of love (p. 42). Jackson claims that this is not a passive internalisation, but an active locating of ourselves within the script. We can identify with love stories, not because they are a record of some pre-existing emotion, but because our cultural tradition supplies us with narrative forms through which we learn what love is (p. 46). Jackson argues that the narratives woven around love and romance are available to both women and men within our culture, but not equally so. Being constituted as feminine involves girls in discourses of romance, from which boys exclude themselves (p. 46).

I share Jackson's understanding of love, but I analyse romantic subject positions for both boys and girls. Further, I do not share her view of girls as being oppressed *by* boys, or *more* oppressed than boys. Instead, I view both girls and boys as being tempted and enticed by different structuring positions *within* romance. From these often cliché-filled narratives of twelve-year-olds, I explore their subject positions, or spaces for action, and how they are articulated and made accessible. Many have viewed romantic love as a social construct or a hegemonic discourse, but few have interrogated its constituent parts.

My research is clearly aligned with the above feminist tradition. I also see love as a cultural construct, as a lived narrative with plots and subject positions, and I share the

view that narratives often disadvantage girls and women. My research is also based on analyses of personal accounts and, like several others, I choose to study love in the subject positions and story plots of personal narratives. My study is unique, however, because the accounts I study are written by young people, who I argue are able to describe specifics of the various ways in which love is done. Moreover, I view power as being inherent in the knowledge of love constituted in these narratives, and the circulation of such narratives.

Methodological premises and contributions

The narrative data for the research project were collected from 55 girls and boys from six school classes located in three areas: a rural district, a city and a suburb in Norway. Each young person was asked to fantasise on paper about her/his future from a perspective of romantic love. The essay assignment was presented by me in visiting them in their classrooms and could be completed at home. They were asked to pretend they were eighteen years of age, and to write a romantic story about their lives from that perspective. The stories of those who wanted to participate were returned to me in an unmarked envelope handed out to each of them for that purpose. Some of the stories were short and to the point, while others were long and colourful. Some were well written, others clumsily constructed. I have treated them all as insights that equally contributed to cultural understandings of love. The project was approved by the [Norwegian Social Science Data Services \(NSD\)](#).

A key methodological principle in analysing the material was to include all narratives, irrespective of whether they exactly satisfied the requirements of the assignment.

Each narrative was understood as constituting a valid response to the assignment, although initially some did not appear to deal with romance.

The idea behind choosing twelve-year-olds to describe love rather than, say, young adults, is linked to a view of some typical characteristics of adolescence. In the transition from childhood to adulthood, people are more conscious of and more able to put into words the scripts of life that by adulthood have moved into the subconscious as taken-for-granted views of the world. In addition, describing love in concrete terms often means moving in the space between the mundane and the spectacular, which is why adults may tend to avoid this activity.

As I had expected and hoped, however, these youngsters exhibited a willingness and narrative ability to share their observations, insights and ideas about love lives. I encountered girls and boys who took seriously various clichés and stereotypes about love, and who possessed, as I see it, the ability to generate fresh restatements of trite romantic phrases. Rather than focusing on the authenticity and uniqueness of the ‘child’s voice’, I view their voices as culturally embedded, as stylised and clear expressions of cultural commonplaces. In this way, young people can be a valuable source of knowledge about adulthood.

My analysis of the essays benefited from the clarity with which many of these young storytellers communicated their thoughts and feelings (Bjerrum Nielsen and Rudberg 1989; Gulbrandsen 1998; Thorne 2004). Perhaps one factor accounting for this apparent lucidity is their use of props and activities in the narratives in ways that

appear anomalous to adults. Though it cannot be claimed that these young people are keen analysts, their essays show them to be good observers. For the most part, their stories demonstrate that they observe more than they interpret. Sometimes they combine the things they have observed in novel and unexpected ways. In some instances, where they appear to be employing metaphors and symbols in clumsy ways, it may simply be because they combine or express the commonplace in original ways. In analysing these texts, the estrangement created by these imaginative combinations often seems to contribute to the clarity of the writing.

If the readers of these essays were to conclude that “This is typical of twelve-year-olds, they will think differently later on”, they would be emphasising the points underscored by the essays. Specifically, adults do not see things as clearly and simply as children and adolescents do, because by the time young people become adults, things either have become euphemised or made invisible by what Garfinkel (1967) and Sacks (1992) have described as the taken-for-granted world.

Having argued that young people’s narratives can be a valuable source of knowledge about adulthood, I will now turn to how I performed my analysis of the collected texts.

Analytical tools

As mentioned earlier, I have analysed the young people’s stories as narratives, finding plots and their subject positions or characters. I have found it fruitful to follow Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré’s views on gender as subject position – an available

track for action (Davis 1989, 1993; Davis and Harré 1990). In analysing the gendered subject positions described by the youngsters *in* their stories of what romantic love has to offer, I have focused on how they correspond to what Davies has described for others as:

...powerful subject positions made available to them both in the lived narratives they observe and hear, and in the textual narratives they encounter in books and on screen. Shaping and hardening their bodies and organising their subjectivities to fit these powerful positions is a complex task (1993: 94).

Using categories based on gendered subject positions, the 55 narratives produced by these girls and boys were initially sorted into twelve groups of varying sizes based on the characters that constitute gendered subject positions in twelve different romantic plots. The concept of 'plot' here is drawn from narrative theory, and defined as a basic idea about the internal logic of an interconnected set of events. The plot, which is sometimes also referred to as a 'storyline', is an underlying structure of meaning (Chatman 1978; Davies & Harré 1990; Thwaites, Davis & Mules 1994; Frønes 2001). Even if 'storyline' is more often associated with discourse analysis, I have chosen to use the term 'plot' drawn from narratology. This is because the storyline concept implies more agency for individuals, while plot is more deterministic. The plot guides actions and emotions (Somers 1994). It creates the characters who assume positions for action within it. Further, it structures stories of actions and positions, in which certain subject positions are exposed and made available as positions with which to identify (Søndergaard 2000). In other words, the plot is what establishes and assigns subject positions. In constructing positions, the plot makes certain acts, reactions and emotions possible.

Love is, in our culture, often made relevant as explanations of good (and evil) acts. However what love is, that is, its concrete features, remain undescribed. Laclau and Mouffe have introduced ‘nodal point’ as an analytical tool in text analysis. Nodal point is thus a concept that is used in discourse rather than in narrative analysis. I have nevertheless found it useful in my analysis. By conceptualising love as a ‘nodal point’ – or as a powerful, empty and privileged sign around which all other signs are ordered and given meaning – it has been possible to find particular, concrete romantic patterns. Accordingly, a prime research aim in this analysis has been to identify the signs ordered *around* the main sign of love. The concept of the nodal point of love has proved instrumental in helping connect arguments, acts of renunciation, fights, turn-taking, dinners, candlelight and perseverance so as to become romantic. With the help of these romantic signs, as well as others, love is provided with concrete content.

Another analytical approach I have used is to distinguish between the position of the author and narrator *in* the narrative. Central to this framework is the notion of gender as it is represented in the gendered characters created *in* the narratives. In this respect, it is noteworthy that each of the youngsters created at least two or more characters, both male and female, appearing in different contexts. Consequently, the essays yielded more than a hundred separate gendered characters. This meant that the analyses of the stories focused first and foremost on these gendered characters in the stories, and less on the storytellers, if at all.

The analysis of this material has also largely drawn on key ideas borrowed from the post-structuralist feminism of Judith Butler and her theory of gender as performance,

that is, an imitation of a non-existent original (1990, 1992, 1993, 1994/2006). I share with Butler an anti-essentialist understanding of gender. Classifications that include gender are the products of social events, not the opposite. Gender attributes and relations are highly contingent, in spite of their power.

Through repetitive readings, the plots and their subject positions in the essays were identified through a process initially involving finding answers to the following questions: What is happening? Who is the storyteller or protagonist, and what does she or he do and say? Who does what with whom? Who says what to whom? What is described and not described? Is there movement or stasis in the story? What kinds of material and immaterial devices are found in the story? Once the answers to these questions had been collected, they were sorted into a matrix. The patterns emerging from this process revealed central plots built around some relational positions throughout the entire body of the collected essays. All represented forms of romantic love, each with its own unique kind of logic.

Several plots and subject positions

Using four narratives as a basis, I will now highlight certain subject positions and plots that are expressed in various ways in my material, but which still have in some powerful mechanisms in common. In other words, many narratives revolve around the same script and logic. The narrative introduced at the beginning of this article illustrates a subject position often regarded as *The Hero*. This character figured prominently in many of the stories written by boys, but also appeared in essays written by some of the girls. It is possible that many youngsters who choose to write

about this character do so to distance themselves from romance. Nevertheless, The Hero is clearly a key romantic character, portraying the dream figure who serves as the protagonist in traditional love stories. Even though action genres traditionally pit heroes against villains, The Hero's real opposite – who he really fears – is the meaningless character of The Anybody. The Hero can be anything as long as he is not just anyone. The Hero, as a love object, gets created in the moment when Mr. Anybody becomes transformed into Mr. Right, which is what happened in the ski run and the lion fight described above. In so doing, The Hero assumes a role in the particular variant of romance using *transformation* as its plot. More precisely, this plot is one of self-transformation wherein the courageous deeds of The Hero turn him into a person worthy of love. Victory upon victory gives him the courage to propose, and the girl a reason to accept.

A second subject position is that of *The Forgiver*. This character figures prominently in many of the essays authored by girls. One rather illustrative treatment of this character is found in the following excerpt:

I am a girl at age 18 who has the world's nicest boyfriend. Every evening we stand together and look at the stars above our little rented room. One evening when we were looking at the stars, my boyfriend said something I will never forget: "Simone, you aren't very sexy," he said. I felt deeply hurt and angry, so I threw my slipper at him and went to the bathroom where I locked the door. After a long time, I gave up waiting for him to come to me and went back into the living room. Do you know what I then saw? He was sitting on the sofa grinning at me when he said: "You really fell for that, didn't you?" I didn't know then whether to laugh or cry. Had he

just been teasing me? I didn't have to think long about that because he came over and kissed me. I let him do so. He pulled me down on the sofa and stroked my cheek. That was the finest evening I have ever had in my life.

The female character that does the forgiving in this story and in a number of other stories is incorporated into the particular variant of the romantic narrative that has a plot alternating between conflict and reconciliation on the one hand, and between spitefulness and forgiveness on the other. As the story progresses, conflicts take place and spitefulness is expressed in order for forgiveness or reconciliation to take place. It is important for The Forgiver to have something to forgive, and part of her role in the story seems to consist of experiencing happiness when something lost is retrieved. For many of the girls, this is incorporated in the powerful romantic mechanism involving acceptance of the irretrievable loss of the lover followed by the experience of joy when the lost lover has reappeared.

Another variant of the Forgiver role is one of helping transform discussions into arenas for romance. Here, the guiding principle is not that one person should forgive another, but that there should be mutual forgiveness. In these narratives, a good discussion is presented as a sign of a good relationship, and good relationships in particular are affirmed during bad times. In some instances, these occasions serve to present practically Biblical interpretations of love. The intertextuality is obvious: 'Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.'

The subject position of The Forgiver presupposes either bad behaviour on the part of the male lover or mutually hurtful verbal exchanges between the two. In extreme cases, the logic of these episodes seems to imply that the poorer the conditions, the greater the victory if happiness is gained in the end. In principle, the subject position in plots involving The Forgiver could be assumed by both women and men without changing the nature of the plot. However, only girls in the sample chose to write stories about The Forgiver. In the boys' stories, malice and forgiveness in romantic relationships were rarely expressed. On occasion, they include discussions as romantic ingredients in their narratives. In these stories, however, no male characters are ever called on to forgive, nor do they find themselves in situations where forgiveness is called for.

Another powerful plot is *synchronisation*. Synchronisation means that a romantic couple needs other romantic couples. They need each other for comparison and interaction in order to make their own relationship special. The uniqueness of similarity gets verified in the masses. An example of a synchronisation narrative is the following:

Tor and I sat at a table when two girls came over to us and asked if we would dance with them. We said yes and went down to the dance floor and danced with them. The band played a mellow tune and we danced closely (...) when we sat by the table again, Tor and Tone were already sitting and making out. Ingrid and I, we sat and talked about everything under the sun. After a while she looked at me with the most beautiful eyes and then it happened. She and I leaned in towards each other, and we began to kiss, like Tor and Tone did. They lay on top of each other and were having a really good time. Ingrid and I sat and made out as well. We danced almost

the entire evening (...) Afterward she came home with me to my new apartment on the ninth floor. She was the prettiest lady I had ever seen. She had the prettiest eyes and the reddest mouth (...). In the morning I recognised the smell of bacon and fried eggs. Then Ingrid came in with the best breakfast tray I had ever seen. (...) We ate until we were full and sat and talked for a while. Then I asked her if we were going to try and start a relationship. We sat and talked for a while before we got out of bed. The first thing I did was get into the shower. After I had finished showering, I called Tor and asked how things went with him and Tone. He had just gotten up, and they had taken a shower together. And he said he thought they were going to start a relationship.

This narrative shows that the particular gets expressed through comparison. We see how Ingrid is made unique in that she is described in contrast to Tone. She has “the prettiest eyes and the reddest mouth” and she makes “the best breakfast tray he has ever seen”. We also see that bond between mates is an important part in this romance plot. The friends need to have time together in order to talk their sweethearts and their romantic relationship into existence. Tor says that “he thought they were going to start a relationship” similar to how the protagonist had asked Ingrid about whether they were going to try having one. The friends affirm one another’s relationship and verify that the elements for romance are intact. Both couples dance closely, they kiss, they go home with each other and sleep over, there are intimate conversations, and there are showers. A larger community of friends and a community of other love relationships enter into and become a part of every individual relationship. What is unique about every individual love relationship does not exist in contrast to other relationships. What is special and heartfelt is what they have in common. The couples

do the same things, but this is still perceived as being unique and heartfelt for every individual. The friends are synchronised. They experience the same unique things simultaneously. Yet that does not diminish what is unique. It has a double effect.

The fourth subject position that frequently appears in the narrative materials, and one that is featured in a number of the girls' essays, is a position we characterise as the *Goddess of Liberty*. The name should not be associated with being liberated from external barriers or other people's superiority. She received that name because, to a degree, she insists that she willingly and readily renounces almost everything in favour of love. The following essay provides a good illustration of this kind of plot and subject position.

I am 18 years old, and Frank and I are together. (...) But when you are 18 there is so much to do at school. Also I am learning to drive. And I don't have very much time with Frank. (...) I almost never have enough. (...) Today, however, I did find some time. "Then can you come to the pub, at 6?" My best girlfriend and her boyfriend were also coming, and some others from school, too. (...) It was lots of fun but at the end of the evening Frank and I began to argue. I went home sad. I felt sure that it was the end, but the next evening Frank called. (...) We talked for a long time. (...) Frank asked me to move in with him. I was really surprised, but of course I said yes. I got permission from my mum and dad. I just had to finish school first.

We quit going to taverns and pubs. We became adults and went to restaurants. One cold April morning, Frank came and showed me some papers describing a house he liked. It was a dream house. It was next to a lake and the neighbouring houses were located some distance from it. (...) Life was great. We often went to the house.

But then I met Paul. (...) I fell head over heels for him. This shouldn't have happened now that everything was planned. (...) I couldn't decide, so I often went out with Paul without Frank finding out. I felt so bad. (...) Then I had to pull myself together. I went to the house and sat there thinking. Then I went to see Frank to tell him what I had done. I promised him that I would stay away from Paul. I knew I could do it. So the day finally arrived when I was to get my own car. I got it from my family and Frank. That new, shiny blue Mazda will come in handy now that we are moving. (...) After a few days, we were living in the house. I was so happy. Life was great. But it became even better when I had little Anne. She stayed home with me and I became a babysitter for other children, too. Frank worked on our little house. We got a dog and a little pony. (...) Soon I was to have my 19th birthday but first it was Frank's 21st. He got his own data system and his own office.

The next day was a normal one. Our neighbours dropped their children off for me to take care of them. Frank sits in his office and the animals play in our yard. This is the way our life is going to be. We do many fun things together. Even though our relationship almost went to hell a couple of times, Frank will always be the best boyfriend I could ever have.

This story illustrates a number of features that often appear in the essay material, but here the focus will be on only one set of such features. The figure of the Goddess of Liberty appears at the beginning of the stories as an acting subject. There, she is described as living an independent life full of friends and activities. However, her main position in the romantic plot involves renunciation. The friends and activities

described in the beginning of the narratives are included in order for her to renounce them.

The Goddess of Liberty needs these persons and things to renounce, because the way she confirms her love is through these acts of renunciation. The confirmation of her love is found in the price she pays for all of these actions. She earns the title of Goddess of Liberty because of her insistence that she freely chooses to forsake friends, activities and other things. These choices she makes in the name of love. In renouncing her liberty and submitting to her fate for the sake of love, she brings about the very important thesis that love is the greatest thing of all. The male character in these types of essays seldom acts in the same way as the Goddess of Liberty. More often than not, she adjusts her life in the name of this great love to adapt herself to his life – not vice versa. In the entire body of essays, there are no boys who write about sacrificing friends and activities for love.

Twelve-year-olds' knowledge of love

Following Jackson (1993), I have understood romance and love to be discursive scripts that shape our conceptions and thereby our actions and experiences. This does not happen via passive internalisation, but through an active, affirmative localisation of ourselves in the script. The plot offers some powerful positions that we are drawn to. I have pointed out a difference between Christian-Smith (1990) and my own study in that she analyses fiction produced *for* adolescents, while I analyse fiction produced *by* them. However, a key point of my article is that the fiction produced *by* them, is also *for* them. A condition for experiencing love is having knowledge of love. The

knowledge of romance or knowledge of love operates in being a circulating type of conception without distance (Ahmed 2004) - it attaches itself within the body as a self-referential footprint. The knowledge is fundamentally tautological, and the competency can therefore not be explained.

Still, in this article, I have decided to do this, not in the sense of arriving at a conclusion or defining anything, but in seeking to undo the self-referential aspect by using an analytical approach that is primarily based on addressing love in the clichés (which the twelve-year-olds were willing to provide), and conceiving of love as a powerful, yet empty sign (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Through this understanding, it follows that the clichés are not referential, but they actually work. The clichés are not illusions of something real and true. Rather, they are powerful and active taken-for-granted. The findings from my analyses demonstrate that while heterosexuality as a hegemonic discourse possesses some powerful mechanisms, it can also assume various forms. There are for example differences between winning someone and sacrificing one's self for someone. An important aspect of the positions and their accompanying predispositions of action that have emerged in the analysis is that they necessitate a recipient position with certain characteristics. For example the hero of a romance takes on an active position (of action), which attaches love onto an object. Winning requires an active subject who struggles. In order to be a hero, a victim is required, and one for whom it is necessary to do something for. The hero's partner must be dependent. On the other hand, romantic renunciation does not require a dependent or needy recipient. Renunciation implies that a person is willing to lose something or sacrifice him/herself, while the one who benefits from this renunciation does not need to be aware of this. An exemplary renunciation takes place in silence. It

does not get emphasised. Yet when the renunciation happens in a relational manner, the other party must be willing to accept or at least bear the fact that the other has given up something.

In different ways, both the romantic plot about the hero and the synchronisation plot touch upon a fundamental logic in our romantic discourse of love; that we as lovers are unique to one another, not random and replaceable. It is a peculiar logic that we are capable of believing in. The rhetorical approach of romance is to make use of the definite singular article: people do not speak of finding *a right person*, but *The right person* – a rather ambitious project. In the plot of the hero, this happens through a self-transformation. The anonymous boy in the article's first narrative is transformed through a skiing contest and a lion fight from being just anyone to becoming a Hero-worthy of love. In the narrative about the friends, one of the girls in the synchronisation plot becomes unique in being closely compared with the other.

The forgiveness plot emphasises quite another peculiar logic of romance. The forgiveness plot stresses the necessity of loss and pain in order to achieve true joy, along with the certainty that good, solid romantic relationships are confirmed during bad times. Love must be able to be tested and tolerate that which is painful. This romance plot is based on a "despite things" logic. A person cannot have utilitarian reasons for love. Love is not given to achieve a particular goal. Forgiveness after unreasonable behaviour, or reconciliation after painful arguments, confirms that a person loves another despite these things, not because of them.

In this article, I have drawn on four examples of romantic plots with accompanying subject positions. These do not represent all of them. I have also analysed several other plots with accompanying subject positions from the textual data, which also do not constitute an exhaustive list. Yet, despite these differences between plots and subject positions, it is clear that the stories told and the storylines created by and for these young people are ordered by gender. However, this does not imply that masculine or feminine dominance is expressed unambiguously. It is love *as* power that stands out. The way in which Foucault's concept of power distinguishes itself from Weber's concept of power is decisive in the analysis. This is not about agency; rather, the power exists in a shared understanding of love itself. The goddess of freedom demonstrates this in an exemplary fashion. She does not submit to her husband, but to love. Therefore, it is not the case that the women in the narratives experience subordination to men. They subordinate themselves to love, unconditionally and unreservedly. If they do not sacrifice anything for love, that is a sign that they do not love either. For the men in the narratives, the question of sacrificing something for love is simply not asked. Rather, love is something that is won or something that happens in addition to something else. It is *not* the case that love affects boys and girls differently, as if boys and girls are equipped with different tendencies that are influenced by love. Gender is constructed as distinctions in differences and displacements *within* the powerful subject positions of love – gendered subject positions that are offered and appear as attractive (Davis and Harré 1990, Butler 1990; 1994, Søndergaard 2000). This marks an important distinction.

These aspects of love are highlighted for us by the way these twelve-year-old girls and boys use stereotypes and clichés to describe their romantic futures. I have understood these romantic clichés to be effective. I have treated the love in the clichés, with their powerful self-referential and essentialist character, as an empty, but powerful sign (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). I have seen that love is the element that gathers and organises different meanings within the twelve-year-olds' narratives, yet at the same remain vague and powerful. Nodal point analysis is usually conducted on “essentially contested concepts” (Connolly 1993) in political and ideological areas with conflicts over definitions. Love cannot be said to appear on these types of political and ideological fields. Clearly discursive struggles between heterosexuality, bisexuality and homosexuality are taking place, but then it seems that the struggle is about definitions of sexuality, while love generally eludes these types of struggles. Instead, the struggle is about the right to love. The power of love lies in the fact that love is not an “essentially contested concept”, but that it is an “essentially *uncontested* concept”. There seems to be a great collective effort to keep love as a self-referential, indefinable, powerful and undisputed thing. Some of the tautological aspects of love exist precisely in that which is undisputed. There are no disputes about the definitions of love, because love is understood as being universal and unique. If two people were to reveal themselves to have vastly divergent understandings of what love is, they would probably not argue with each other and be in disagreement; they would agree that both of them have a love that is unique. Ahmed's (2004) argument that feelings do not reside within the subject or the object, but are produced and operate via circulating notions, is demonstrated in my study in how fervently the youth adopt tired clichés. The clichéd narratives emphasise how we ensure that love operates

using a necessary paradox. This paradox finds itself in the tension between what is arbitrary and motivated on the one hand, and what is conventional and idiosyncratic on the other. That which is arbitrary is motivated when what is conventional is made idiosyncratic. Thus, love's universal signs become powerful when they are made intimate, and intimate signs become powerful in being defined as love. In this way, love can be something universal without being the same for everyone. Further, it is in the belief and knowledge of this type of love that we are governed. The important point I am trying to make is that love as a cultural construct regulates our lives. Following Ahmed (2004), I have sought to show in my analysis that emotions should not be regarded as psychological states, but as social and cultural practices.

Most of the female authors in my data demonstrate considerable knowledge about love. They write passionately about how they allow themselves be subject to powerful, romantic love, while they also describe themselves as modern, self-confident girls. They do not view themselves as oppressed or dominated, but write themselves into powerfully gendered, romantic subject positions with great enthusiasm. The girls know about romantic love. And the more incorporated they are into the plot of love, the more powerless they become. Having knowledge of love does not confer power, it brings powerlessness.

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